

Psalm 121 - Undaunted Courage for the Year Ahead

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Preacher: Dov Cohen

[0 : 00] And for the benefit of our guests again, my name is Dov Conner, I'm a pastor here so if anyone walked in a little bit during the singing it's good to have you all here.! This morning we're going to be expounding and looking at Psalm 121. Psalm 121. And the title of today's message is Undaunted Courage for the Year Ahead.

The main idea of this message is pretty much in line with the title, we can have undaunted courage for the year ahead because God is our keeper.

We can have undaunted courage for the year ahead because God is our keeper. Now, who here likes audiobooks? Yeah, all right, yeah. So, knowing you all and any congregation this size, I figure there would be some people here who enjoy listening to audiobooks.

And you're not alone, I also enjoy audiobooks. You know, I like, you all know I like a good printed book as well, but I do love audiobooks. Especially one with a great narrator, right? Great voice, great to listen to.

Well, that being said, I'm from New Jersey. I went to Rutgers University, same school as Isaiah Pacheco, right?

[1 : 31] We didn't go at the same time, otherwise it would have stopped him on the football field. But that being said, I went to Rutgers in New Brunswick. It was about an hour north of where I grew up in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

And I would come home a bunch on the weekends so I could go to church in Salva Grace and Marlton. And on the ride home from school in New Brunswick, for that hour, I would listen to audiobooks.

And two audiobooks that stand out. One, the classic Pilgrim's Progress. I know a few of the ladies are reading through Pilgrim's Progress. That's a classic. Love that book. So I got to listen to that. That was neat.

But then also a second that really stands out to me is the book Undaunted Courage by Stephen Ambrose. Undaunted Courage by Stephen Ambrose.

So has anyone here heard of Lewis and Clark? Lewis and Clark? Yeah, yeah. So if you went to school, you probably heard of Lewis and Clark. So that's what Undaunted Courage was, that book is about.

[2 : 36] Now, it's about Lewis and Clark's great expedition from St. Louis through this area up to Oregon and back. As they explored and studied and mapped the recently acquired Louisiana Purchase.

Now, Lewis and Clark's journey, it really was a fantastic adventure with lots of danger. You know, they faced harsh weather and limited food and grizzly bears.

And simply the danger of trekking through the unknown. And I love what Ambrose writes about Lewis and Clark.

And specifically, Murrayweather Lewis' perspective on his journey. Murrayweather Lewis says that his fixed rule was always to assume that the road ahead was good.

And so proved otherwise. He always would assume that the road ahead was good. Could there be a more courageous statement?

[3 : 45] Could there be a bolder statement? Truly, could there be a more Christian statement? And to know that the road ahead is good?

Well, today, we're going to be studying a psalm that can infuse us. The truth in the psalm can infuse us with that type of courage. Now, it's early September.

So know that many of us, if not all of us, are beginning a new season of life at this time. We're beginning a journey. We're embarking on a new school year. We're heading into marriage.

We're heading into parenting. We're into a new phase of parenting. We're just a new community group. We're a new job. And starting out an adventure, it can be daunting.

We look at the road ahead and we wonder, will this be a good one? Am I on a good path? You know, will I learn something valuable?

[4 : 56] Or will my kids learn something valuable? Will this be a good marriage? Will I be a good parent? Will this community group be as sweet as the last one?

And so, our minds wonder. Well, through Psalm 121, I think the Lord wants to redirect our attention this morning.

Yes, he wants us to look up ahead and consider what is to come. But I think he wants us more so to lift up our eyes beyond, beyond the possibilities, beyond the potential blessings, beyond the potential challenges, and rather lift our eyes up to him.

So, this morning, I want, and I think the Lord wants, through Psalm 121, to infuse us with confidence, with undaunted courage for the months ahead, to face him with hope and faith, because we know that he is with us on this journey.

So, that being said, I've got four reasons why we can have undaunted courage for the year ahead. Before we get into them, let's first read the Psalm.

