

July 26/27, 2008

The Trail-ride Promise

Psalm 121

Pastor Bryan Clark

I invite you this morning to go with me on a trail-ride. What do you think about when you think about riding a horse? Maybe, if you're a child, you think about something really safe, like the horse on a merry-go-round at the State Fair. Then, if you really want to live on the edge, maybe you go to the Children's Zoo and ride the horses that just go round and round the circle. Or perhaps you'd go a little beyond that, up to Mahoney State Park, and take a nice little 45-minute trail-ride. Or, you'll push it one step farther, and actually go out in the wild and take a trail-ride.

Now those are not necessarily one better than the other, but they're certainly different. With each one of those levels there's more risk and there's more return. The ride at Mahoney is a nice ride (I've done it myself). It's safe; it's a good place to get started and takes about 45 minutes. But, if you think you're guiding that horse, if you think you're in control of that horse, you're guiding and leading that horse about as much as if you are riding on a rollercoaster. That horse is going down the same trail every single time. He's going to follow the same horse, and it's going to be the same horse behind him. That's just the way those rides are. There's very little risk, but there's also very little return. While it's a good place to get started, after two or three times around the trail, it starts to settle in as kind of dull and boring. If we were to use the language of two weeks ago, it's very "safe and comfortable".

When you get out in the wild, where you're actually responsible for your horse, you don't know what you're going to experience. You may have to cross a river. You may have to go through the rocks. You may encounter a wild four-wheeler or a deer crashing out of the brush. You just don't know. The risk is greater but the return is also greater.

A year ago last May a group of us went horse camping up at Halsey National Forest. On the very last morning we went out riding and happened upon a herd of antelope. They were completely undisturbed by us, probably because we were on horses. Mostly what you ride in there are the sand hills and a little bit up into the forest. The antelope just basically stayed one hill ahead of us, relatively close, for well over an hour. We kind of moved through the hills together. That's one of those "riding moments"; that's the reason why you go out on the trail.

Now there's really no problem, unless you have the mindset of somebody riding at Mahoney, but you're actually out in the wild. If you watch people riding at Mahoney, they really aren't paying much attention. They really don't know how to ride; they're sitting all wrong. They're turning around chatting with their friends, totally unprepared. If the horse was to spook, I guarantee you, most of those riders would not stay in the saddle. They're really not riders. They're just tourists on the back of a horse.

When you go out on the trail, you really have to be prepared because you just don't know what you're going to experience. If you're not anticipating, if you're not prepared—believe me, I've learned from experience—you're going to end up on the ground, and the horse will probably

come back without a rider.

Some of you, when you entered into your Christian life, somehow got it into your head that this is a nice little trail-ride at Mahoney. And, over the years, you've been bucked off enough times to realize that's not what it is. It comes with a lot of disappointment, a lot of bruises. It's more like a trail-ride in the wild.

The Bible is very clear from cover to cover. As a matter of fact, in the Old Testament, the most common language would be that we're pilgrims on a pilgrimage that represents our desire to know God. This morning we're going to look at a psalm that's often been called "The Traveler's Psalm". We're going to call it "The Trail-riding Psalm".

Down through history, many of the great heroes of faith have said that the promise that is given in Psalm 121 has given them more encouragement than anything they've found in any of the other psalms. If you understand the promise of Psalm 121, it will make all the difference as you ride this trail. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 121. There's a group of 15 psalms called *psalms of ascent*. It includes Psalm 120 through 134, named because they represent psalms of the nation of Israel. They canted, they sang, they shouted together primarily on three holy pilgrimages a year: in the Spring (Passover), in the early Summer (the feast of Pentecost), and in the Fall (the feast of Tabernacle). People would come from all over the land and they would make significant journeys, trail-rides if you will, all the way to Jerusalem and then into the presence of God.

It's a little bit hard for us to understand that concept of God being located in a specific place. But their sense was that within the tabernacle and then within the temple, that that's where God was, and they would take these pilgrimages, these journeys, together into the presence of God. And, as they would come together, they would begin to sing, they would begin to shout these magnificent psalms. Some believe that they're actually in order; that they kind of represent the journey. That may well be.

