“Josh Moody does a masterful job of leading us through the Psalms of Ascent in a way that touches and transforms our lives.”

TREMPER LONGMAN III
Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies, Westmont College

“True happiness comes from within.” At least that’s what our culture tells us while beating the drum of self-esteem as the route to real joy.

But what if this is wrong? What if true joy comes not from *within*, but from *without*? What if it comes from God himself?

Embedded in the Bible is a little-known guidebook to the lasting joy we long for: the Psalms of Ascent—a set of 15 Psalms that share honestly about the heights and the depths of life while celebrating the faithfulness of God.

Helping us to engage and explore Psalms 120–134, pastor Josh Moody offers practical counsel, perceptive insights, and personal experience as a fellow pilgrim on the joy-filled journey to the father heart of God.

**JOSH MOODY** (PhD, University of Cambridge) is senior pastor of College Church, Wheaton, Illinois, in the Chicago area. He is the author of several books, including *The God-Centered Life* and *No Other Gospel*, and blogs at GodCenteredLife.org.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 11
Preface 13

1 Peace (Psalm 120) 19
2 Help (Psalm 121) 29
3 Church (Psalm 122) 39
4 Injustice (Psalm 123) 49
5 Danger (Psalm 124) 61
6 Security (Psalm 125) 69
7 Laughter (Psalm 126) 77
8 Beating the Daily Grind (Psalm 127) 87
9 The Blessing of Family (Psalm 128) 99
10 Finding Freedom from the Past (Psalm 129) 109
11 Living Guilt Free (Psalm 130) 123
12 The Humility of Greatness (Psalm 131) 135
13 When You Think God’s Plans Might Fail (Psalm 132) 145
14 The Secret of Teamwork (Psalm 133) 157
15 The End of the Journey (Psalm 134) 167

General Index 175
Scripture Index 179
Why the Psalms of Ascent? It is rare enough to study the Psalms, let alone this particular book within the book of Psalms. I suspect some will feel that the only reason to study a series of psalms like this is for antiquarian reasons, for purposes of academic interest, or at best to try to recapture a long-gone day when it was usual to sing psalms in church worship services. My reason for studying the Psalms, preaching them to our wonderful congregation at College Church, and now publishing them, is quite different.

I believe there is a crying need for people who believe the Bible to feel it. (And vice versa for those who feel Christianity, to know more about the Bible.) I know that, because in my own life I have experienced it. At one point in my life, though, I realized that while I knew God, and I knew he was true in an objective sense, subjectively my experience of God was significantly less than what I read about in the Bible. Where do you find in the Bible a solution to that malaise? David! The Psalms! There is a reason why Jesus frequently quotes from the Psalms and why the Psalms have proved a perennial favorite. They are real. They pull no punches. They tell it as it is. They scare people who wish the Bible said only things that sound pious and nice. But they also help you reconnect between the objective and the subjective, between the truth about God and the truth of God, between fear and faith, between failure and trust, between suffering and joy, and between hate and forgiveness. All the way through them is the theology of the cross, though the cross in a literal sense was unknown to the authors of the Psalms. And all the way through them is the theology of the resurrection, though Christ’s resurrection in a literal sense was unknown to the original authors of the Psalms. They take your pain, and if you will, they transcend it by means of passion, the suffering of the soul in communion with God and his Messiah.
The Psalms are written to help us put our feelings in the right place. With all the ups and downs of life, we need to work those feelings through until we feel as we are meant to feel, and the Psalms give us what someone has called “Psalmotherapy.” You may know that some of the psalms say things that are quite honestly and bluntly horrible. But then quite honestly and bluntly, you and I feel things that are sometimes horrible. Because the psalms are inspired by God does not mean that every emotion in them is approved by God. In the Psalms you find people talking to God about their feelings openly in the context of the security of the covenant relationship between God and his people.

In particular, the Psalms of Ascent are a special collection of psalms put together in ancient Israel for this purpose. If you’ve looked at the Psalms of Ascent before, you will know that discovering that purpose is a little bit difficult because not every scholar agrees when they were written. We do not know what the ascent was that these psalms were ascending. Some scholars say that the psalms are ascending within their own poetic style, that there is a repeated refrain within them that ascends. One says “peace,” so peace is repeated at the next poetic ascent; “deceit,” and then deceit is repeated with the next step up in the poem, and so on. Several of these psalms do have this ascending pattern; it is particularly obvious in Psalm 130, but though these repetitions are in several of the Psalms of Ascent, not all of them have the same ascending poetic pattern. Indeed there are other psalms that also have this kind of ascending pattern. So the thought that this collection of psalms is called “Psalms of Ascent” because the poetry “ascends” does not quite explain their name.

