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The Climb of Your Life: The Sherpa Psalm 121

Before I begin the message, this is my last chance to say this: every man in this church ought to attend Men's Life. And every wife should do all she can to encourage it. It is a more concise version of a program that has changed hundreds of lives. It could change yours, too! Even if you attended before...would a refresher course really kill you? Our world needs more real men. Please sign up today.

Okay, we are in the second week of a series based on Psalms 120-134, all of which have the same subtitle: The Psalms of Ascent. Jews sang these songs on their pilgrimages going "up" to Jerusalem, and they sang them as they returned home from 70 years of exile in Babylon.

But these Psalms aren't just for ancient Jews. They are for us today. They describe a life of discipleship. We want our lives to be noble and noteworthy; to count for something. We want to feel like God is using us in significant way. We want to go up, don't we? That's why these Psalms matter to us, too.

Our theme for this series is, *The Climb of Your Life*. Who are the best climbers in the world? The Sherpas! Those tough little people with freakish lung power who live in northern Nepal. The most famous Sherpa was Tenzing Norgay. Together with Sir Edmund Hillary, they were the first to summit Mt. Everest in 1953.

When my friends and I climbed Mt. Rainier in 1995, we had our own version of a Sherpa. His name was Eric Simonson. He has summited Rainier 280 times. He was our guide, mentor and protector. We were tied to his rope. He trained us how to put on our crampons and how to use ice axes to self-arrest when we fell. He chose the route and pointed out the crevasses. He told us when to stop and rest and made us eat something even when we weren't hungry. All I could think about as I trudged up that mountain was taking one lunging step at a time...and one more deep breath. But it was our Sherpa, Eric, who watched us, protected us, made sure we got where we wanted to go.

In this morning's Psalm of Ascent, the writer is on a long journey back from exile. He realizes he cannot make this climb without help. He needs a Sherpa, and he finds one. But be prepared for a surprise: And as we read this text, see if you can spot the key verb that appears again and again.

This is a great Washington State psalm. The people of Kansas wouldn't appreciate it because they don't even know what a hill is. We know hills, don't we?! But what we don't know is what the psalmist was really saying. "I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, Maker of heaven and earth." When we read this psalm, we think something like this: "When I look up and see Mt. Rainier and the surrounding mountains, I am awe-inspired! I cannot help but think of the God who created such majesty. What a great and powerful Lord He is! And this powerful God of creation can certainly help me in my time of need."

Is that about right? That might be the way we read it, but it would not have been the way the Israelite read it 2500 years ago. Do you know what they saw when they lifted their eyes to the hills? Idols. The hills were the places of idol worship. Statues to the god, Baal; great phallic totem poles to the goddess, Asherah; groves of trees planted as a shrine to the nature gods; "temples" where men would "worship" the fertility gods by having sex with either a female or a male temple prostitute.

Even King Solomon, the builder of the temple of Yahweh, also built idols to the gods Chemosh and Molech to keep his pagan wives happy. And he built them on the Mt. of Olives! Right across the Kidron Valley from the temple, in full view! Molech was a particularly nasty deity. He was hollow bronze god sitting on the hill with outstretched arms. Worshippers would build a fire inside his body and then, when it was red hot, they would lay a baby in his arms and burn alive as a sacrifice.

One of the most awful kings ever to rule in Israel was Ahaz. This is how he was described in the Bible:

Ahaz did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord...but he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. He made metal images for the Baals, and he made offerings in the Valley of Hinnom and burned his sons as an offering... And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree.

If you lifted up your eyes to Mt. Carmel or Mt. Tabor or Mt. Olivet—or nearly any other high hill in Israel—you would see evidence of the idolatry that led to the destruction of that nation and to its exile. So if these songs were sung by people returning from exile—people who were trudging hundreds of miles in the sun back to Jerusalem, exhausted people who wondered if they would survive this hard journey... as they lifted up their weary heads and saw the idols on the hills—it was a stark reminder of the rebellion that got them in trouble in the first place!

"I lift my eyes up to the hills..." (I am tired... I am afraid... I don't know if I'm going to make it. I need help.) "Where does my help come from?" (Will I turn to the

gods of this world to give me the strength and answers I need? Will I listen to the bad advice of my culture about how to live and whom to trust?)

Have any of you ever taken bad advice? From someone who claimed to be helping you but, in fact, was not helpful at all? I have... plenty of times. When I was a young man and had saved some money, I went to a stock broker for advice. This "helper" took my money and put it in option index trades. He had me in a straddle position, selling puts and calls. If you have no idea what I just said, join the club. I didn't either, but it lost me thousands of dollars. Not very helpful.

Later, when I was married, Cyndi and I decided we really didn't want our kids born around Christmas time because of the craziness of that season. So we took some family planning advice from a friend. Do you know what we call that family planning method? Cooper. Cooper who was born on Christmas day. Not very helpful.

"Who will help me in this journey of life?" asks the psalmist. "My help comes from the Lord, Maker of Heaven and Earth!" he decides. I will put my trust in God."

Then, to highlight this contrast, he compares Yahweh to the gods on the hillside. For example, one of the jobs of a priest of Baal was to wake him up because Baal was a lazy, sleepy god. When Elijah was battling the 450 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, do you remember what he said? "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is in the toilet, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." In contrast, the Psalmist says of His God: "He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." Baal may be prone to catnaps. Yahweh never takes his eyes off of you.