If you've been around for awhile, you're aware of the fact that this is one of those concepts of the people of God worshipping, that I find just absolutely wonderful. Can you imagine millions of voices strong, singing and shouting these wonderful psalms, one after another, while marching forward into the presence of God? I'm convinced in the new Heaven and new Earth that we will do that, so that's one of the things on my "to-do" list. I'm going to find out where that's going on and I want to get in the middle of it, because I love the concept. Psalm 121, verse 1:

I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come? (*NASB)

The psalmist opens with a question, probably not a question that he doesn't know the answer to. It's more of a Hebrew technique to put us into a kind of meditative mood. He wants us to think about where our help comes from. Now regarding the idea of "looking to the mountains", different commentators have different ideas about this. In order to travel in the ancient world, a lot of these people would have to go through the hills and the mountains, and those were very dangerous places. Those were the places where the bandits and the thieves and the robbers hung out. There was a lot

of risk going through those hills and mountains, and maybe that's what the psalmist was referring to. In taking this trail-ride, we're going to have to go through the hills and the mountains and ask where is our help going to come from. Perhaps that was a reminder.

Some people say there was a tradition that this was kind of a "night-before" psalm. What they mean by that is, as the travelers (the trail-riders) got close to Jerusalem, they saw the hills and the mountains and could identify where they were. They looked upon them and they knew that with one day's ride (the next day), they would be within the gates. And so it's kind of this idea of thinking about God and we're "almost there".

A third idea that I think has a lot of merit—and all three of these may be true because they're not contradictory in any way—is the idea that during the writing of these psalms, Israel was not doing real well spiritually. There were a lot of pagan shrines and pagan temples; there was a lot of pagan worship. And typically they would set up their shrines and their worship on top of the mountains and the hills. It's very likely, as these pilgrims were making their journey up to Jerusalem, they could look to the hills and the mountains and they could see the shrines and they could see the smoke going up. And they would ask themselves, "*Where does our help come from? Is it from those gods whom we have created, or is it from the 'One' who has created it?*" That's really where he goes in verse 2:

My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth.

A couple of things here: The name for God, LORD, is all capitals, which tells us it's the Hebrew *Yahweh*. It's the God who is personal. It's the God who makes the covenant. It's the God who makes a promise. In the ancient world, the pagan religions did not believe that the gods were personal at all. They had multiple gods, but the gods were much more likely to harm than to help. Most of the time what they were doing was trying to keep the gods from harming, not really even imagining that the gods would help. The gods were not personal. What was unique about the Hebrew people is they had one God, and they believed that their God was a very personal God. He was a God who was very aware. He was a God who was aware of the trail-ride. He was a God who was very aware of the needs, and He was the source of help.

It's very common in the Old and New Testament, when identifying the God of power, the God of unlimited resources, to talk about the God who made Heaven and Earth, the God who created Heaven and Earth, the God of unlimited power. This morning, as many of you walk through these doors, you come with a pretty heavy burden. It could be anything. It could be your finances. It could be a marriage that's falling apart. It could be a wayward child. It could be your job. It could be a disease that just isn't going away. But when you walk through these doors you would say there's something really heavy on my heart this morning. So we ask the question: "*Where does your help come from?*"

Now, we all know the right answer if it's a quiz. But I'm asking deep in your heart of hearts, where do you believe your help comes from? I think if many of us were to be honest, we'd have to say, "*I know where my help comes from. It comes from 'me'. That's why I'm always out there trying to somehow finagle, somehow to strategize, somehow to figure this out, to come up with some sort of a solution. But my plan isn't working, and it's now starting to feel kind of hopeless.*" You can

always tell when the answer to the question in verse 1 is “me” by the symptoms. You walk through the door this morning and you have fear. You have anxiety. You have despair. You have a sense of hopelessness. Do you know why? Because you have this burden, this situation in your life, and the answer to the question, “Where does my help come from?”, well, it’s got to come from *me*. But you’re sadly aware that you’re not up to the job. I’ve looked at my resume’ and I can’t pull it off, so I’m fearful. I’m anxious. I’m depressed. I’m despairing. I feel hopeless. But the psalmist is reminding us that we’re not the source of our help. God is. We’re talking about a personal God who is very aware and a God of unlimited power.

I want to show you a little video this morning. It’s about 3 minutes long. It’s basically a picture of God’s creation. It starts at the most macro level and works its way all the way down to the most micro level by increments of powers of ten. As you watch this, what I want you to have in the forefront of your thinking is whatever your burden is. And as you watch what God has made with simply a spoken word, I want you to ask yourself the question, “*What is it on my heart today that is just too big for this God?*” Watch.