Other scholars say that the Psalms of Ascent were sung at the return from Babylon, though those of us who think that the heading of the psalms (called the “ascription”) is inspired and indicates direct authorship will not think that psalms said to be written by David could have been composed long after him. The Psalms of Ascent certainly could at least have been sung as God’s people returned from Babylon, but apart from anything else, if the return from Babylon was the primary historical context, you would expect then that they would have been called Psalms of an Ascent rather than Psalms of Ascent.
The most common interpretation—and the one that I adopt for want of a better option—is that these psalms are pilgrim psalms, generally speaking. They are a journey from a long way away to the very heart of God, as represented by the three great pilgrim festivals in ancient Israel. We can imagine people singing these psalms as they went up to Jerusalem for a great festival. Even then, some of them seem more like something that you would write in your journal rather than sing with others, so perhaps they were also used to prepare the pilgrim privately or devotionally to make the great journey back to the very center of God.

Some also think that the fifteen psalms were used as the Levites moved up the fifteen steps from the Court of Women to the Court of Israel, perhaps in an increasingly higher tone, and again it is possible they were used that way. No doubt these psalms had different reference points and usages, as they do today. But whatever was the precise journey, they are intended to take us on a spiritual journey closer to God, through the various difficulties and trials that can come which might prevent that journey or derail us from it.

I rather like that term “psalmotherapy.” Some older people turn more and more to the Psalms, but not because the Psalms are only for old people. It’s like poetry. The golden age of poetry is either youthful adolescent woes or aged whimsy or whenever there is a need for emotional turmoil to be expressed. Unlike our poetry, the Psalms are a God-designed tool to help us feel truly the truth. Psalms say things we would rarely say out loud in church. But, then, people feel things they would rarely say out loud in church. We need somewhere to go to process those emotions, to inspect them in the light of God, and bring them into line with his will and his way.

Such is the great gift of all the psalms, and the Psalms of Ascent, in particular, are a coherent path along which we may travel to the center of God. Whatever their precise historical origin, and no one knows for sure, though everyone has a theory, they are intended to help us make a pilgrimage back to God. We might start far away, even in a land of gossip and slander, but gradually, by following their path, we can end up in a place where there is “blessing.”
That does not mean you have to have some problem that needs fixing to enjoy the Psalms of Ascent. As Bunyan realized, we are all on a journey, or pilgrimage, as Christians, and these psalms are a perfect companion to a modern Pilgrim’s Progress, or to an adventure novel of traveling fiction with a motif of journey at its heart, like Lord of the Rings.

When you read the Psalms of Ascent, you should think of yourself as embarking. You are starting a journey.

It is your journey. It is all in relation to God, centers on God, and is intended to honor God. But the psalms frequently (and shockingly for some theologians) love to use the first-person pronoun I, me, or my, as well as the corporate language of plural we. It is rarely them or they who are addressed or described, though that of course is there often enough, but it is not the driving feeling of the psalms. As my “journey to joy” starts and carries on, I find that I am lost in wonder, love, and praise in God, and so I become increasingly God centered and gospel centered.

That’s my prayer. Enjoy these psalms. They are meant to be read, sung, digested, wrestled over, and most of all put in your backpack and taken with you on a spiritual journey to the father heart of God.
A SONG OF ASCENTS.
In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me.
Deliver me, O LORD, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.
What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?
A warrior’s sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree!
Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!
Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.
I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war!
—Psalm 120
If someone has lied about you, perhaps someone you trusted, you know how much it hurts. Of course people say nasty things all the time. Children can be especially cruel with their words. In fact, I sometimes wonder whether many of the apparently sophisticated criticisms of films or books are little more than adult versions of the name calling that happens in childhood. When someone writes, “I found his piece of poetry impermissibly obtuse,” he may simply be using an adult way of saying, “I don’t like you,” or even, “You look kind of funny to me”—the sort of nastiness that is heard regularly on school playgrounds when the teacher is not looking. But the people in Psalm 120 are not only being nasty; they are being deceitful. They are saying things that are unkind, certainly, but more than simply being unpleasant, they are untrue. We do not know exactly who these people were who were speaking “lying deceit,” but we do know it hurt the person who wrote the psalm.

