

## The Antidote to Uncertainty, Psalm 121, 6/3/23

Some of you know that I wasn't always a pastor, in my other life I worked in investments and wealth management. Now most people when they hear that think it sounds like the opposite of pastoral ministry but there are many transferrable skills sets- one of the most significant is helping people make wise decisions in times of uncertainty. In times of economic uncertainty like we are experiencing now, it was helping my clients avoid two pitfalls- Foolishness- Don't run after speculative, overly risky gambles...don't put your entire retirement into bitcoin. The other pitfall is Freezing. Some clients would want to stop investing, do nothing or cash out...by doing so often they sell low and buy high (that's just some free advice).

But of course, we don't only face uncertainty in the stock market, there's all kinds of uncertainty in our lives and world. Let's take a quick mental exercise- think about your life now compared to one year ago. How many things are in your life, good, bad or indifferent- that you did not foresee coming? That's just one year, what about the last 10 years? Likely in that exercise- it exposed the uncertainty your health, career, personal finances, where you live, your friends, relationships, changes in your family, your faith, in politics and global events. Now take that same exercise and instead of going into the past, go 1 year into the future, how about 10 years? We quickly see that there is more uncertainty than we would like to think about. Will I get married, become a widow? How will my kids turn out? What changes will happen in my health? Will I be able to retire? Will another Philly sports team ever win a championship? What's going to happen in world politics? What about our values? Will AI take over? Will I even be alive? Are you feeling anxious? We all must manage life's uncertainties. But we do not need to be fatalistic about that as if there is nothing we can do and everything is going to fall apart...or try to overly control our destiny as if it's all up to us. Psalm 121 gives us an antidote in times of uncertainty so that we can avoid common pitfalls and thrive. Psalm 121 is going to show us **Where to look in uncertainty and how to walk in uncertainty.**

### Where to Look in Uncertainty

***v.1 I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from?*** Psalm 121 is a Song of Ascents, because these Psalms were sung by the Jewish people as they were making their pilgrimage up to Jerusalem, especially for Passover. Now we say *UP* to Jerusalem because Jerusalem's elevation is 2500 ft. above sea level, and much of the surrounding area is at or below sea level. Which is why your ears pop on the bus as you climb 3000ft in the final 16 miles to Jerusalem. In ancient times, the Jericho road was a primary means of travel to Jerusalem **[Picture]** this was a potentially dangerous journey because in these mountains and crags and caves hid bandits and wild animals, not to mention braving the weather. As the psalmist is looking up to the mountains, he was looking with uncertainty, insecurity and the danger of the journey ahead and asking **"Where does my help come from?"**

This is the question isn't it? During times of uncertainty, to what do you look for help, for security? I'm just old enough to remember the tail end of the duck and cover drills- in the 80s schools were still having nuclear bomb drills of getting under the desk. Looking back it seems silly, what is my desk going to do to save me from a nuclear bomb? We tend to look to all kinds

of false securities. Your power and influence can't save you from a life-threatening illness. Money might be able to protect you from some financial uncertainty, but it won't insulate you from relational loss, your physical beauty won't protect you from devastating news. Maybe the thing that feels most secure to you is your family, and family is a great gift from God both even your family is temporary and more susceptible than we'd like to admit- we can't keep them in a fixed state, (if only it could just stay like this forever) and then you blink and they move away, they wander off, there is fighting, relationships start to breakdown, or they pass away. All forms of security we cling to ultimately fail us if we add just one element- Time...and not even that much of it in the grand scheme of it. A few decades...Tim Keller "Beautiful flowers will be in the ground decaying soon, and they are only on a slightly faster path than us. But it's the same path."<sup>1</sup> So how we answer this question is critical because we don't only need security to get through the temporal uncertainties of life, but we need a security that outlasts time. So, where does our help come from? The Psalmist immediately has an answer.

*v.2 My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.* The psalmist facing the uncertainty of his journey looked beyond the mountain, to the one who was bigger and stronger, more secure than the mountain- God himself. In fact, God is the maker of the mountain, not only the mountain but the maker of the heavens and earth, long after the mountain is gone, God is still there. In looking beyond the mountain and all the uncertainty it represents, he sees that *God's help is Constant- <sup>3</sup>He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; <sup>4</sup>indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.* What a comforting image! Have you ever fallen asleep when you are supposed to be awake? Check out this [youtube short](#) I found... [\[God's Help is Constant slide\]](#) We are not so good at keeping watch. We are finite, weak, easily distracted, my family will be watching a movie, I go to look over to say something to Shannan, asleep. But God doesn't need naps, he doesn't fall asleep on us. He does not grow tired of watching over us like a good shepherd. This is one of the reasons why we can rest- rest from our worry, our fear, rest from our toil. We can sleep because he's awake. We can rest because he never stops working for us.

As he looks beyond the mountain to God he also sees that *God's help is Comprehensive: v.5 The Lord watches over you— the Lord is your shade at your right hand; <sup>6</sup>the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.*

*<sup>7</sup>The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life, <sup>8</sup>the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forever more.* During the journey, the psalmist is facing the uncertainty of the scorching heat by day, and the cold at night, the trip up and the trip back...it's a way of saying the totality of life's experiences, God is keeping watch, he's our protector. Friends, when we look beyond the mountain of uncertainties, when we look to God the Maker of heaven and earth, we will find that there is not a single facet of our lives that God isn't actively keeping watch over us.

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<sup>1</sup> From Tim Keller sermon on Psalm 102.

