

I lift My Eyes to the Hills

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[0 : 00] So we started a new series tonight called The Songs for the Journey, and they are based on the songs of Ascent, which is Psalms 120 to 134.

There's 15 of them in the Psalter. We've got 10 weeks, so we're not going to do them all. So we're starting with 121 instead of 120 tonight, and I just want to dive right into it.

We're going to look at three things. The fact of the Ascent, the peril of the Ascent, and the keeper of the Ascent. So first, the fact of the Ascent.

It's a fact that the Bible consistently puts our lives, the Christian life, into the language of a journey, of a traveler, of a pilgrim, and the songs of Ascent are here because they're teaching us that a traveler, the Christian traveler, needs songs to sing on the way to help them.

And that's because there are dangers and perils on every side as you walk through life, and the songs aren't here to stop the danger.

[1 : 20] The songs have no purpose in stopping the danger. That's not the point. What they're for is for when you are in an unsafe place, they're for finding safety in the heart.

In other words, what they're about is an ability that only the Holy Spirit can give because of the work of Christ, and that's the ability to have a changed heart, a heart that can float when all the circumstances in life are pulling you down and trying to sink you.

And that's what the songs of Ascent are here for, the songs on the traveler's way to help your heart, to help keep you afloat, abundant as Paul put it, to find the equilibrium there to help you stay on the path when the siren songs of the forest are calling you.

It's a venture away from the path that's been made for you. And so each of the 15 songs here, the songs, they have what we call a superscription, which is the little introductory title line, and it says a song of Ascent or song of the Ascent, or it can be translated a song for the Ascent.

In the word Ascent here, it means going up by marching, and the word song means that it's a song. And so it's a song for the going up while marching is what the songs of Ascent are.

[2 : 54] And the question is, where is the traveler, the pilgrim, going up to when they are going up by marching? And none of the 15 songs tell us at all where the traveler, exactly what's happening, exactly the context.

We know they're going to Jerusalem, but exactly what the context is, we don't know. So Old Testament scholars usually say that there are two main contexts for where the Israelites would have sung these songs.

The first is that these are ceremonial songs. So typically when coming back from war, a king would not only have a marching band, but also a choir.

And it's often thought by Old Testament scholars that a choir would sing these songs with the army on the way back from victory, David Solomon, the other kings of Israel, or another ceremonial event that we know happened, and it's definitely true.

And that's that because of Jewish tradition records it pretty regularly, that the priests, well on the south side of the temple in Jerusalem in the ancient world, there are 15 steps that lead up to the gate called Beautiful and that enters into the women's court outside the outer court of the temple.

[4 : 12] And the priest would sing one of these songs for every step that they took up to the gate called Beautiful. And we know that's definitely true, but there's probably other contexts as well.

And the most prominent context, the most likely context that Israelites would sing these songs is they would sing them on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Three times a year, every single Israelite had to take a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the three great feast days, festivals that God had called them to that's Passover, which is to celebrate the Exodus from Egypt.

It's Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks, which is to celebrate the giving of the law at Sinai, and it's the Feast of Boozes, which is a celebration, a remembrance of their time in the wilderness.

That's why it's called boozes or tents because they slept in boozes and tents in the wilderness. And so three times a year, they had to do this, three corporate feasts. They had to pilgrim to Jerusalem, and that's what this is.

[5 : 18] These are the songs that they would sing on their pilgrimage toward Jerusalem three times a year. And when they're journeying, the ethos, well, I know that at least up to 1870, military armies usually had marching bands and sometimes choirs that continued to march with them, even in, I know that at least it happened through the Civil War, and perhaps even later than that here in Europe, I'm not sure.

But the ethos, think not of the military marching band hiking up to Jerusalem. Think more of this context being like the English Ode.

The Canterbury Tales is more of the picture here. It's more of the dwarves in the hobbit on their way up the mountain singing the great song, far above the misty mountain cold to dungeon deep in caverns old.

We air away a break of day to the pale forgotten gold. That's the ethos here. That's the kind of travelers' tune that they're singing as they march up the mountain to the feast days.