It Feels Like You Are in a Trap

The psalmist tells us that he is in “distress” (v. 1), a word that has the idea of a narrow or confined place. He is saying here that he was feeling trapped by others’ words. That is exactly the feeling you get when someone lies about you or spreads deceit about you. This distress that he is talking about is no minor emotional bumped toe or scratched knee. The distress is the experience of being locked away. When someone launches a gossip campaign against you, the result of that can be to leave you feeling stuck or imprisoned. You feel that whatever you do from this point on will be interpreted in the light of what that person said about you.

If someone said that you were jealous, then told a story with just enough truth to make the charge of jealousy seem credible to those who
were listening, from then on you would fear that saying anything even vaguely critical of any program or event will be taken in light of that comment. People might say to themselves as they listen to you, “Oh, he’s just saying that because he’s the jealous type.” Or if someone noticed that you like to read Shakespeare rather than watch Oprah’s latest TV channel, he might create a story about you that gives an impression that, frankly, you are a bit of a snob. So the next time you turn up at a meeting wearing a perfectly normal outfit, pleasant-looking though not particularly expensive, you might fear that everyone will be saying in their heads, “Look at that snob. Isn’t she vain!”

Slander makes you feel like you are in a trap.

It Feels Like You Have Been Shot

The psalmist tells us that they have a “deceitful tongue” (vv. 2–3). The word used for “deceit” here has the sense of shooting. He feels as if he is in the firing line. The psalm is not just describing someone saying something petty, an occasional sarcastic sneer perhaps. No, this is a little more clever than that, perhaps a bit more sinister. It is deliberate deceit, words aimed as carefully as a sniper aims. They are well-constructed lies. Someone or some group of people is picking up on things that the author of this psalm had said or done and then turning those things around to make him look bad. They are using his words as ammunition against him—shooting words.

This may not be slander in our modern legal sense of libel, but it is slander in the sense of lies spread around the community with the deliberate intention of causing harm, like a water-cooler conversation that you were not a part of but affects your reputation, or a few words shared about you for prayer in every prayer meeting in town, or a whisper in the ear of those who have the power to influence your career to make them look at you with disdain. If you have experienced anything like this, you know how damaging such deceit can be. You may have the wounds to show for it, wounds every bit as real as a bullet hole.

What can you do about it? After all, you probably do not know exactly what was said because you were unlikely to have been there when it was said. All you know is that you pick up a change in atmosphere when
you walk into the room or a feeling that influences the tone when you are present. If you try to say anything about it, you will be guessing, and then it will be easy to characterize you as being paranoid as well. And if you happen by chance to hit the nail on the head about what is being said about you behind your back, then you can be characterized as nasty as well as vain. It feels like you are trapped in a box and cannot get out. It feels like you have taken a bullet and cannot stop the bleeding. What is the answer? As surprising as it may sound, the answer is to read this Psalm.

**A Strange Place to Start**

At first glance it is strange that the Psalms of Ascent start with lies and deceit, but when you think about it, that actually is the most important and natural starting point. It dispenses once and for all with the rather unhelpful limerick I heard growing up as a child: “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me.” If only that were true; unfortunately, if someone calls you fat or ugly or stupid or lazy, it tends to hang over you for many, many years. Unaddressed, it can influence your entire life. So it is very important that we do good soul work to get rid of those lies and journey to the truth about ourselves in relation to God.

You may think talking about ourselves is hopelessly compromised in terms of pop psychotherapy, but it is interesting to me that in this psalm, one of the repeated refrains is directly related to the self. Deliver “me” he says (v. 2); even, perhaps rather self-indulgently, “woe to me” (v. 5). Both instances are talking about the self, and then the self in relation to this particular situation is brought by this distressed individual into the realm of God. He uses the first-person pronoun “I” a lot—this is not something about them or us, but about “me.” He is making this personal, for it is personal, and he needs personal help.

1) **Pray**

   In my distress I called to the **Lord**, and he answered me.
   Deliver me, O **Lord**, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue. (vv. 1–2)
How does he deal with this distress? First, he prays about it. “In my distress I called to the Lord” (v. 1). He does not first tell one of his friends about it (“Did you hear what so-and-so said about me?”). He does not first tell the local authority figure, whether boss or principal or lawyer. He needs help from God first of all. “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me.”

The right approach is first to pray. It is no good trying to deal with lies about you before you have gone first to God. You are too raw, too likely to lash out with a hurtful word yourself and then make everything even worse. Somehow you have to go to God first and deal with it with him. I will admit that this is far easier written on the page than done at home or in a small group or at work. You see, the psalm is not merely “praying about it” in some rote or traditional fashion. The author of the psalm is actually honest with God in his heart about the distress, about the lying lips and the deceitful tongue. That is difficult, because part of what makes deceitful lies such a trap is that you never want them repeated again, not to anyone, perhaps not even to God. If someone says to you that your work is no good, the last thing you want to do is tell someone else that someone said your work is no good. You want to keep it to yourself in your little box, in your “distress,” in your narrow confine.