Or notice when the Psalmist speaks of the sun beating down on them by day and the moon by night. On the hills were idols honoring the sun god and moon god. There were priests who could offer incantations to protect them from the heat of the day and the dangers of the night. But again, the Psalmist says "No!" to the offer of this world's help. His God will be the "strong shade on your right hand." His God will "keep you from all evil."

In other words, the psalmist says, "For this hard journey of life—this journey from bondage to freedom—I need help! I can't do it on my own. I need someone to guide and protect me. So... where shall I place my trust? Where shall I turn my eyes? To the hills? To Baal and Asherah and Molech? No! My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth. He made those hills! He made the stones from which those idols were sculpted and the trees from which those totems were carved. Why would I turn to a cheap substitute when I can trust in the real thing? "My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth."

Here's something else we need to wrestle with. You come away from this psalm with the impression that God's people never struggle, never hurt, never fail or fall.

“He will not let your foot be moved... the sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night...” Is that true? Is that our experience? That Christians never get sunburned, never have bad dreams, never slip and fall and break something? Ten years ago last month, my foot slipped. It was in an ice skate. I slipped and fell on my head and nearly died. I loved the Lord; was trying to serve Him. And yet I slipped. He let my foot slip.

If the promise of this verse really is that we will never have troubles, slips, or falls... what will you say to the Dickersons? The Pearsons? The Fouquettes? The Hendricks? You cannot read the Bible without discovering that God’s people are not immune from the sufferings of the world. The Lord Jesus suffered, and he warned that we would too. Even other Psalms of Ascent speak of adversity. Psalm 129: “Greatly they have afflicted me from my youth...” Or Psalm 130: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to my pleas for mercy!”

The Bible never promises we won’t suffer; won’t slip, won’t get sunburned or be afraid of things that go bump in the night. But here is what it does promise: “The Lord is your keeper... the Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.”

Did you hear the key verb of this passage? Keep! Six times he promises that the Lord will “keep” us. The word means “to guard, watch over, attend carefully.” In other words, on this climb of life, God alone will be our Sherpa. Our faithful guide and protector who will get us to our destination which is eternity! Our pilgrimage is not to death. It is to eternal life! “The Lord will keep you from all evil... the Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore!”

The promise of this Psalm is that if we belong to God, he has a hold on us! He will never let us go. Even if we do slip, even if we do get baked in the sun, even if we do get afraid, even when we die or someone we love dies—we are never, ever out of the unblinking sight, the unsleeping attention, the eternal, keeping care of God.

The problem is we are just as idolatrous as the ancient Israelites. We are horrified by the gods Molech and Baal and can’t imagine how good Jewish people could debase themselves that way. Then we good Christian Americans turn around and grovel before our hill gods. The god “Choice” and the god “Greed” and the god “Diversity” and the god “Sports.” We still lift up our eyes to the hills... we trust the gods of our culture to tell us what marriage is and what family is and when life ends and begins. We listen as our hill gods tell us what success is and to spend money we don’t have and hoard what we do. We listen as our hill gods tell us that divorce is just a harmless reset button and sex is a recreational activity.

Again and again we lift our eyes to the hills to get help from a culture that doesn't know our God and doesn't have our best interests at heart. We have a Bible we revere but never read... and we don't obey it when we do. We have a Holy Spirit living in us, but we don't listen to His promptings. We have a God we say we believe in, but we don't really trust him to keep us; to care for us; to guide us. This psalm realizes how easily the gods of this world draw our attention and he calls out a warning: "On your journey of life, there is only one reliable source of help. One guide, one protector, one Keeper who will sustain you through the bumps of this life and right into eternity. The hill gods cry out for you to believe and follow the way of the world. God cries out, "No, I alone, the Maker and Savior of Heaven and Earth... I am your helper. I am your keeper. Don't put your eyes on the hills or anywhere else. Put your eyes on me!"

And then just to make himself perfectly clear, God comes to earth—in the flesh, in the person of Jesus—and repeats those ancient promises: "I am the Good Shepherd... I am the way, the truth and the life... I will never leave you nor forsake you... come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

In mountaineering, there is a technique called short-roping. A lot of celebrities want to make it to the top of a mountain they are not capable of climbing, so they short-rope to their Sherpa... which is another way of saying that the Sherpa pulls them all the way up to the top of the mountain they could never climb on their own.

Short-ropers are viewed with contempt in the mountaineering world. You should never attempt a climb you are not capable of completing on your own strength. But what mountain climbers sneer at, we embrace. We are short-roped to Jesus Christ. We can never make it to the top of our mountain on our own. Only if we are bound to Him—if we listen to Him, obey Him, trust Him, follow Him and rely upon His strength—will we ever complete *the Climb of Our Lives*. "I lift my eyes up unto the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth."

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. What surprised you about Pastor Mark's explanation of this passage?
 2. Idolatry is any substitute for the worship of the True God. Where does idolatry appear in this psalm? What are YOUR idols?
 3. Is the psalm really promising that believers will never stumble, struggle, get sun-burned, etc? If not, what is the psalmist trying to say?