Ancient people sang the stories. They sang their fears. They sang their hopes. And that's exactly what's happening here. Isaiah 30:29, it actually records the fact that this happened all the time.

[6 : 41] The pilgrim plays the flute as they go up to the feast, Isaiah 30:29. One commentator, William Johnson, he says this though about the modern pilgrimage that we're on.

The idea of the pilgrimage itself, even for Christians, is increasingly remote in Western man's thoughts.

The travelers' ode is lost and forgotten today. And that's true that we don't see so many contexts that we still sing the pilgrim songs out and about in our life as travelers because we drive cars and they have radios and CD players and things like that.

Not even CD players, what am I thinking? Bluetooth, of course. But the fact that these songs cannot be lost in the church, the songs of the pilgrimage, where do we sing them?

We sing them in the church as Christians in the Christian life. They must be sung. Why must they be sung? Because Hebrews 3 and 4 puts the Christian life, our life today, in exactly the same terms as the Old Testament pilgrimage, that we are the true exodus, that we are the ones living in the wilderness, that we are the ones in exile, that we, if you are a believer in Jesus, are on the pilgrimage, that it's out in front of you, that you are running the race, that you are called to walk.

[8 : 13] And the New Testament quotes these Psalms of a sense six times, which isn't that often. But every time it does, what it's saying is that these songs aren't just for the Israelite pilgrimage, that's just a shadow of the real.

And the real is the pilgrimage that Jesus Christ, by His death and resurrection, calls each of us to, if we're Christians tonight, that you are on a pilgrimage, you are going somewhere, that it has a true and final destination.

What is it? Philippians 3, 14, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Or Hebrews 12, 22 puts it exactly. You are going to Mount Zion, just like the ancient Israelite, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the city of the living God.

And the only point I want to make, and this first point, which is an introduction to the whole series, is that some of us tonight need to come back to terms, to wake up, to get back on the path, to realize once more that you are a pilgrim in exile, that you are actually walking a pilgrimage, that you are traveling, and that it has a real and final destination, and that is the city of God.

[9 : 31] And that you, on the pilgrimage, you are either going forward or you're going backwards. And so tonight, some of us simply need to, because of the dangers and the perils and the siren songs that have called us off the path, we need to get back on the path.

And that's what these songs are about, is keeping us on the path, of helping us stay on the path, of taking our place. Okay, so this psalm, the last two points.

This psalm is, the question is, what do you face on the pilgrimage? What do you face on the journey? What is it that you're facing? And the point to you face, you face the peril of the ascent, is what this psalm is about.

So the New Testament teaches that says, repeatedly, that the Christian on the journey has three great enemies, the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Those are the three great enemies of the travel that we are on now. And the world is everything that's wrong outside of you. And the flesh is everything that's wrong inside of you.

[10:50] And the devil is the one who wants to destroy you. And those are the three great enemies. And this psalm is about the peril of two of the three great enemies that the New Testament teaches us about.

Now which two? Well, to find out, you have to look at the hills. You have to look at the hills. First one, I lift up my eyes to the hills from where does my help come from?

What's happening here? You're driving through Glencoe, as we did a few weeks ago, and you see the hills. You see the mountains.

And what happens to you? You're taken aback. They catch you off your guard. And you realize this is one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen.

And what does it make you do? It makes you look up and see God. And you say something like, where does my help come from? It comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

[11:53] He made this place. And that's true. And that really does happen when you drive through Glencoe. But that has nothing to do with what this passage is about.

That's not what's happening here in verse one at all. And I know a lot of us might have read it that way in the past as I have as well. But when he says, I lift up my eyes to the hills from where does my help come from?

You see, to put it simply, the hills are bad here, not good. The issue here is when he looks up to the hills, he's afraid. The hills have made him afraid.

And he's saying, where can I have help? I'm about to face the hills, and the hills are not a good thing for the pilgrim here. He's saying that he's anxious.

One commentator says like this, in the ancient Near East, the hills are consistently the place of real danger. Hills and their valleys are where the thieves do their work.

[12:51] It was commonplace that traveling in the high places on tops of the mountains was the safe, smart way to go in the ancient world.

