

"The Great Train Robbery of Your Soul"
Psalms 121
5 March 2017

I love road trips. And one of the best road trips that I have ever been on, in fact it is *the best* road trip that I have ever been on, led me and my friends right into an old-fashioned train robbery. The staff at the church I used to pastor in Texas went on a "road trip staff retreat." Someone in the church has a house in the mountains of New Mexico, so the four of us- Matt, Tim, Clark, and me loaded up a truck and we hit the road for a 12-hour drive.

And it was a great road trip. We each told extended versions of how we met our wives. And we listened to a lot of the satellite radio station called "Coffee House." But it was when we stopped at a Dairy Queen in Clayton, New Mexico that changed our lives forever and created a bond between us that even our wives don't quite understand. It was in that Dairy Queen in Clayton, New Mexico that we met a real, old-fashioned train robber: Mr. Tom "Black Jack" Ketchum.

* INSERT PIC OF BLACK JACK KETCHUM

Of course, we didn't actually meet Black Jack Ketchum that day because by that time, Black Jack had been dead for over 100 years. But we were introduced to Black Jack Ketchum that day. In the Dairy Queen. In Clayton, New Mexico. As we were refilling our cokes.

On the wall right next to the fountain drinks were several pictures of Black Jack Ketchum. But these weren't just any pictures of Black Jack. They were pictures of him being hanged on the gallows! Right there, as we were getting drink refills, were these before and after pictures of Black Jack Ketchum being hanged for a train robbery. We were confused why this Dairy Queen, out of all the pictures and paintings in the world, why they would display the hanging of a man right by the fountain drinks.

So out of curiosity we asked the people working there why these morbid pictures were hanging up and they told us briefly the story of Tom "Black Jack" Ketchum. So we were curious and got back in the truck and hit *Wikipedia* on our iPhones so we could learn everything we could about this man named Black Jack Ketchum. And what we discovered on our road trip was that he was a cowboy and an outlaw who lived in the 1800's. He was part of the "Hole in the Wall Gang" and he would often hide out and rob travelers. He would also rob trains and that's what eventually led to his death on the gallows in Clayton, New Mexico in 1901. A failed train robbery cost Black Jack his life.

And these were the final words of outlaw Thomas "Black Jack" Ketchum, as the noose was placed around his neck: *"Good-bye. Please dig my grave very deep. All right; hurry up."* And with that, he died. His death was actually a lot worse, but I'll spare you the gory details. You can do the research if you want and then you'll see why these pictures were really out of place in a restaurant.

But that's why those morbid pictures hang in that Dairy Queen. Tom "Black Jack" Ketchum was hanged in Clayton, New Mexico for attempted train robbery and that's one of their claims to fame. So Matt, Tim, Clark, and me spent hours on that road trip looking up information about ole Black Jack Ketchum. And on the way back, when we drove through Clayton, New Mexico again, we went and found where he was buried and we made a stop at Black Jack's grave. And like true Texans, we poured some Dr. Pepper out on the ground in honor of his memory, in honor of our homey Black Jack.

Road trips. That was the best road trip that I've ever been on. Good times with good friends. And we even made a new friend in Black Jack Ketchum on that road trip.

The truth is that people have been taking road trips since the beginning of time. You don't get too far in the Bible, in fact, it's in the third chapter of Genesis where you have Adam and Eve leaving the garden on the very first road trip. And the Israelites later took a 40-year road trip through the wilderness. And in the Mosaic law, the Israelites were required to make 3 road trips every year. Three times a year God required the nation of Israel to go on road trips to Jerusalem to worship. And he gave them a soundtrack for the road: The Psalms of Ascent. These songs were the ancient Near Eastern equivalent of satellite radio, if you will.

Remember what we saw last week. The Ascent Psalms (120-134) are the songs that ancient Israelites would sing as they made their pilgrimage to worship Yahweh during their 3 main festivals. So as they made their journey to Jerusalem, these are the songs that they would sing. These psalms are little snapshots, little films. They are *films for radio*.

So imagine that you live in ancient Israel and you and your family start walking to Jerusalem to celebrate. And your wife is with you. And your 6 kids. And you have a few animals with you. And as you make your

way toward Jerusalem, you walk through valleys and deserts and over mountains with steep drops, all the while aware that there are robbers and bandits and outlaws that are hiding and might jump out and rob you. You know that as you make your way to Mount Zion that there are Black Jack Ketchum's out there waiting to rob you; waiting to stop the train and pull a good ole fashioned train robbery.