Understandable, though, as the desire is to keep the deceit as secret as you can, often that just makes it all worse. As William Blake wrote, “I was angry with my friend: I told my wrath, my wrath did end. I was angry with my foe: I told it not, my wrath did grow.”\(^1\) The poison eats away at you. Somehow you have to be honest enough—shall we say, brave enough—to start by telling God about it. I am not saying that is easy, but I am saying it is where you are going to find healing. That, at least, is the testimony of the person who wrote this psalm. “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me” (v. 1), which allows him to become confident that God will “deliver” him (v. 2). He has gained the certainty that in God’s sovereignty even lying lips will be turned to his deliverance.

---

\(^1\)William Blake, “Songs of Innocence and Experience,” in *A Poison Tree* (Minneapolis: Filiquarian, 2007), 89.
Would you like that deliverance? First pray. Go to God in prayer, and you will find that he has a deliverance plan even for slander. Perhaps not straight away from the malicious consequences of the lies that have been spread about you, but straight away from adding to the malignancy by spreading lies back. It takes strength to be someone who stops gossip rather than keeps on spreading it around, especially when the wounds are yours, not someone else’s. And that sort of strength (deliverance) can be found only in God: “Deliver me.”

2) Tell the Pain to God

The psalmist does not just go to God and ask him for help. Important as that is, having prayed about it, in the context of that prayer the psalmist unleashes the ugliness that the pain has caused in his own soul.

What shall be given to you,
and what more shall be done to you,
you deceitful tongue?
A warrior’s sharp arrows,
with glowing coals of the broom tree! (vv. 3–4)

Honestly, I can’t quite decide whether verses 3 and 4 are a confession of the psalmist’s personal anger and wish to get back at the horrible so-and-so who has been so mean to him, or a prophetic denunciation of God’s judgment, or even a description of the inevitable result for the person who told the lies. In the end you fall into your own trap, and it is worse for you than for your victim.

Usually it is said that these verses are some sort of prophetic denunciation, but I’m a little uncomfortable with that. There certainly are instances in the Bible of righteous anger, but I find, at least in my personal experience, that whatever little righteous anger I have is least likely to be purely righteous anger when the wrong done is against me. I suspect it is usually rather tarnished by unrighteous anger too. I see a little too much here of the personal vindictiveness that you would not expect from someone trying to fulfill the Old Testament mandate of loving your neighbor or of helping your enemy when his ox or donkey is in trouble—these sorts of teachings that were as much mandated in
the Old Testament law as they were in the New Testament teaching of love for neighbor and enemy.

We know that judgment is coming on all those who sin and do not repent, but as the apostle Paul wrote, quoting from the Old Testament, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. . . . If your enemy is hungry, feed him” (Rom. 12:19–20). I do not think the psalmist is “letting them have it” in his heart. His knee-jerk reflex to pray suggests a far too mature spirituality for that kind of childishness. But I do think the sting of his anger is being drawn out by God in prayer. You see, what happens when someone hurts you is only half the cruelty. The real danger is that you’ll become someone like that and start to hurt other people in turn. That vicious cycle is the standard pattern, whether of verbal or physical abuse, unless the grace of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ intervene, as they do here.

Verses 3 and 4 are really a form of confession. The deceit is shooting at him, and now he wants God to shoot back at them with sharp arrows and with glowing coals of the broom tree, fiery darts that would not go out. The broom tree coals once lit, we are told by an ancient commentator, were known to last without going out for a very long time. He wants the deceit that others have spread about him to come down on them ten times worse, if not more. It is a confession.

It is also, of course, a kind of prediction. Proverbs is full of the reality that if we set traps for other people, in the end the trap falls upon us. That is the kind of world that God has created—sin eventually results in judgment even in the here and now and only grows toward final judgment. That Wisdom Literature understanding of the moral universe, the world in which we live, is in the background here, no doubt, but this psalm is not written to the person doing the lying. It is written by the victim of the lying. Somehow in this place, in verses 3 and 4, he has to get the emotions—the dark, even demonic emotions—to the surface and then take them to the only place where they can be safely dealt with, God himself.