Not to mention that when you, this is a Psalm for the ascent, probably what's happening here is he sees the hills of Moriah, the hills outside of Jerusalem.

And there's a 2,000 foot elevation change from outside Jerusalem to in Jerusalem, of course Jerusalem's up on a mountain. And it's pretty rocky and rugged.

And so he sees the hills, he's talking about the climb that he's about to make up the hills, not to mention that Jewish tradition, actually to mention it in fact, Jewish tradition says from a lot of different texts, this isn't the Bible that I know of, but that typically no pilgrim would sleep in a house or a built structure on the festival pilgrimages because they were trying to re-experience the Exodus experience, the wilderness experience, right?

So they wouldn't stop in the rural house, the structure that was built to find security and safety. They would sleep outdoors, they would build booths or tents.

[14:11] And so the hills, they are the domain of danger here. That's what the Psalm is about. And for us today, because of roads, the hills are not really the domain of real danger, but what it's talking about, it's talking about one of the great problems that we face in our lives and that's the issue.

I mean, it's real, it's tangible, it's daily, and that's the issue of safety. I mean, it's that surface level here. His fear is on the surface, is the fear of safety.

There are two great problems, two great enemies in this passage and the first one is the fear of, for his bodily existence, for his safety, and for us, well, it's not the hills, it's not the mountains usually, but how often, how much time do we spend thinking about and protecting ourselves from and occupying our mind with the issue of safety in our day-to-day lives?

I mean, it's really common for us whether it's that moment where you leave the baby in the room by themselves because you're single parenting at your house and you just can't do it all and the baby has to be left in the room by themselves for just a split second, right?

And the whole time you're away, this is what happens at my house, the whole time you're away, you're afraid and you don't know what you're going to come back to, hopefully, a living baby, that's the prayer, right?

[15 : 40] Or when you put your 16-year-old behind the driver's seat, what do you do? You see the hills. That's what's happening, or whatever it may be, and it's the reason you locked your doors at night, the hills, that's what's being talked about here.

Well, it's hard to even get it across to you because Edinburgh is a ridiculously safe place. It's so safe relative to most of the cities of the world, but most people in history have not been safe, and of course, safety is only relative and danger exists everywhere, even here, right?

Now this psalm is antiphonal. It's an antiphonal psalm, which means that it's a conversation between multiple people. If you notice it's not actually a prayer, it's a conversation between more than one person.

The first person speaks, you, and the first person plural and says, I see the hills. I've just put my 16-year-old behind the wheel of a car, or whatever it is for the first time. I see the hills, and I'm afraid, and anxiety is creeping in my heart, and my concern is growing and growing, and it's going to overtake me.

The second person you see then speaks in verse 3, and antiphonally, and sings to you, he will not let your foot be moved.

[17 : 05] So it's another person coming alongside of you and saying, you need to know this about God. He will not let your foot, and just notice in what the second person says how surface level the danger is.

This is literally about physical danger. He will not let your foot slip. He's about to hike 2,000-foot elevation. The hills, they're dangerous.

He will not let your foot slip, the fear of death. He who keeps you will not slumber. The real danger of going to sleep in the wilderness at night, which is something if you've done much of, is scary, sleeping outdoors in the wilderness in the middle of nowhere at night.

That's what he does not sleep or slumber, because when you sleep at night in the middle of the woods, it's scary, and the sun will not strike you by day.

The real danger in the ancient world of sunstroke, which was very common here. People died from it all the time, still do, especially in the ancient world. The moon will not strike you by night.

[18 : 09] That's a parallel verse. Now, we had a long conversation about this last night. I had a long conversation about this verse last night with our minister and others, and he convinced me that this is real and true, and I can say this.

The idea in the ancient world, and commentators regularly note this, who knows what the medical professionals will say to me afterwards, is that the moon and its rays and the celestial bodies and their rays do, can, cause some form of, well, the term we've adopted in English is lunacy, which comes from the term lunar, lunacy, the term for the moon, right, that people go crazy at night. Whether it's a medical condition, it's called synoplexia, according to Wikipedia. There are stories of what happens when a full moon comes out, and what happens at the ER, apparently, it's a little bit different.

