

The Ride of Your Life: Why Providence is so Vital to Your Voyage (Ps. 124, 121)

Chris Altrock – April 25, 2010

At the end of 2008, the website connected to television's "The Travel Channel" posted their list of the "Top 40 Travel Songs of All Time."¹ A song by Billy Joel came in at #29. The song is called "Travelin' Prayer." In it, Billy Joel sings about a loved one who is travelling. And he prays that this loved one will have all she needs during her journey. Here is the first part of his melodic prayer: *Hey Lord, take a look all around; And I'd a-find where my baby's gonna be. Hey Lord, would ya look out for her tonight. 'Cause she is far across the sea. Hey Lord, would ya look out for her tonight. And make sure that she's gonna be alright. And things are gonna be alright with me. Hey Lord, would ya look out for her tonight. And make sure that all her dreams are sweet. Said now, would ya guide her along the roads. And make them softer for her feet. Hey Lord, would ya look out for her tonight. And make sure that she's gonna be alright. Until she's home and here with me.* The song is about providence—divine provision during a journey. Billy Joel prays that God will provide sweet dreams and soft roads and that God will look out for his loved one during her travels. He prays that God will provide what's needed for the journey. Some of us have probably prayed similar prayers for our loved one as he/she travelled. That common experience helped make Billy Joel's "Travelin' Prayer" one of the top 40 travel songs of all time.

I noted last Sunday that there was an ancient list of songs similar to the Travel Channel's list of songs. Thousands of years ago, during some of the most important journeys which the Jews undertook, the Jews compiled a list of their own travel songs. We know these ancient travel songs as Psalms 120-134.

As I mentioned last Sunday, there are four important things to know about Ps. 120-134.

- First, these psalms were called the "Songs/Psalms of Ascents." The word "ascents" can refer to a slope or a stairway.² All 15 of these psalms relate to a journey or an ascent.
- Second, Psalms 120-134 were sung by Jewish pilgrims as they travelled to and from Jerusalem for three annual religious festivals.³ As the Jews ascended to Jerusalem, these songs were on their lips.
- Third, a Jewish book called the "Mishnah" states that these 15 Psalms corresponded to the 15 steps that pilgrims would ascend as they moved in the temple in Jerusalem from the Court of Women to the Court of Israel.⁴ Perhaps as the pilgrims arrived in Jerusalem and walked up these 15 steps in the temple, they were singing these songs.
- And fourth, the book of Ezra (2:1, 7:9) uses the verb "to ascend" to describe the Jewish exiles returning from Babylon to Jerusalem. These 15 psalms were likely sung by the exiles on their journey home to Jerusalem.⁵

These songs were sung by God's people during the most important journeys of their lives. And the songs serve as a metaphor for the journey of our lives. They point to what was most important to the Jews as the Jews travelled. And they highlight what ought to be most important to us as we travel through life.

This morning we're listening to two of these ancient travel songs. Both of the songs focus on providence—divine provision during a journey. The first song is Ps. 121: *1 I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? 2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. 3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. 4 Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. 5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. 6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. 7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. 8 The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. (Ps. 121 ESV)*

The singer, while traveling to Jerusalem for one of the religious festivals, looks up at some nearby hills. As he gazes into the hills, he asks, "From where does my help come?" One of two things may have prompted the singer to ask this question. *First, the singer may be anxious.* Hills could hide thieves and bandits. And as he thinks about having to travel by or through those dangerous hills, he asks, "From where does my help come?" "Who's going to provide me protection during this journey?" *Alternatively, the singer may be relieved.* She may be gazing at the hills around Jerusalem. She's arrived safely at the city. And rhetorically, she asks, "From where does my help come?" "Who do I have to thank for the provision of safety during my journey?"⁶

Whether the question is prompted by anxiety or by relief, the singer knows the answer: *2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.* Three times in the Psalms of Ascents God is called "maker of heaven and earth." The phrase "heaven and earth" is used in the Bible to stand for everything that exists.⁷ The singer calls God the creator of everything that exists. In the Bible, the phrase, "maker of heaven and earth" highlights the distinction between creator and creation.⁸ There is everything that exists—all creation. And there is Creator. Thus, the singer is able to look beyond the dangers, beyond the anxiety, beyond the hills, and realize that the "maker of heaven and earth" is his/her travel companion.