(Video)

Where does my help come from? It comes from the Lord who made Heaven and Earth. I want to ask you this morning, “*What do you have that’s going on that is just too big for this God?*” Whenever you go on a trail-ride, there are obvious obstacles. The psalmist identifies some of those in verses 3 and 4:

He will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

You see the word “keeps” in verse 3 and 4. That’s actually one of the key words in this psalm. It’s translated *keeps*, it’s translated *guards*, it’s translated *protects*, but it’s all the same Hebrew word. That’s kind of the theme that runs through here.

When you traveled as a pilgrim in the ancient world, the terrain was very difficult. They did not have roads and trails like we have today. They were often very rocky. You often had to go through very difficult terrain, and there was always a risk. If you slipped on a rock and fell down the cliff or into a crevasse, or perhaps you just simply slip and injure yourself or break a leg, typically those types of injuries were fatal in the ancient world.

So the idea is that on this pilgrimage there are going to be obstacles. There is considerable risk. But God is going to be there to see you through them. The psalm doesn’t say there won’t be obstacles, that there won’t be dangers, that there won’t be difficult parts of the trail. Just the opposite. There is a great risk of your foot slipping; that’s why God will be there.

It says that God doesn’t sleep; He doesn’t slumber. You’re not going to slip and fall while he’s sleeping on the job. Now that may seem strange to us, but you have to understand in the ancient world that gods slept all the time. There were two things that kind of identified someone who was very powerful or very wealthy, and then of course the ultimate of that would be the “god”. That is

food and sleep. When you were a king, if you were really a powerful king, you had more food than you needed and you could sleep all the time. Those were symbolic of great power.

When you see the pictures of many of these ancient gods, they are grossly overweight. There's a reason for that. In the ancient world, that was the way of saying they were very powerful. All they did was eat and sleep all day long. And so much of the responsibility of the pagan priest was to wake up the gods. If you were experiencing a disaster, the conclusion was the gods were asleep, because they slept most of the time. Much of the ritual activity and even the very destructive things that they would do, was designed to somehow wake up the gods.

So against that backdrop, the psalmist is saying, *“Hey, we have a God who not only is very personal and very aware, this is a God who doesn't sleep. This is a God who doesn't slumber. I'm not going to be traveling on this trail-ride and suddenly fall down the cliff because He's taking a nap. He's always there, always aware, always knowing.”*

Now, I understand sometimes in life it doesn't feel that way. Sometimes it feels like God isn't aware; God doesn't know. It does sometimes feel like God's taking a nap. But you just have to believe by faith He's there, He's aware, and He's very alert.

Verse 5:

**The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.
The sun will not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.**

One of the big problems on this trail-ride is sunstroke. Again, this is something a little hard for us to fully appreciate. But in the ancient world, traveling across very difficult terrain, one of the great concerns was sunstroke. And again, if you'd get sunstroke on the trail, most of the time that was fatal.

If you've ever watched the TV show, *Survivor Man*, and you've seen those episodes where he's out in a very hot climate and he's desperate for shade, you get just a glimpse of what it must have been like for these people trying to survive very difficult circumstances. The psalm is not saying there will not be intense heat—just the opposite. You could expect that. That's part of the journey. The promise is that God will have His hand on your forehead, and when you reach a point where you can't take any more heat, He's going to bring in the shade. And He's going to shade you until you're cooled off, and then the trail ride continues.

Another concern in the ancient world was what happened at night, I think represented here by the moon. There's a couple of things related to the moon. One is that the ancient world believed the moon had the potential to make you crazy. We would say *lunacy* or *a lunatic*, which comes from the word *lunar*, which is the word for moon. But I think it also represents the idea that mysterious things happened at night. Some of the nights got very, very long. You were at considerable risk out in the wild at night. You never quite knew what was out there, but you did know that you're always at risk. So the nights were very difficult. But He also knows that sometimes on this journey the nights are going to get really, really long. There are going to be nights that seem so long it seems like the sun is never going to come up again. And it feels like there is so much risk at night that you feel the anxiety and you feel the despair.

And you beg God for the sun to come up again. The promise is that He's going to be there. He'll guard you, He'll protect you, He's on the job.

Verse 7:

The LORD will protect you from all evil; He will keep your soul.