And so what do you do? Fast-forward to today and it's the same. What do you do? When you're scared, when you are worried, when you face the unknown, what do you do? Psalm 121 will teach you to-

CONNECT YOUR PROBLEMS WITH HIS PROMISES.

Psalm 121 was written for children who think there are monsters under their beds or in their closets. And for adults who fear what the future holds. Psalm 121 was written to be sung at the scariest moments of life. And on our journey in this life, on our journey to the City that is to come, we will face dangers. We will face darkness. It's unavoidable, actually. Faith encounters troubles. It has to!

And on top of that, our own flesh will conspire against us, and we will be tempted to fear and worry. And our enemy, the Devil, will do his part to see the great train robbery of our souls happen. It's easy to look at all the unknowns (and all the knowns!) and allow our soul's to experience a train robbery. It's so easy on our journey to have our joy stolen, our peace stolen, our soul's robbed of peace.

And that's why Jesus gave us Psalm 121. To give us hope when we feel like we are on the verge of the great train robbery of our souls. Jesus gave us Psalm 121 to help prevent the great train robbery of our souls. Jesus gave us Psalm 121 to remind us to connect our problems with His promises. And that's exactly what the psalmist does.

LOOK AT VERSES 1-2...

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.

Psalm 121 was written so that believers could be reassured of Yahweh's presence and His ever-ready promises as they made their way to Jerusalem to worship. And so they would sing the Gospel as they made their way. And the first thing you'll notice here is that the psalmist is preaching the Gospel to himself. He is rehearsing the Gospel here in verse 1. He's reminding his own soul that his help is not in anything of himself- not his gifts, not his skills, not his swagger. It's all in Yahweh.

Now, why might he be afraid? Why is the psalmist scared here? It's because he looked up to the hills! He looked at his surroundings and that started a mini panic attack. His heart started beating fast. He started to sweat a little. Why? Because he most likely has his family in tow with him and he's worried about what's hiding in the dark. He's on a train, if you will, traveling to his destination, and he's worried about train robbers.

Understand that the pilgrimage to Jerusalem was fraught with danger. The terrain itself was dangerous. There were slippery paths, loose rocks, steep valleys. You could fall off a cliff. You could slip and lose your footing and slide down the side of a rocky mountain.

But there were also robbers and bandits and gangsters. There were ancient Near Eastern outlaws like Black Jack Ketchum and the Hole in the Wall Gang and they might put a hole in your head. Plus, there were snakes and wild animals. So anyone making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem would be tempted to fear.

So the psalmist preaches to his own heart here in verse 1. He reminds himself that his help comes from Yahweh. But notice that the danger is not specified in Psalm 121. Where does the emphasis lie throughout the song? It lies on Yahweh's ability to keep, guard, and protect His people. The emphasis lies in Yahweh's covenant-keeping nature. The focus in this song is on God's faithfulness in keeping His promises. As we will see in a moment, the word "watch" or "keep" or "protect" is used 6x in this psalm. And 5x the covenant name of God, Yahweh, is used. So make the connection: 6x the word protect is used and 5x Yahweh is used. Connect those 2 words: *Yahweh protects*. And that's a promise that is just as relevant today as it was back then.

So the emphasis in Psalm 121 does not lie in detailing and explaining whatever the problem is because it does not matter what the problem is. It could be dangers from gangs or gorillas, dangers from slipping or sleazy thieves, dangers from snakes or snake oil salesmen. The focus is on this one central truth: Yahweh will always be faithful to His promises, no matter what we face, no matter what we are going through.

So the psalmist spills more ink on God's character as a covenant-keeping God in this song because that's what matters. The subjective nature of verses 1-2, what we are going through, is met with the objective truth about Yahweh in verses 3-8. And there's a lesson to learn here: The subjective nature of verses 1-2,

what we are going through, is met with the objective truth about Yahweh in verses 3-8. More ink, more thoughts, more words, more prayer, more focus, more conversations, more energy should be spent on the objective truth about Yahweh than what we are experiencing.

So the psalmist preaches to his own heart in verse 2: *"My help comes from the LORD."* The Hebrew compound preposition in the phrase, *"My help comes from the LORD"* is literally *"My help comes from with the LORD"* and it could be worded *"My help comes straight from Yahweh."* Our help comes straight from Jesus. No angel. No messenger. No Western Union telegram. No delivery by train. No Pony Express. It's personal. The psalmist's help comes straight from the throne of Yahweh, straight from God Himself.