In vs. 3, the language moves from first person—*My help comes from the LORD*—to second person—*He will not let your foot be moved.* It is as if a second person now comes along, to give encouragement to the first person as they travel along.⁹ The first singer asks and answers the question: *From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD.* But now a second traveler joins and speaks to the first and helps the first understand how God will provide during this journey. Last week we looked at how vital it is to have travel companions. In this psalm, a travel companion now speaks words of encouragement to the first traveler.

And the message the second traveler gives to the first is that this "maker of heaven and earth" will guard/keep the traveler. Six times, the second traveler describes God as one who keeps people during the journey of life: *3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. 4 Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. 5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. 6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. 7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. 8 The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. (Ps. 121 ESV)*

The second traveler tells the first that God will keep him, keep him, keep him, keep him, keep him, keep him during the journey. This guarding/keeping will take place in three ways. *First, it will take place at any time.* Regardless of the time of day, God will keep this traveler. The song celebrates how the LORD keeps/guards us from the sun—that is, from dangers that may appear during the day—and from the moon—that is, from dangers that may appear during the night. God will keep at any time. *Second, the song celebrates how this guarding/keeping will take place in any direction.* Regardless of the direction of the journey, God will keep this traveler. The song declares that “The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in”—any direction. *Finally, the song celebrates how the LORD keeps/guards at any season.* Regardless of the season of life, God protects. Right now in our journey—from *this time*—and every step we’ll take in the future—*forevermore*. The second traveler encourages the first by telling him that God will provide protection at any time, in any direction, and at any season during the journey.

Eugene Peterson writes about his sons, both of whom are rock climbers:¹⁰ “*...as they climb, they put in what they call "protection"—pitons hammered into small crevices in the rock face, with attached ropes that will arrest a quick descent to death. Rock climbers who fail to put in protection have short climbing careers. Our pitons or "protection" come as we remember and hold on to those times when we have experienced God's faithfulness in our lives. Every answered prayer, every victory, every storm that has been calmed by his presence is a piton which keeps us from falling, losing hope, or worse yet, losing our faith.*”

On the journey of our lives, many of us have experienced times of providential protection. We can each testify to the way in which God kept us or protected us during our life’s journey. We have experienced what Psalm 121 celebrates—the providence of God during our life. And these experiences become a kind of piton, keeping us from falling, losing hope, or losing our faith. Ps. 121 calls us to remember those times when we have experienced God’s faithfulness in our lives.

This morning’s second psalm, Ps. 124, is the twin of Ps. 121. Ps. 121 begins with a description of God as maker of heaven and earth. Ps. 124 ends with the same description: *1 If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—let Israel now say—2if it had not been the LORD who was on our side when people rose up against us, 3then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; 4then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; 5then over us would have gone the raging waters. 6Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth! 7We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped! 8 Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth. (Ps. 124 ESV)*

This song remembers a time when danger from the hills did flow. It flowed down over the people like a torrential flood. The song describes this threat and the people behind it as a “flood,” as a “torrent,” and as “the raging waters.” The word “raging” in “raging waters” is literally the word “proud.” The psalm describes this danger as a group of people who are proud and arrogant. And at one time in the past, these proud and arrogant people nearly washed these travelers away.

Having described the danger, the song then asks us to imagine what that journey would have been like without God. Imagine what the ride of your life would have been without any kind of providential assistance from God: 3then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; 4then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; 5then over us would have gone the raging waters. The song recognizes that without God's providence on the journey, the journey would have ended-- tragically.

But then, having given us the chance to imagine life's journey without God, *the song asks us to realize what our journey has been like because of God.* It reflects on the reality that God has been present and protecting during the journey: *Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth! 7We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped! 8 Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.* Because God had been with them on life's journey, they had escaped—like prey from the teeth of a wild animal, like a bird from the snare of a hunter.

Herbert Lockyer writes that in 1900 Christian missionaries in China were suffering intense persecution.¹¹ Many were killed. Some, however, escaped. On August 22, 1900 Christians in China sent a telegram to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. The telegram listed the names of Christian missionaries who had narrowly escaped death in China. Beside these names was one Bible quotation. The quotation? Psalm 124. It celebrated the way in which God had delivered at least some from the flood of persecution.

The song "Travelin' Prayer" is a series of requests, asking God to provide what Billy Joel's loved one needs on her journey. Psalms 121 and 124 are a series of praises, celebrating the God who has provided what was needed on the journey. And today is an especially appropriate time for Highland to celebrate the way God has provided for us on our relocation journey. Psalms 121 and 124 are our psalms, more so today than ever before.