[6 : 19] The Psalm 121, a song of ascents. I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on your right hand.

The sun should not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. 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. God, holy God, would you bless the preaching of your word now.

[7 : 23] Please send your spirit. In Jesus' name, amen. All right, well first, if we're going to glean courage from Psalm 121, we need to understand the background of this psalm.

We need to understand the context of this psalm. So specifically, that it's a psalm of ascents. Psalm 121 is a psalm of ascents. So what is the psalm of ascents?

Well first, the psalms of ascents, there are 15 of them. Psalms 120 to 134 were psalms sung on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem by the Israelites about 2,500 years ago, about 500 years before Christ. Shir Hamalaot, as they're called in the Hebrew. These psalms were sung as Hebrew pilgrims traveled from the surrounding area of Israel to Jerusalem on the festivals of Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot, and Sukkot, Sukkot being the Feast of Tabernacles.

These psalms, they express the heart of the nation for a longing for God, for unity, for the Lord's protection, and for trust in the Lord's faithfulness.

[8 : 33] all themes that we'll see in this psalm, in Psalm 121. Ultimately, the psalms of ascents, they're written by various authors, but ultimately, they were all to guide and strengthen and solidify the footsteps of the Israelites as they were trekking from the surrounding countryside to Jerusalem to meet together, but truly, to meet with their God.

So, if that's the background of Psalm 121, let's dive into the four reasons we can have undaunted courage for the year ahead based on the truths within it. So, reason number one, we can have undaunted courage for the year ahead because God, our helper, is the maker of heaven and earth. Second, we can have undaunted courage for the year ahead because God is tireless in His care for us. Third, we can have undaunted courage because we know that God will only allow redemptive purposes into our lives.

And fourth, we can have undaunted courage because God will keep us now and forevermore. Now, we can have undaunted courage but Psalm 121, it begins with a dose of realism.

Psalm 121 begins with recognizing and confronting the facts of reality, the hills ahead. Look at verse one. I lift up my eyes to the hills from where does my help come.

[10 : 22] Now, what are these hills? Well, commentators generally agree that the hills of verse one represent the challenges that lay ahead for the pilgrims as they're going to make their way to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem itself was situated on top of a hill. So as the pilgrims traveled to the holy city to meet with God, what they were going to face, they're going to have to climb some hills.

And so as they set out on their journey to Jerusalem, they lifted up their eyes and what did they see? A glittering city? Did they see an easy path or a straightforward way?

No. They saw hills. On their pilgrimage, the first things the pilgrims see, what these pilgrims are aware of, are the hills.

Hills of strain. Hills of difficulty. Hills of just getting tired. That's what they had to look forward to.

[11 : 29] So, question for you all. today. Consider, as you look out into startup September, overloaded October, nutty November, dizzying December, jumpstart January, flurry February, March Madness, almost there April, and yes, finally May-cember.

What do you see? What hills are in front of you? Are they keeping multiple kids engaged as you're trying to teach one the alphabet and one algebra one at the same time?

Are they establishing a marriage that you're so excited for, but you don't know if you're going to be a good spouse? Are they hills of establishing new professional relationships as you head into a new job?

Or are they health-related or financial-related? Track with me here. The hills are real.

They're not some illusion created simply by fear. So let's see them. Let's acknowledge them. Let's call them out. Let's remember that God is so much bigger and stronger and more faithful than we know.

[12 : 56] And how do I know that? Let's keep on looking at the psalm. Let's look at verses one and two together. I lifted my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. After recounting the hills facing these Israelite pilgrims, the first comfort, the first source of undaunted courage the psalmist draws from is the fact that the Lord, his Lord, is the maker of heaven and earth.

So consider the one who simply spoke the world into existence. The one who created every star in the sky, every blade of grass, every grain of sand.

The one who knows the rules of mathematics, who created the rules of mathematics, of physics, of grammar. This powerful, wise, loving God is the help and hope of the psalmist.

So consider for the kiddos in the crowd. Specifically the ones who can't wait to play football after listening intently to this sermon.