And the Hebrew word that is used here ("help") is often used in the Old Testament for Yahweh's intervention on behalf of His people to provide for them what they were lacking or to do for them what they could not do for themselves. So the idea is not merely help, it's that the psalmist would not be safe at all if he did not get this help. The psalmist needs *outside help*. He lacks the ability to pull this off. No amount of swagger and no six-shooter can help him when train robbers hop aboard to steal his joy and peace.

And so the psalmist gets the help that he needs not just from some local deity, not from some local god. As his train made its way to Jerusalem, the psalmist would see look to the hills and see the high places where other peoples worshipped their gods. He would see them worshipping other gods. In other words, the psalmist would be on the "turf" of other gods as he made his way to Jerusalem. He was behind enemy lines as he sojourned. He was in the wrong part of town many times. But Yahweh was with him. And Yahweh is not like these other local gods. Yahweh was not some ghetto deity from some backwoods town in Israel. No, Yahweh is the Sovereign God who made everything in the universe.

Yahweh is the one who made the very hills that the psalmist sees and through which he walks. The trees that pagans would cut down to use in order to make some idol, who made those trees? Yahweh. The clay that was shaped and heated to make some small figurine to worship, who made it? Yahweh. The stone that was cut to make a little amulet to ward off evil, who made it? Yahweh. The God who made Saturn with all of its rings is the God who was helping the psalmist. And He's the God that is with you right now whatever it is that you are going through right now. Christian, your help comes straight from Jesus. Do what the psalmist does and-

CONNECT YOUR PROBLEMS WITH HIS PROMISES.

Puritan Thomas Brooks said, *"God looks that we should spread his gracious promises before him... God is never better pleased than when his people importune him in his own words, and urge him with arguments taken from his own promises."* (The Secret Key to Heaven, p.129)

Whatever it is that you are going through, connect it with a promise from God's word. Spend more time in thought, conversation, and prayer talking about Jesus! That will build your faith. As I said earlier, faith has to encounter troubles. Faith has to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Faith has to walk through the bad parts of town. It has to. But we don't have to fear when we do stroll through the ghetto of some false god, some false truth, some problem that we face.

Of course, we do fear! Right? We do fear! The psalmist is acknowledging that in verse 1. He looked to the hills and felt that surge of panic. He is just like us and we are just like him. We do fear. We do get afraid. That's why *"Fear not!"* is one of the most commands in the Bible...precisely because we do fear! Dangers surround us that do cause us to lose hope and peace. That's life in a fallen world. Yes, sometimes life just happens and before you know it, you look up and the train has stopped and your circumstances are trying to rob your soul of your peace. But you can have hope because your help comes straight from Jesus. When you're scared, God is there. Jesus is there.

And sometimes you have to buckle down and preach that to your own heart. You have to connect your problems to His promises. You have to preach the Gospel to your own heart. And sometimes, you need other people to preach it to you.

LOOK AT VERSES 3-8...

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 shall 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.

The lyrics of this song now switch and we realize that this is a duet. We get the change from the first person in verses 1-2 to the third person in verses 3-8. So we get the church rallying around the psalmist

in verses 3-8 and they address his subjective needs, his subjective fears with the objective reality of the truth of Yahweh. They connect his problems with Yahweh's promises.

Verses 3-4: *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.*

What these other travelers are doing is preaching the Gospel to the psalmist. This is a Gospel caravan. And they remind the psalmist that Yahweh will not let him slip on the journey. In fact, they even call his attention to the Lord's care by using the Hebrew word *hinneh*: "*Behold! Come here and look! See for yourself! Open your eyes and see how Yahweh never sleeps!*" That's the idea behind the Hebrew word *hinneh*. Behold. Come see for yourself.

And if the psalmist is not to slip or stumble, that means that Yahweh would have to be watching him every step of the way, which we know that He would be. It's like what John Calvin said, "*So numerous are the dangers which surround us, that we couldn't stand a single moment, if His eye did not watch over our preservation. But the true security for a happy life lies in being persuaded that we are under divine government.*" (Commentary on the Bible, Psalm 61)

True security is being persuaded that we are under divine government. Yes, we might stub our toes, but we are under the watchful eye of Jesus. This is what Jesus does for us as we make our journey through this life! He preserves us! He keeps us! He upholds everything by the word of His power, as Hebrews 1:3 says. The humbling truth is that we could not stand one single moment if Jesus was not watching over us. We would crumble. We would break. We would slip. We would stumble. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus is upholding everything in His creation by the power of His word.