You say OK Nate, I see hear these promises and I want to believe them, **but isn't this wishful thinking?** How can the Psalmist say that God will keep us from all harm, when experience has shown me otherwise? God seems to allow all kinds of harms to come upon us, even when we are obeying and trusting him. I mean look at Job's life, it sure seems like even though he lived a godly life he wasn't spared from all kinds of harm. Even Jesus said, in this life you will have trouble and that we should expect suffering and even persecution. Three perspectives to apply this promise.

**#1 The Literal Perspective**- this is not a promise that we can bank on literally for all time because it was a promise given to a specific group of people, the covenant people of God, the Jewish pilgrims at a time in history. This was a corporate promise, much like God's promise to bring the Jewish people into the promised land, that he would secure the journey so that his people would be able to come to worship him. While God does physically provide for us, we cannot turn this into a "name it, claim it" passage for us today and say... if you have enough faith you will never get sick and nothing bad will happen to you.

**#2 The Spiritual Perspective**- notice the Psalmist says **the Lord will keep you from all harm**. Not, "I will give you a completely pain free, hardship free, comfortable life." That's how we define no harm, but not necessarily how God defines harm...this is the same word translated evil. This is primarily a moral and spiritual term. For us spiritually, harm is what will keep us from God's ultimate purpose for our lives. What is that? To find the answer to that as Christians we must go to that great and often misused promise from **Romans 8: 28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**

**29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.** God's purpose for our lives is to be conformed into the image of his Son. Which means that "harm" and "good" have completely different definitions than what we may think. **"Harm" would be anything that keeps us from becoming like Jesus Christ** (which might be things you think are good like prosperity, getting all your desires fulfilled, wealth, all kinds of pleasure and comforts). And **"Good" would be all the things that God uses to accomplish his purposes of forming Christ in us** (which might include what we consider harm- loss, tragedy, pain, unfulfilled longings, suffering). British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge: "Contrary to what I would have expected, I look back now on experiences that at the time seemed especially devastating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything of value that I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence has been through affliction, not through comfort and ease."<sup>2</sup> With a little time and perspective, haven't you seen this to be true in your life? I have!

**#3 The Eternal Perspective**- Did you notice how the Psalmist ended this song? **"He will watch over us...both now and forevermore."** The Psalmist, through the Spirit was pointing to a promise of eternal security. We need to step back and interpret this promise in light of the end of the story. Remember the movie, **Sixth Sense**? The thing about that movie is you can never watch it

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by JD Greear in Psalm 91 Sermon

the same way twice. (BTW, spoiler alert so shut your ears if you are still waiting to show it to your kids...). You find out at the end that Bruce Willis' character has been dead the whole time. Now go back and watch the movie a 2nd time with that knowledge and it redefines everything. You can't see the beginning the same when you know the ending. [#3 Eternal Perspective] This is how we must read the promise of this Psalm. At the cross, the son of God, Jesus Christ, has defeated everything that the mountain symbolized. All the uncertainty, trouble, danger, all the evil in us and the world, and ultimately "death itself will be swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15). That is why Jesus is the ultimate antidote to uncertainty because he makes eternity certain for all who trust in him. Have you?

### How to walk in uncertainty

**Keep moving toward Jerusalem...and sing along the way.** In spite of the dangers, toils and snares, the pilgrims kept moving toward Jerusalem, and they sang 14 Songs of Ascent, this is one of them. They sang about their God in whom they trusted. They trusted the promise that God would be with them and meet them in Jerusalem. For us today Jerusalem is a symbol of the destiny and eternal dwelling place of God. It's the Celestial City in Pilgrim's Promise. We keep moving and we keep worshipping. This kind of resilience should define us as Christians. Look at the testimony of the Apostle Paul in the face uncertainty. 2 Timothy 4:17–18, *"But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that I might fully preach the word and all the Gentiles might hear it. So, I was rescued from the lion's mouth."*

*The Lord will rescue me from every evil work and will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom.* This is the very same mindset, same faith that the OT pilgrims had in God. Some of us are so frozen by uncertainty and the 1000 possible dangers or outcomes. And if we allow the fear of the unknown to dominate our lives, we will be dead in the water, we will never live the kind of bold, purpose-filled lives we are meant to live. "God loves to steer a moving ship."-Lon Solomon. Start pointing north, move toward Jerusalem, **Keep moving toward Jerusalem** Did you know that the most repeated command in the Scriptures is "Do not fear." And the most repeated promise is "I will be with you." He is with you in your loneliness in the night that used to be occupied by your spouse so don't give up- sing of his protection, he's not done with you yet, he is with you in your sleepless nights facing anxiety about your finances so keep moving in his will, sing of his provision...he is with you when you are struggling with the fear of living out your faith at work so keep moving forward and sing of his power. Remember this, you are indestructible until God has fulfilled his purposes in you.

Just a couple weeks ago I had the privilege of visiting a couple of our members- Kevin and Elle Straley. Kevin has a number of serious health conditions that keep him mostly shut-in except for doctor's visits. I went to encourage them, but I found myself leaving being so encouraged as Kevin talked about his security in Jesus and how he sees every day as an opportunity to keep moving in the work that God has given him. Talking with medical team about his relationship with Jesus, sharing these moments with Elle. And if Kevin were here, he would tell you- keep moving toward! **Is there uncertainty that is keeping you from moving forward?**

**Communion:** Ultimately we know we can keep moving toward Jerusalem because Jesus Christ made the way for us. Jesus faced another mountain, not of uncertainty, but of certainty of his death- the mountain, called Golgotha (place of the skull). Jesus took on the opposite of the promises of this psalm, he faced the abandonment of God, God turned his face away, he allowed the full weight of evil to fall upon him so that all the promises of this psalm could be true for us forever.