But that's what's being referenced here. That's what the commentators talk about, is the fear of disease or something that happens particularly at nighttime. But the point is, it's physical, it's real, it's about safety.

I mean, that's what he's talking about here, and this teaches us two things. This means that this song legitimizes the fears that you have for your own safety, for the bodily harm that you're afraid of, the fear that drives you to lock your doors.

[19 : 43] It says that God is paying attention to this real concern that we do have, where we think about our safety. And this is a song about vulnerability.

It's saying you are vulnerable, and you don't control your circumstances. And bad things come our way, and we're not safe. And that's because we have a great enemy, and that's the world.

And the world in the New Testament means much more than this, but it at least means that this place is bruised and broken and corrupted, and that people are sinners, and that nature doesn't work right, and that we are in danger.

It at least means that. It's true, it's real. And the second thing it teaches us is that God deeply cares about your safety.

That's why the Psalm is here, that he deeply cares about your body, not just your soul. He doesn't want your foot to break when it slips, the ankle to roll.

[20 : 49] He made your body. He loves your body. He created us. He doesn't want it to be this way. It's not the desire of his heart.

He hates the curse of pain, just like you hate the curse of pain. Isaiah 49-10, God shall feed the traveler along the way.

On all the bare heights in the place of danger, he shall be their pasture. They shall not hunger or thirst. Neither scorching wind nor the sun will strike them.

He cares about our physical problem, about the dangers, about the issue of safety. Now let me just close out this point by saying, what is the help here?

What is the help here that the Psalmist says, from where does my help come in this issue of danger? And what is the help? And you can learn about it when he says that God is a shade in your right hand.

[21 : 52] Now when he says God is a shade in your right hand, he's talking about an actual shadow, like an umbrella in modern terms. You saw this in Jonah chapter 4, right, when Jonah is getting beat down by the sun and God provides for him the tree, the shade that goes over his head, protects him from the sun.

The metaphor across the Psalms, whenever the danger is climate, the sun, or something like that, is God will be your shade or shadow, it can be translated.

The parallel metaphor, whenever the danger is from a human being against you, is God will be your shield in your right hand. Just like it says here, he'll be your shadow.

And in Psalm chapter 3, David is afraid. And he says that the Lord is the shield in my right hand, parallel to this passage.

The shield all about me. And the reason that the translators translate it, the shield all about me, is because it's a very particular word for shield.

[22 : 59] There are multiple words for shield, and this is a particular word for shield, and it's not just any shield, it's not like the shield that you would slide on your arm, circular, that's for single hand-to-hand combat.

This shield, so the commentators say, is a shield all about me, is what David says. In other words, it's a shield that has three sides, it protects you this way, and it goes over your head, and it's particularly a shield that you would use for one purpose.

When do you need a shield that goes over your head? And that's when you are on the front line about to be a part of the siege, right, to take the castle. You need a shield that's literally all about you, because what's going to happen when you get close to the castle door?

What do they do? They throw bricks down on your head, they pour hot coals down upon you, they throw the javelin down to try to get you from the top, you know, and everybody knows, right, we've all had this experience, and you need a shield all about you, and that's the word that is being used here.

In other words, when God says, when the promise in the Psalms is, he will be the shield all around you in your right hand, he will be the shade in the scorching sun, which direction is the pilgrim going?

[24 : 21] Not away from the danger, it's toward the danger, right? It's about going into the siege, going toward the battle, walking down the road straight into the terrible circumstance, that is, people pouring hot coals on your head, and it's the shield.

In other words, the help here, the help here is not a promise of safety when you feel unsafe, that's not the promise.

Goodness know, look at Jesus' life, he was not safe, and the eleven of the twelve first great pilgrims of the Christian church were not safe, they were martyred.

The promise here isn't safety, the help is an ability to be buoyant, equal, to find a peace that surpasses understanding in the midst of circumstances that aren't safe, right?

And that truly is a peace that surpasses understanding, and that's what he's saying here, God is your helper, your keeper, he's the only one that can make your heart safe when there is no safety about you.