[14 : 16] Now, typically, you have Mr. Ben or Mr. Logan or Mr. Caleb quarterbacking for you after church. Just imagine if one team could bring over the one, the only, Patrick Mahomes to play quarterback for you today after church.

Imagine if he were your help on the football field. Accurate passes, great play calls, strong but catchable deliveries. This guy on Sunday with y'all could truly do no wrong.

And what undaunted courage your team would have if you had Patrick Mahomes as your quarterback after church, not to disparage Mr. Ben or Mr. Logan, Mr. Caleb or any other guys.

But I think you get my point. It's a fun illustration and it breaks down to the fact that Mahomes, for as fantastic as he had quarterback, well, God is a helper.

God is your helper. There's just no comparison. God is the creator, the maker of heaven and earth, of everything.

[15 : 29] And he is our helper even as we look at these hills. Therefore, we can be hope and faith and courage filled as we look upon the hills we're about to face in the year ahead.

Second, we can be filled with undaunted courage for the year ahead because God is tireless in his care for us. Look at verses three and four.

who will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

All right, now think about it. These Israelites, they were traveling from the surrounding countryside through the hills to Jerusalem. they're exposed to various dangers, not unlike Lewis and Clark that we talked about earlier.

They would face wild animals. They would face bandits or thieves. You know, think about Luke 10 with the parable of the Good Samaritan and what that man faced.

[16 : 36] And at the same time, at some point, they would have to sleep. They would get tired.

They would lie down, close their eyes, and expose themselves to the various elements they were

facing as they were journeying from the countryside!

They would have to Jerusalem. And sure, they would probably set up a watchman, but even the watchman would probably get tired and doze off and potentially miss out on a sign of danger at some point. But God, God is the total opposite.

He never grows tired. He never slumbers. He never falls asleep. And he doesn't need any coffee from Black Dog to boost his energy. Rather, God, God is always awake.

God is always alert. His eyes are always open. His energy level is always boundless. His attention is undistracted. And what is God's energy and attention and alertness focused on?

Well, according to Psalm 121, it is on keeping Israel, protecting Israel, watching over his people to ensure that no harm comes upon them.

[17 : 56] And friends, in Christ, we know the same is true for us. Consider 1 Peter 3.12, which says, for the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous.

Brothers and sisters, if you are in Christ, not only is God alive, not only is he alert, but his eye is on you. He's paying attention to you.

His eye is watching you in love and in care and protection. Yes, he may allow trials to come into our lives.

We're going to talk about that more in the next point. But, truly, we can trust that he is fully alert to us, our circumstances, our present, and our future.

and we can walk in faith knowing that the road ahead is a good one because the Lord has purposes for it that may make sense now, that may make sense five years from now, that may make sense 5,000 years from now, but that will make sense.

[19 : 11] And so, remember and have courage that the one who keeps Israel, the one who keeps you in Christ, will neither slumber nor sleep.

He is tireless to care for you. All right, now a third reason we can have undaunted courage is because we know that God is our keeper and he will only allow redemptive purposes into our lives. Check out verses 5 and 6. The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night.

Now this language, this psalm, is just so vivid. Consider what the psalmist is saying here. First, God is our shade on our right hand.

The sun shall not strike you by day. Now, here in Kansas City, it's beautiful out right now. It's beautiful out and the sun is shining. But think back to the summertime when the sun is just bright and strong and hot.

[20 : 26] I remember one time I went golfing with some work buddies a few years back and I had no idea. I had been here for a year or two.

I had no idea how strong the sun was here in Kansas City. And, uh, did I wear sunblock? Well, let's just say that I got burnt, like red burnt that day.

So the point where my nickname at work became red hot. And it wasn't because of my golfing abilities. Well, the sun is strong here in Kansas City.

consider how strong the sun must get in Israel in the Middle East. Yeah, like, sun poisoning is a real thing there.

It gets blisteringly hot. However, what does the psalmist say in Psalm 121?