When I start to talk like that, you can begin to see why so often the Psalms were used in the New Testament to point to the cross. Psalm 110 is frequently quoted in the New Testament for that purpose. One
ancient Christian writer actually recommended that when someone is beginning to find out about Christianity, he read the Psalms before reading the New Testament, which may be stretching things a bit too far, but you will know what he meant when you read the Psalms carefully. They are not only the language of the soul, the spirituality of the heart; they are not just a spiritual form of psychotherapy; they are *theo-therapy*. They are the place where the objective doctrine combines with the subjective experience, and the questions that this combustible fire raises are all answered at the cross of Jesus, where love and justice meet.

Let this psalm take you there. Take all the bitterness you have swallowed over time, as you have replayed in your heart the nasty things that have been said about you, and leave it in God’s hands. That might mean saying some things about those experiences in the safety of your relationship with God that would be as equally eye-opening as what the psalmist wrote in verses 3 and 4. Between you and God have confidential dealings so that you can then emerge on the other side. It probably will not be a one-off experience, but it will be a lifetime journey—the journey of forgiveness not just seven times but seventy times seven, as Jesus put it, the journey of the truth that I need forgiving just as much as anyone who has lied about me.

**3) Real Peace**

The last thing the psalmist does is even more remarkable. Some songs are trite because they are overly triumphalistic, too certain that everything is always going to be fine, that the sun will always shine upon your steps, and that with a spoonful of sugar, no problem is too big. Of course, for Christians there is victory to come, and there will be a time when there is no more crying, because Christ has won the victory. But we live in the here and now without that victory finally and fully applied, and it can be rather demoralizing to be asked to try to live in a preachy world where everything is as easy as a perfectly constructed three-point sermon. That’s not life. All we hear are the perfect victories, and how this person came out of sin into light, and how the other person got victory over this problem or that, or how that person’s children were struggling but now they are thriving. Wonderful as those stories
are, if that is all we hear, then there is a danger that we are not really braced for the reality of the next step in the ongoing journey. The Christian life is a pilgrimage, meaning it is a journey back to home, so however great the victories are here, however thrilling the adventures, we are still going there, and it is only there that we will find full satisfaction.

So as the psalm concludes, it ends in a way that no modern writer of a devotional book would conclude, nor any hymn writer, nor any therapist, or at least too few of all of the above. He concludes with a reality check:

Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech,
that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!
Too long have I had my dwelling
among those who hate peace.
I am for peace,
but when I speak, they are for war! (vv. 5–7)

Hardly a good finale to a popular Christian devotional book! The “woe to me” suggests that the psalmist is not yet completely over his personal hurt. He has made progress, but he still seems to me to be taking too much pity on himself. “Woe to me”? “Come on!” I want to say to him. “God has delivered you. He has answered you. You are moving toward Jerusalem. You are on the great journey with God’s people to the city of God!” And yet, if we are honest, “woe to me” is sometimes how we feel. It is not right. It is not best. But it is real.

Meshech and Kedar are places far distant from Israel, one along the Black Sea and the other in the Arabian tribal areas. Together they seem to function as the psalmist’s feelings toward the sort of people who are lying about him. They were from Meshech and Kedar; they were Philistines and Barbarians! It is not exactly politically correct to call some of those with whom he was dwelling crass and Philistine barbarian hordes—not much better than Mongol invaders! But again this psalmist has not yet arrived. He is still on the journey.

Yes, he is on the journey, but still at the end he has made a highly significant, life-changing discovery. He says, “I am for peace” or literally, “I peace” or “I shalom.” Peace is nowhere near where he was in verses 3 and 4! Then he wanted to get them back with warrior’s sharp
arrows and glowing coals of a broom tree. But now he is peace. He has realized the shalom of God, so his disposition to these invaders who have labeled him and lied about him and put him in a relational trap is now one of peace. He is leaving it up to God now. Any response he makes to their slander is now not vengeful but peaceful, for their good. That has not changed who they are yet. They are still for war. But he has left them in God’s hands and taken the most important step in dealing with lies and slander, which is to be in the right place himself before God. He is no longer defined by the lies that people say about him. He is defined by the truth of what God says about him. He knows he cannot control their response. He has left that between them and God. He has given up his right to play judge, jury, and executioner all rolled into one. I peace.
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 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.
—Psalm 121
HELP

With the best will in the world there still comes a time when all of us must realize that at some point we simply need help. Perhaps really macho men do exist who have sufficient “true grit” never to shed a tear or cry out in the dark from fright. But I, for one, suspect that image has far more to do with fantasy than with reality, the myth of the unconquerable hero pulling himself up by his own bootstraps, facing adversity with a steely glint in his eye, Rambo-like. That myth is just that, a myth. Of course there have been great men and women who have shown us the extent to which the human spirit can face adversity and come through on the other side, but when you read the biographies of, say, a George Washington, or an Alexander the Great, what is remarkable is not so much that they did not need resources to accomplish what they accomplished, but that when they needed those resources they found them.