[25 : 28] And that's the promise that's being offered here. All right, secondly, the second problem, and briefly, the second great enemy in this passage, on the surface it's clear, this is about real and present danger, physical danger, but it's about more than that, and the thing that it's about that's more than that is not as obvious on the surface of the text.

And it's this, verse seven, the Lord will keep you from all evil. Now that little phrase, all evil, is a reference to the third great enemy of the New Testament, the devil, what Paul calls the powers and principalities, the prince of this age.

Now how do we know that? Verse one, the hills, the hills, in verse one, this is from a, the hills stand as a domain in the Israelite mine for mysterious forces.

In the ancient Near East, being away from the city, being away from the mountain of God, the place that God has set his presence, this is the domain of the demons, it's the domain of the hills, this is the domain of the high places, the high places, the place that you worship, false spirits, false gods, idols, is the same as the hills in the Old Testament.

There are a lot of parallel synonymous terms. Let me just give you some examples. Jeremiah 3.23, in vain salvation is looked for in the hills, meaning in the fallen spirits, the false gods, not the true God in the hills, or first Kings 20.23, the servants of the king of Syria said to him, the gods, the false gods, they are the gods of the hills.

[27 : 21] And so they are stronger than we. Where this one's important, Jeremiah 10 is parallel to Psalm 121.1. It uses the phrase, the maker of heaven and earth, just like Psalm 121.1 does, but in the opposite way.

So just here, thus you shall say to the people, the gods who did not make the heavens and earth, they will perish from the earth and from under the heavens, Psalm 121.1.

But the God that you have when you face the hills, which is the domain of the devil, the powers, the fallen spirits, the high places of false worship, he did make the heavens and earth.

You see, it's the opposite of Jeremiah 10. The last one I read for you. Deuteronomy 4. Beware lest you raise your eyes to the heavens and you see the sun and the moon.

And you be drawn away to worship them and serve them. And you see, you have the hills, which is the domain of the high places, the false gods, the sun and the moon, the three locations here, which are all considered mediums in amongst the Israelites for where the demons do their work, where the false gods are worshiped.

[28 : 37] Real danger. So it's not just physical, it's spiritual. You see, it's everything. That's what the hills mean here, and the point here is that God is your keeper, he's your helper.

He not only is there for your good, for your safety, the safety of your heart, but he actually actively protects you on the Christian pilgrimage from the all evil, the devil, the powers, the principalities. And this isn't a mythology. This isn't something we can dismiss in the modern world. This is real. The Old Testament teaches it just as much as the Old Testament.

One commentator says this, verse six, should be interpreted as an argument. The sun and the moon, the heavenly bodies, which are often worshiped and credited with divine powers and the other religions, are here being stripped of their powers in the face of the true God.

You see? John Patton, many of us, many of you know the story of John Patton, the great Scottish missionary to the New Hebrides.

[29 : 42] The New Hebrides were a land of cannibals. And well, John Patton, I think this was in Glasgow, if I remember correctly, but I could be wrong, he proposed to his fiance, his soon to be fiance, and two weeks later he told her for the first time that they were going to move to the New Hebrides, where the previous missionaries had been eaten by cannibals.

So I don't know if you did that. I mean, it's a one way to do it. But that's what he did. And he went to the New Hebrides and pretty early on, as you would expect, they built a hut.

They were in the hut with his family. And that night they came for him. And they surrounded the hut. And they were going to take him. And they were going to kill the family.

And they were going to do what they had always done, the people of the land. But they never came inside. They never came in. And many of you know the story. You know, it's an amazing story. They never came in the whole night.

And a year later, after Patton had learned the language and he had witnessed about the gospel to these people, he was sitting with the chief of the clan before the fire.

[31 : 02] And the man said to him, that night when we came to your house to kill you, to eat you, who were the men guarding the way that we could not break through and get to you?

And you see, God is everywhere. And the angelic hosts are real. Just like the spirits who have fallen are real. And that's what this passage is about.

And it's not some ancient mythology. It's about the help of God, the protector of His people. He is greater than all of your enemies. Greater than all of your enemies.

And if you are walking on the ascent, if you're on the pilgrimage and you're looking at the city of God, it says that He will keep you. Now, let me close. We just have a few minutes.