Just consider our journey. In 1928 Highland's journey began when 24 people from the Union Avenue Church of Christ planted the Normal Church of Christ, the predecessor to Highland. In 2001, Highland's growth had crested. That year we experienced an all time high Sunday morning worship attendance, Sunday School attendance, and membership. We had four Sunday morning services and within a year would have two Sunday Schools. Struggling to manage the growth, we made an offer to purchase Briarcrest Christian Schools. That was nine years ago. For nearly a decade we've been on a journey to find a new home.

And in the hills we've travelled through there have been some dangers and some difficulties. We attempted and failed to purchase Briarcrest 4 times. We attempted and failed to purchase the Lakeland Outlet mall 4 times. Many of our good friends left Highland for another local church during those troubles. Like Psalm 124, there have been times when it seemed the flood might overwhelm us. We shudder to think of what it might have been had the Lord not been on our side.

Yet 7 days away from the Grand Opening of the Highland church at its new location, the words of these two psalms mean more than have ever meant. Because we can look back on this journey and see time and time again God's providential provision.

- God provided a buyer for our property at 443 S. Highland Street before the economy crumbled and made selling commercial property difficult.
- God provided a temporary office facility at Shelby Oaks for two and a half years that provided ample ministry space.
- God provided forty acres of land on Houston Levee Road.
- God provided the opportunity to solicit bids for the construction at Houston Levee at a time when construction costs were at historic lows.
- God provided about 400 new members during this journey who brought new life and new energy and optimism.
- God provided dozens of new deacons and five new elders whose shoulders at the wheel have definitely been felt.
- God provided new ministry opportunities during this journey. In our interim period, God began 7 new initiatives aimed at the city: 1) our work with Lebonheur Children's Hospital, 2) our increased work with the MUM summer camp, 3) a weekly worship service at Highland Wesley Towers, 4) a weekly worship service at the FIT homes, 5) the adoption of Larose Elementary, 6) providing leadership for the MUM vision dinners, and 7) for the HopeWorks breakfasts. Who would have thought that during this journey God could have provided such new urban ministry? Incidentally, at the recent Volunteer Luncheon at Lebonheur, Highland was recognized as the only church in the city working in an official capacity with the hospital and Highland was asked to consider adopting the NICU.
- And in this interim period, God began additional initiatives aimed at reaching our neighbors: The Neighborhood Prayer Ministry which now visits 300 homes near the new facility twice a month, our just announced adoption of Macon Hall Elementary school near the new facility, a budding ministry to Homeschoolers, the re-launching of the Highland Day School, and plans for more neighborhood Bible studies. The Neighborhood Prayer Ministry recently met a woman who works at airport Radisons where 10 Europeans were stranded due to the air travel ban caused by the volcano. One European couple had run out of cash and had no credit card. The Prayer Ministry assisted them. The couple was shocked and said, "Back in London, no one would do that!" God has provided all of these wonderful opportunities.
- And God has provided tireless servants and gracious hosts during our journey. At our combined Sunday School session after worship, we'll be thanking these servants and our hosts.

¹ <http://www.worldhum.com/features/lists/world-hum-top-40-travel-songs-of-all-time-20081208/>

² Thomas, Robert L.: *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries : Updated Edition*. Anaheim : Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998, 1981, S. H4608

³ James L. Mays *Psalms Interpretation* (John Knox 1994), 385-386; Hughes, Robert B. ; Laney, J. Carl: *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Tyndale House Publishers, 2001 (The Tyndale Reference Library), S. 224

⁴ Allen, 219; Richards, Lawrence O.: *The Bible Readers Companion*. electronic ed. Wheaton : Victor Books, 1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996, S. 378; Archer, Gleason Leonard: *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*. 3rd. ed.]. Chicago : Moody Press, 1998, c1994, S. 499

⁵ Allen, 219.

⁶ Carson, D. A.: *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*. 4th ed. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA : Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, S. Ps 121:1

⁷ James L. Mays, Psalms Interpretation (John Knox, 1989), 391.

⁸ James L. Mays, Psalms Interpretation (John Knox, 1989), 391.

⁹ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:883

¹⁰ Eugene Peterson, The Unnecessary Pastor, Rediscovering the Call (Eerdmans, 2000), 12.

¹¹ Herbert Lockyer, Psalms: A Devotional Commentary (Kregel Classics, 1993), 635.