And it gets as practical as Him keeping your legs working properly. It gets as practical as Him keeping you breathing as you sleep at night. Oh, do not be deceived. You do not sleep well, you do not sleep heavily because you went to bed exhausted or because you took some *Nyquil*. Au contraire! You sleep and your lungs keep working while you sleep, without any effort on your part, precisely because Jesus the King keeps your lungs functioning.

That ought to make you sing out the doxology or Amazing Grace... and it definitely should humble you.

*Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come.
'tis grace that brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead us home.*

Grace will lead us home because Yahweh is watching over us. Yahweh "keeps" us we are told. The Hebrew word for *keep*, which is used 6x in this psalm, means to "watch over, to care for, to protect, to guard." It's the same word that is used in the famous Aaronic blessing in Numbers 6:22-27: *The Lord bless you and keep you, watch over you, care for you, protect you, guard you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you...* And that's exactly what the people are praying for the psalmist as journeys through many dangers, toils, and snares!

But here's what I love about this song. This Gospel caravan who are speaking the Gospel to the psalmist are also taking a jab at Baal, the god of the Canaanites in this psalm. They are poking fun of Baal. And it's probably an allusion to 1st Kings 18 where Elijah told the prophets of Baal that they should wake Baal up. Baal apparently likes to take naps, so Elijah was poking fun at them and that's what these people are doing in Psalm 121.

It's a "polemical poke" at Baal, the god of the Canaanites, the god whose territory the psalmist was most likely walking through. The point is that as the psalmist makes his way to Jerusalem to worship and he looks up to the hills, and as he passes through Baal's neighborhood, as he passes through Baal's turf, the psalmist will be reminded about that one time in 1st Kings when Baal's people needed him the most, that time on mount Carmel when Elijah pointed out that Baal was taking a nap. But that's Baal. He likes to take naps, but not Yahweh. Yahweh never sleeps. He never slumbers. He never doses off.

In fact, God never takes His eyes off of you, Christian, which is exactly what the Gospel caravan tells the psalmist in verses 5-8.

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. 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.

The Gospel caravan making their way to Jerusalem now remind the psalmist that Yahweh never takes His eyes off of His children, not even for a second. They are preaching good news to the psalmist that Yahweh is the one who keeps us, watches over us, protects us, and surprisingly He attends to us! Yahweh is the sovereign one, He is the God who made heaven and earth, and yet He humbles Himself and attends to us. That's the idea here with the phrase, "*the LORD is your shade on your right hand.*" Alec Motyer translates it this way: "*Yahweh is your shade in attendance at your right hand.*" In other words, Yahweh stoops down to care for us. He attends to our needs.

And His care is so comprehensive. That's the idea when it speaks of the sun and moon. It's round the clock care. You've got 24/7 coverage with Jesus. Your going out and coming back is under His sovereign care. He will keep you from all evil.

Of course, that doesn't mean that we are exempt or immune from troubles. We will suffer in this world. Psalm 121 acknowledges that. Psalm 121 reminds us that the promise is not the absence of suffering but the promise of real protection. When it says that Yahweh will keep and protect us from all evil, it's not saying that we get to live a life free from pain, suffering, sorrow, etc. It's just saying, in general terms, that Yahweh is caring for us and even when we do suffer, it's all under His providential care.

So whatever you are going through today-
CONNECT YOUR PROBLEMS WITH HIS PROMISES.

Spread out His promises. Connect your problems with His promises. Connect your pressures with His promises. When you feel like the train of your soul is about to be stopped and robbed by outlaw emotions, by renegade thoughts, connect your problems with His promises. You don't have to be afraid of the dark, Christian. You don't have to be afraid of the Black Jack Ketchum's of this world. You don't have to fear when the train of your soul gets held up.

But understand too, that we can't go at it alone. We need a Gospel caravan to travel with. Psalm 121 teaches us that our walk with God, our journey to the City that is to come is a community project. There will be times when you don't preach to your own heart, when you don't connect your problems with God's promises. And this is where your church family comes in. It's the church, the Gospel community that speaks to the psalmist in verses 5-8. They are speaking to him and praying for him to believe these truths about Jesus.