Where Can You Find Help?

Where do you go when you need help? Perhaps you harbor a secret suspicion that it is not quite Christian or mature to admit that you ever need help. Maybe you remember that it was Benjamin Franklin who said, “God helps those who help themselves.” For some of us, asking for help seems more like weakness than the tried and tested method of pulling yourself up by your own shoelaces. I certainly do not want to encourage any more blubbering wimpiness than we already have these days, a tendency to give way to what you feel in the mistaken impression that, because you feel it, it must be true. A fleeting short-lived feeling can merely indicate that you ate a rather bad lunch, that your hormones are temporarily out of balance, or that you are in the midst of a momentary mood swing. But there are more consistent feelings that could tell you that you need help.
The author of this psalm is crying out, “Help!” These psalms are all intended to give us the ability to manage our feelings so that they are brought into line with reality. In particular this psalm is intended to give us the resources to find help when that is what we need. Sometimes this psalm is called “The Traveler’s Psalm,” and indeed it has often been used to bless those who are going on a journey to assure them of God’s watching care. Yet in another way all the Psalms of Ascent are actually traveling psalms in the sense that they take worshipers on a pilgrimage toward God, first used perhaps as the pilgrims went up to Jerusalem for one of the great festivals that you can read about in the Old Testament. Later perhaps they were adopted as the Jewish people returned from their exile to Babylon and sang these same psalms. It seems to me that they were designed by God to help us journey closer in our relationship to him and to avoid the many pitfalls and difficulties and diversions and distractions that can prevent us from continuing.

Avoiding a Common Pitfall

One of the pitfalls that often comes on the spiritual journey is not being willing to ask for help. I love the sort of determination and spirit represented by Franklin’s famous quotation about God helping those who help themselves. In a way, I wonder whether we need a little bit more of that and less of the attitude that “I have a right to receive help even though I’ve done nothing to deserve it.” It reminds me a little of the poem by Rudyard Kipling called “If”:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you, . . .
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same. . . .
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!

The message is that true manliness is a stoic persistence. Or, as Winston Churchill put it, “Never, never, never, give up.” Maybe we do need a bit more of a Rocky Balboa attitude, getting up again when you have been knocked down and keeping on fighting. However, the reality
is that God does not help those who help themselves. God helps those who know they need help. Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened (see Matt. 7:7; Luke 11:9).

Taking the Initial Step of Looking Up for Help

The first step, the most remarkable step, that we find in this psalm is that he begins to look up for help.

I lift up my eyes to the hills.  
From where does my help come? (v. 1)

Counselors all over the world will tell you that in some ways this step in the first verse is really the most important step to take, to acknowledge that there is something beyond your personal resources and that you need help with it. Pastors will say the same, especially when they are dealing with a clear habitual sin, a bondage that needs breaking. To come and say, “I need help with this,” is a most important initial step. The idea that you can always fix everything yourself has caused the breakdown of more marriages, the heartbreak of more people, and the disaster of more businesses than perhaps any other idea on the face of the planet. Pride might be the first casualty of failure, but pride is also failure’s common cause. “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18).

But if it is important to admit that we all need help from time to time, then it is also very important that we go to the right place to find help. Translations handle the second half of the first verse either as a question or a statement (“From where does my help come?” esv; “from whence cometh my help,” kjv). The difference partly depends on whether you think that the “hills” are appropriate places for help. Are they the hills surrounding Jerusalem as symbols of godliness, seen as the pilgrim gets closer to the end of his journey? Are they perhaps the hills that the weary soldier might look up to from the valley beneath, hoping that his Jewish brothers will ride over to his aid like the cavalry coming to rescue him? Or, more negatively, are the hills the high places where, throughout Israelite history, God’s people were tempted to go back to Canaanite religion? We are not told one way or another clearly
here. The point is that there is a natural tendency for all of us to glance skyward when we need assistance. We look up for help.

**Going Beyond the Hills**

However, you must not stop at the hills. Nature is designed by nature’s God to take you to its creator.

> My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. (v. 2)

There is a place for natural diversion from stress—a thoughtful walk in the woods, an energizing hike up a hill to gain a mountaintop view of the situation. Such escapes from the burdens of life by enjoying creation are good in themselves and can be a timely relief. But nature is not the solution. Looking to the hills is a sign that you feel the need for help, but it is not the help that you need.