[21 : 29] The Lord is our shade on our right hand. the sun will not strike you by day. Literally. The Hebrew says he will not smite you, kill you, or destroy you.

The psalm, what it's saying is that God will protect us. He will keep us. He will guard us from the physical, from physical harm on our journeys. He will guard us from the dangers of the day.

And he will guard us from the dangers of the night. Look at verse 6. Nor the moon by night. And what are the dangers of the moon by night? Well, moon in Latin, y'all know, is luna.

We get lunar calendar from. And it's also where we get the word lunatic from. It connotes madness, irrational thinking, psychological disturbances.

So here in Psalm 21, verse 6, the psalmist is stirring up courage because he knows that God will protect him from the disturbances of the night, literally from going mad, from psychological distress.

[22 : 38] This God, this keeper, who not only made heaven and earth, who not only doesn't sleep, but who guards us physically, emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically.

Yes, this God will allow us to suffer at times. Life is not all rainbows and unicorns, right? What I think the text is implying here, through the Hebrew for strike, again, meaning smite or kill or destroy,

is that any harm that does befall us is allowed to befall us from the hand of the Lord. And the Lord will truly sustain our faith and souls through it. Truly, couldn't God stop any harm from striking us, harm from the sun, harm from the moon?

But yes, at times, God does allow seemingly bad things to happen to us. So the question is, why? Well, because I think God wants us to be able to say with Spurgeon, I've learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the rock of ages. What is God's ultimate goal for us?

[24 : 04] Is it to give us constantly, seemingly positive circumstances? I don't think so. Could it be that God as our Father has a higher aim for us than even that?

Could it be that God as our Father wants to grow in our love for Him, our trust in Him, our contentment in Him? and so like Spurgeon, who greatly knew the harm of the sun and the moon, the physical and spiritual and emotional and psychological challenges of life, I think that God wants us ultimately to be able to kiss that wave, the wave that throws us against the rock of ages and forces us to grab on to Him, to set our hopes on Him, to pin our hearts on Him and Him alone in faith, knowing that any seeming harm that does come our way is from the hand of a wise and powerful and loving Father.

A Father who could stop it all, who could block all the pain and challenge and suffering, but who loves us enough to give us what will bring us ultimate joy, namely Himself.

So why can we face the future with undaunted courage? Because the sun and moon will not smite us, truly it will not destroy us, because we are His and He is our keeper and He will only allow redemptive purposes into our lives.

And fourth, we can have undaunted courage because God will keep us now and forever more.

Wasn't it good to sing that this morning? Look at verses 7 and 8.

[26 : 19] 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 forever more. Truly, we are safe in Christ because God is our God.

And we are safe both now and forever more. We are safe now as we journey through our pilgrimages, pilgrimages through the school year, or into marriage, or into a new face of parenting, or wherever He's leading.

And we're safe forever more. There is no limit to God's keeping. Truly, neither time nor eternity will set the bounds on God's care for us.

rather, we can experience the peace and security and stability of knowing that God is our keeper now.

and we can lift up our eyes to the hills, those challenges we talked about earlier, and know that as we climb those hills, as we make our way even to our eternal Jerusalem, even as we enter that glorious destination, we can experience the peace and security and stability of knowing that God is and has and will continue to keep us.

[27 : 47] Praise God. All right. Now finally, before we close for today, I want to drive home some application to our lives.

And we've been thinking about this all throughout today's sermon. There's been little points of application sprinkled throughout. And man, I could connect this to like a million points of life, this psalm.

But I've got two I want to specifically. First, are you embarking on a new school year? Are you a parent with a kid in public or private or homeschool or whatever?

Well, summer's over. And the hills are just beginning to rise up in your eyes. The hills of busyness and activity and homework and stress.

And you are wondering, how am I going to be able to do all of this? Well, as you leave today and as you wake up tomorrow and as you journey through September and October and November, I want you to remember who your help is.