And that's what we are called to do. Understand this, Grace: Gospel doctrine creates Gospel culture. Gospel doctrine on paper and shared with one another creates a Gospel culture. That is what is happening on this journey in Psalm 121. They are having promise-driven conversations about Jesus. And when a church has promise-driven conversations about Jesus, it creates a promise-driven church!

If we have no doctrine, no Gospel, we'll be a weak church. We'll have a weak culture here. There will be no Gospel in the culture here. And if we don't have a Gospel culture here, then our doctrine will all be personal. What we want to do is allow our belief in the Gospel to create a culture that is a Gospel culture. We want to create an environment and atmosphere here at Grace that you can do what the psalmist does in verse 1: he acknowledges his fears, he acknowledges his struggles. And what does the church do? Do they shame him? Do they say, "*I can't believe you struggle with that?*" No! They rally the covered wagons, and they come alongside him, and they walk with him through his struggles and they connect God's promises to His problems.

That's what a Gospel culture looks like. Gospel doctrine creates Gospel culture. We don't just want to be a church that says "*Preach the Gospel to yourself.*" We also want to preach the Gospel to one another! And that's what discipleship is. Discipleship is simply telling one another over and over and over and over again what Jesus has done for us through His life, death, and resurrection. Let me repeat that: Discipleship is simply telling one another over and over and over and over again what Jesus has done for us through His life, death, and resurrection. Discipleship is about connecting what we know about Jesus to one another.

You've heard our tagline here at Grace numerous times: we want to be busy "making disciple-making disciples." Well, guess what? Psalm 121 tells you how to do that. Here's how you stay busy making disciple-making disciples:

Come alongside one another. Encourage one another. Share Gospel promises. Pray for one another. That's it! We can do this, right? You can do this, right? You can make disciples! Just share Gospel promises with others and pray for them. That's it! That's discipleship! You just do what they do in Psalm 121.

Gospel doctrine creates Gospel culture. We want to take the doctrine that we believe, and move it from the paper that it's printed on and write it on people's hearts. We want to preach the Gospel to one another

in a community, in a family, where shame is not allowed. That means no guilt trips. Please let me repeat that: We want to preach the Gospel to one another in a community, in a family, where shame is not allowed. No guilt trips. NO SHAME. NO GUILT TRIPS. No, "*How could you?*" but instead a whole lot of, "*How could He? How could Jesus be so good to us?*"

We want to be a church that connects our problems to God's promises. We want to be a church that is on a journey together to see Jesus. And sometimes, outlaws and bandits stop the train that we are on, and they want to rob us of our joy and peace. And so what do we do? We start talking about Jesus! Imagine what this place would be like if we did this? Imagine if we started being like the Gospel community in Psalm 121? This place would change. Why? Because we would be talking about Jesus all the time! Tell me: is it a bad thing for a church to talk about Jesus all the time? Isn't He what all this is about? So why do people find it strange that churches and disciples talk about Jesus all the time? To me, it's weird if you are a church or a Christian and you don't talk about Jesus.

Here's the bottom line, because we are out of time: When we connect our problems to God's promises, what we are doing is connecting others and ourselves to Jesus. And that's what this table is all about that is spread before us. The Lord's Supper is one big promise to us that Jesus will never leave us for forsake us. At the table we connect our sin with His righteousness.

Let's pray and prepare our hearts to be connected to Jesus once again and to feast on His promises.

"The Great Train Robbery of Your Soul"

Psalm 121

Sermon Study Questions

- 1) What did you find most challenging, helpful, or troubling in the sermon on Psalm 121?
- 2) What are the common troubles of your life? (*The steep, slippery paths and noonday suns.*)? When you are in trouble where does your physical body, your heart turn to? Who or what in your life reminds you in a daily sense that your "*help comes from the Lord*"?
- 3) Psalm 121 reminds us that the promise is not the absence of suffering but the promise of real protection. How do we reconcile the promises in Psalm 121 with real suffering and pain and evil?
- 4) What does Psalm 121 teach us about discipleship and the local church?
- 5) Discuss this quote by Puritan Thomas Brooks: "*God looks that we should spread his gracious promises before him... God is never better pleased than when his people importune him in his own words, and urge him with arguments taken from his own promises.*" (The Secret Key to Heaven, p.129)