The perspective of mountain landscape is not the solution; it points to the solution. The problem with staying looking at the hills is that such escape can morph into escapism. People who stop at the hills can start to look for more permanent forms of escapism: quitting their job and going traveling, self-medicating with alcohol to dull the pain, constantly checking the scores of their favorite sports team on the Internet. Spectator sport may be so popular because it gives people a momentary escape from their real needs. The ancient Romans controlled the crowds through a combination of what was called “bread and circuses,” that is, food and gladiator entertainment. Nowadays the entertainment is different, but the result still can distract us from our real needs. There is, of course, nothing wrong with an innocent bit of diversion, but we must go farther. The help is not in the hills; it is in the hills’ God, the maker of heaven and earth.

**Focus on the Nature of God**

Now we come to the part of the psalm where the first person (I) switches to the third person (he).

> 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... (vv. 3-5a)

The person talking, “I,” is now addressed by someone else: “He will not let your foot be moved”; “He who keeps you will not slumber.” We do not know exactly why this switch in voice takes place. Some scholars say it is an internal dialogue, as if the psalmist is talking to himself, saying, “Come on, now. Look to God. He won’t let you down. Let me tell you why, self.” In that view this is a poetic soliloquy, an internal dialogue recorded for other people to read. Other scholars think this part of the psalm was originally a choir singing antiphonally, that is, one group of singers answering the soloist with a response. The soloist begins, “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.” Then comes the choir responding with, “He will not let your foot be moved.” And then perhaps the congregation joins in, “Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” But whether this is self talk or a choir singing, it is a form of conversation designed to persuade you that looking to God is possible when you focus upon who God is, upon his nature.

In one sense you may think that this psalm is simply saying that when you need help, ask God. But unless that instruction is shored up with some rigorous theology, it becomes painfully trite, potentially damaging, and definitely discouraging. “Just trust God,” someone can say, like a plaster applied to a hemorrhage. So the psalm does far more than offer simplistic piety. First, it says that this God is the maker of everything. So when you say, “Trust God,” you are not saying, “Trust one of the gods.” You are referencing Someone entirely different. He is the maker, not a spirit of the air who dances this way and that in accord with capricious fortune and at the whim of the dictates of earthly powers and natural events. No, he’s the rock-solid creator of heaven and earth, all of reality. That is who he is.

Not only is he the creator; he is the covenant God. So verses 3 and 4 are saying, “You can be sure that God will not let your foot slip because this is the God who, in his covenant, has promised to
look after his people.” If you are one of his people, then he will look after you.

Jesus makes the same point when he tells the parable of the ninety-nine sheep and the one lost sheep. God is the God who will not let a single person of his people fall. So you may feel in your desperation, if you’re being honest, that you are alone, that everyone else in church is fine. But God knows. And not only does he know; he also gave his blood for his people, and in dying for his people, he will never let you individually, as a part of his people, be snatched out of his hand. You can go to God for help. He is the creator. He is the covenant God. He is the watcher.

God Is Watching over You

To apply the truth of God’s nature to this need for help, the psalm begins to draw a vivid picture. Often your imagination needs to be reframed when you need help; you need to be able to see that God can help and picture that real help is possible. So the psalm says, “God is your keeper. He is your watcher.” The word for “keep” runs through the rest of the psalm, and the word for “watch” has the same root. The two ideas are connected. God is keeping you, he is watching over you, he is looking after you. The picture is of God standing guard, eyes open, neither slumbering nor sleeping. It is a powerful image.

One of the difficulties of trusting God enough to ask him for help is that you cannot see God. That is sometimes why people watch TV rather than pray, or why they go out and party rather than pray, or even why they go and talk to someone else instead of pray. God cannot be seen. But what if he sends word that he sees you? That is what happened when God’s people were slaves in Egypt. The Bible tells us that “God saw” their need (Ex. 2:25). The Old Testament priestly blessing, that in some ways this psalm reflects over and over again, emphasizes the same point: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace” (Num. 6:24–26). He’s looking.

Of course, we live by faith, not by sight, but God does not. He sees. The image is a bit like a child reassured who has been afraid to go to
sleep. The parent says, “Don’t worry. I’ll stay in the room tonight and watch over you.” God is saying, “I am watching over you.” We can sleep because God does not. We can travel because God knows the way. We can keep going because God will not let our foot slip. He is constantly watching.