[29 : 06] Where your confidence lies, where your hope is pinned. I want you to remember that God is your God.

That he made heaven and earth. That he doesn't sleep in his care for you. That anything that seems to threaten you this year will come from the hand of a loving father who would not let your faith or soul or walk with him be destroyed.

Rather, as you begin this pilgrimage beyond Maycember and to just breathe June. I want to call your attention not to the hills in your life.

Yes, acknowledge the hills in your life. They are real. But throughout the year, I want you to pace your eyes, to fix your eyes on this God, this Jesus who is strong, who is tireless, who is wise, who is eternally keeping you.

And seek to walk faithfully with him. Seek him in his word and prayer. Take care of your bodies, love your spouse, care for your kids, plug into church, do the things.

[30 : 24] But remember that number one, he is keeping you. And number two, you are doing all these things to glorify and enjoy God forever.

So all the pressure, all the perfectionism, all the permissiveness, even possibly a sinful comparison, kill that in your heart and aim to remember that he is your keeper and you are simply seeking to walk humbly and faithfully and rightly with him.

And so, trust him. All right, and second, I want to talk to any of you today that are troubled in your soul.

You're struggling to follow the Lord. You feel yourself wavering or weak at times, sometimes even indulging the flesh. Well, you too are on a pilgrimage.

You're on a path and the path is to eternity, to be with God forever. And well, in Christ, all these promises of Psalm 121 are for you on this journey, the struggling pilgrim, the struggling saint.

[31 : 46] They're for you. As you journey to the heavenly Jerusalem, it's the maker of heaven and earth who is going to get you there. It's the one who doesn't sleep who will get you there.

It's your sovereign keeper who will get you there. It's the one who is keeping your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. It is him who will get you there.

So despair not. As you travel this path to this celestial city, yes, read your Bible and pray.

Yes, obey his commands. Yes, put to death all known sin. And yes, love him and love your neighbor. But ultimately, you can rest and trust in the hope that God is your keeper and that he will keep you both now and forevermore.

Well, to wrap things up, in these eight short verses, we've seen a whole lot this morning. A whole lot about a great God, a creator God who is strong and wise and powerful.

[33 : 09] A keeper God who is tireless in his care for us. A protector God that will only allow redemptive purposes into our lives.

And an eternal God who is guarding us and keeping us now and forevermore. aren't we so blessed to call this God our heavenly father.

And so, as we make our pilgrimage through the school year or into marriage or into or through parenting or wherever the Lord may call us this year, may we face the hills, the past, the journey, not just assuming but truly knowing that the road ahead is a good one.

And a good one ultimately because our great God has gone on it before us, is on it with us and will keep us to the end.

And for that, may we have undaunted courage for the year ahead. Let's pray. Dear God, we just praise you because you are a good God.

[34 : 39] Lord, how can we thank you enough that you saved us? That you, God, that you chose us for the foundation of the world so we can know these truths and we could walk through life with these truths.

So I pray that you would just bear fruit through your truth, through your word and help us wake up tomorrow and on Thursday and a week from now with hope and faith and courage for what you have for us ahead.

Thank you, Lord. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. All right. For communion this morning, I would be remiss if I didn't remind you of Jesus.

The one who traveled before us to Jerusalem, yes, to the Passover festival, but not to joyously celebrate. Instead, he made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, ultimately to be betrayed and condemned and crucified.

Surely, we know that this Jesus, the one who deserved all of God's protection and keeping and care, this Jesus, well, he experienced the scorching of the sun as he hung there on that cross.

[36 : 13] He experienced true spiritual anguish, and he experienced the wrath of God for you and for me. Thank God.

Also, the promises of Psalm 121 could be for us so that we could know not only God's forgiveness and acceptance and approval, but also God's strong, wise, and loving care, truly working all things together for our good.

And so this morning, come to the table, reassured, bolstered in your faith, encouraged and grateful, knowing that God is for you and God is personally watching over you and that God will truly keep your life both now and forever.
So please come to the table. Amen. Thank you.