I think verses 7 and 8 are the key to the psalm. It's very important that we interpret them correctly. What the psalmist is not saying is that there will be no struggles, there will be no trials, there will be no evil. The psalmist is not saying, "*Hey folks, c'mon, sign up; this is a 45-minute ride in Mahoney State Park.*" He's not saying that at all. He's saying, "*I want to tell you something: This trail-ride is the real thing, and there's going to be risk and there's going to be reward. Some of the most difficult moments you'll ever experience are going to be out on this trail. But also some of the most wonderful, life-fulfilling moments will come in the most unexpected ways as you take this ride. There are going to be obstacles. The heat is going to get intense. There is the mystery of the night. But I'm going to get you through it. I promise. I promise.*"

When interpreting Hebrew poetry, one of the keys we look for is what's called parallelism. Think of two lines, one parallel to the other, and there're different types of parallelism. There's a type of parallelism where the second line simply restates what was stated in the first line, called *synonymous parallelism*. There's also a type of parallelism where the second line is a contrast to the first line. "God knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked shall perish", called *antithetic parallelism*.

The third one would be what's called *synthetic parallelism*. And that's the idea that the second line completes the first line. That's what we have in verse 7. "The LORD will protect you from all evil." Hmm...I wonder what he means by that? He will keep your soul. Oh, that's what he means by that. He's going to guard you, He's going to protect you, which implies obstacles. It implies heat. It implies the dangers of the night. But He's going to protect you, He's going to guard you. He's going to make sure you stay in that saddle until the journey is over.

Verse 8:

The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever.

The promise is this: God has invited you on the most remarkable trail-ride. And God Himself is going to put you in the saddle, and His promise, as you leave the corral is this: "*I'm going to go with you. I want you to know that there're going to be risks. There're going to be obstacles. There're going to be some really long nights. But I promise you this: At the end of the ride you will still be in that saddle and you'll make it back to the corral. That I promise you. Going out. Coming in. Now...forever.*"

That's God's promise. Every single person in this room this morning was created on purpose for a purpose. If the desire of your heart is to have a safe, comfortable, 45-minute ride at Mahoney, you're in for some real disappointment. That's not what God promised. But if the passion of your heart is to charge hard after God, to say, "*God, I want to know what my purpose is; I want to know what my call is, and I want to live my life for your purpose*", God makes you a promise. If that's the

case, saddle up. And I promise you this: *“It’s going to be high risk, high reward. No matter how difficult it looks on the trail, no matter how hot, no matter how long some of the nights get, I’ll promise you this, when you get back, you’ll still be in that saddle. You’ll finish the ride.”*

Eugene Petersen has written a wonderful book. It’s called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. It’s basically going through the 15 psalms of ascent and just talking about them and applying them to our lives. Listen to what he says about Psalm 121:

The Christian life is not a quiet escape to a garden where we can walk and talk uninterruptedly with our LORD. It’s not a fantasy trip to a heavenly city where we can compare our blue ribbons and gold medals with those of others who have made it to the Winner’s Circle as well. No, the Christian life is going to God; and in going to God, Christians travel the same grounds that everyone else walks. We breathe the same air, drink the same water, shop in the same stores, read the same newspapers, citizens under the same governments. We pay the same prices for groceries and gasoline. We fear the same dangers. We are subject to the same pressures. We get the same distresses and are buried in the same ground. The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God. We know we are accompanied by God. We know that we are ruled by God; and therefore, no matter what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will guard us from every evil. He guards our very life. Once we get this psalm in our hearts, it will be impossible for us to go gloomily and suppose that being a Christian is an unending battle against ominous forces that at any moment may break through and overpower us. No faith is an ominous affair of chance, escape, from satanic assaults. It is the solid, massive, secure experience of God, who keeps all evil from getting inside us, who guards our life, who guards us when we leave and when we return, who guards us now, who guards us always. ¹

God has called us to the ride of our life, and He’s told us, *“Hey, this is going to be a tough ride. This is the real deal.”* Are there going to be obstacles? Absolutely! Is there going to be intense heat? Yes. He’s going to keep His hand on your forehead; He knows when you need shade. And there are going to be times on this ride when it feels like the night is lasting forever, and you wonder if the sun will ever come up again. God has made you a promise: *“I’m there, not asleep. And I promise you this: no matter how dark it may seem, you’re going to make it to the end of this ride, and I guarantee you’ll still be sitting in that saddle...because we’re going to do this together.”* That’s God’s promise to you.

Father, we are thankful that You are such a faithful God. You have called us to this magnificent ride, a journey unlike any other, filled with obstacles, filled with intense heat. And Lord, at times, there are nights that seem like they’re going to last forever. Lord, help us to remember Your promise. You will guard us. You will protect us. You don’t sleep. You don’t slumber. You will be with us every step of the way. And You have promised that when the journey is over, we will still be in that saddle, now and forever. Lord, we thank You for this.
In Jesus’ name. Amen.

1 *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Eugene Petersen, pp 38-39

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