Let me close with this thirdly and finally. The keeper of the ascent. What does it mean to say that He will keep you? It repeats it three times. It calls Him the keeper, that He will keep you, that He will keep you.

[32 : 02] He calls Him the keeper. One idea, and this is, I think this is true and incredible, is that some scholars said that these 15 songs of the ascent correspond to the 15 words in the Aaronic benediction, number six.

In Hebrew, there are 15 words in that benediction. And each of these 15 Psalms do repeat a word constantly from the Aaronic benediction.

And of course, the word in this one is keep. May the Lord bless you and keep you. And we have keep, keep, keeper here in this Psalm, but that doesn't tell us what a keeper is.

What's a keeper? A keeper is not a position in football. Well it is, but not in this context. A keeper is a guard, a watchman, as we would call it.

A keeper is one who takes up the night watch on the city wall to look out and to see if the enemies are coming, right?

[33 : 04] To ring the bell if the enemies are coming. It's the one who takes up the night watch. And the classic image of the night watchman on the city wall, what happens every time in every sitcom and movie when the night watchman goes out to take his post and 2 AM rolls around?

You all know what happens to him. He falls asleep, right? Every night watchman, they always fall asleep. The keeper, he always goes out, he takes his post, he sits down, and at 2 AM he's gone. He's asleep, and of course then the enemy sneaks in and the city is destroyed. You see the point of the text, he's the keeper, the night watchman. He does not slumber or sleep.

He doesn't fall asleep. Like the night watchman who always do fall asleep is the point of that passage. In other words, to slumber here literally means he doesn't need a break after lunch.

He doesn't, after eating his big meal at lunch, have to have an extra dose of coffee like we do. The afternoon, the Monday afternoon, tired that we all get, he doesn't get that, that's what slumber means because he doesn't sleep.

[34 : 18] He never gets drowsy. I had a friend at New College, my first year studying, we were in a prayer group together, and he said that whenever he gets prideful, he knows that he's being a bit prideful that when he goes to open the bathroom door or put his head down on the pillow, he's always reminded, I am not God because God doesn't need to do any of those things.

God, he neither slumbers nor sleeps. He doesn't take breaks. He doesn't sleep. He's not like us. And he is your keeper. And the point here is that what do you do when you're afraid?

When you see the hills, you say you have to talk to your heart, just like the friend here is talking to the person that's afraid. You have to talk to your heart, and you have to talk to your heart about God.

And what do you say? When you see that hill in your life, whatever it is that makes you afraid and anxious and fearful, what do you say to your heart? And what you say is, you need to look at another hill.

You need to look at another hill. And this is another pilgrim. There was a pilgrim, and he faced a hill called Golgotha, and it was a nasty ascent, the worst in history.

[35 : 46] And he carried the wood upon his back as he made the ascent to the mount, the Temple Mount, the city of Jerusalem, and he wasn't protected. He wasn't kept.

He was forgotten. God did not keep him in the night watch. He experienced the ultimate terrors of the night. And when you ask, will God keep me afloat on the path of the Christian pilgrimage, you have to look at that hill, and you have to say this to your heart, he who did not spare his own son for you, will he not keep you?

Will he not give you what you need to stay afloat? You have to lift your eyes up to that holy hill if you want to lift up your heart in the midst of sinking circumstances.

We'll close with a quote from St. Augustine's sermon on Psalm 121, which I read this week. He asked the question, where do you look for help in the terrors of the night?

And this is what he says, Who is there who will neither slumber nor sleep, when thou seekest one among men, thou art deceived, thou will never find one among men.

[37 : 06] Thou art not therefore in any man. Every man slumbers, every man sleeps, seek not a keeper among the human beings.

Let's pray. Father, we give thanks to you that you do not slumber, that you do not sleep, that you are the night watch who keeps us forever, that you will deliver us to the city of God.

We thank you as well that the Psalms are so real that we can pray our fears about our safeties, all the things that we get worried about, about our fears about the spiritual life, the demonic powers.

We thank you that these songs are so real. So we ask, Lord, that they would do a work on us, that they would help us when we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.