**God Is Your Shade**

The psalmist uses one other metaphor, that of shade:

The Lord is your shade on your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. (vv. 5b–6)

In the Middle East the sun is dangerous. The heat can be blinding, and sunstroke can kill, so shade is a dramatic picture of God’s protection. God is your shade “on your right hand,” the right hand being the place in battle where you needed protecting, because the shield was held in the left hand.

It is easy to understand the metaphor of protection from the sun, but what of protection from the “moon by night”? Some people explain this by saying that the moon was believed to have potentially deranging effects on people. In a couple of places in the New Testament “moonstruck” is a literal translation of the description of epilepsy (Matt. 4:24; 17:15). We have the remains of the same idea when we use the term lunatics. That word originally meant those who have succumbed to the malign influence of the lunar rays of the moon. A more likely explanation, though, it seems to me, is that this is again picture language of the dangers of traveling by day (sunstroke) and the dangers of traveling by night (bandits, thieves, robbers). The psalm is saying that God is a protection against the dangers of the day and of the night.

**No Evil**

As the psalm comes to its beautiful poetic conclusion, it leaves a series of questions that I find troubling. Verses 7 and 8 conclude with a total promise for complete protection in every way at all times and in all places forever.
Really? No evil? Now and always? Not a single little bit?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was killed at the end of the Nazi regime for his part in an assassination attempt on the life of Hitler. Bonhoeffer was a pastor and author, and his life is championed in many places as an example of Christian sacrifice. But in the light of this psalm, in what sense did God watch over Bonhoeffer’s life? In what way was he kept from “all evil”? No doubt you can read the famous chapter 8 of Paul’s letter to the Romans in the New Testament and say that all things work together for the good of those who love him. So you can say that Bonhoeffer may have lost his life, but his life was used by God remarkably, and he now has eternity to enjoy God. He did not lose out. I have no difficulty with that concept. Indeed, many times you can see, as Tertullian said, that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Suffering is not to be thought of as counter to God’s purposes but as a part of God’s purposes. How can Christians believe in the crucifixion of the Son of God if they do not believe that God has a plan for suffering? We worship the king with the crown of thorns, not the golden tiara.

Such ideas about suffering are difficult yet coherent. But this psalm not only says what Romans 8 says, that all things will work together for the good of those who love God; this psalm says that nothing evil will happen. Are we then to believe that the death of a martyr is not truly or finally evil? I think the answer to that must be yes. There are worse things than dying. There are worse things than losing your job. There are worse things than finding your most precious relationship is breaking down. There are worse things than being hurt. But even that is not quite what the psalm is saying, for it says “all evil,” not “there are worse things than that kind of harm.”

Think of the surgeon prepping himself to go into surgery. As he prepares, he knows in one sense that he is about to do his patient harm. He is going to cut open his body and delve in with surgical tools. The
patient will bleed. If there were no anesthetic, the patient would be screaming in pain strapped to the operating bed. That sounds evil. Yet that surgeon rightly believes that he is following the Hippocratic Oath to “do no harm.” Harm is not harm when it good does.

That is what I think the psalm must be saying. Yes, this may hurt. That is why you are asking for help. Look at the hills, but do not stop there. Go beyond them. Look to the God who made the mountains, who made everything.

But you may say, “What does he care?” If you are a Christian, you commit your life to Jesus; you are a part of God’s people, and God has promised—and sealed that promise with his own blood—to take care of his people, to look after them, to watch, to see, and to therefore guard. He is a shade protecting you from the heat of the work of the noonday sun and the anxiety and fears of the moonlit night.

But you say, “Will that really work in all situations, in all circumstances? You don’t understand what I’m going through!” Will it work not just then but even now in our modern world with our modern temptations and difficulties and not just now but as far as the human temporal horizon can see—tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow’s tomorrow, and forever?

And the psalmist says, “Yes, it will work.” There may be painful things. The psalmist knows that otherwise he would not be writing this psalm asking for help from painful things. There may be painful things, but if you entrust yourself to God, then you will never experience any final or true evil. And that might take some redefinition of evil for you to believe. But then who is the one truly in harm’s way? Is it the miser atop his mountain of gold, dragonish gleam of avarice in his eye as he destroys his life from the inside out? Or is it the child of God making his joyful journey with a song in his heart and a tune on his lips as he walks step by step closer to the eternal joy of the crucified Savior?

I know which I will choose. What about you? Or as the psalm might say, “Where are you going to go when you need help?”
Josh Moody and a team of internationally renowned Edwards scholars ask the question:

What did Jonathan Edwards Believe about Justification?

“Provides insight and guidance not only for understanding the thought of Jonathan Edwards in his historical context, but also for wrestling with the current debate regarding the doctrine of justification by faith.”

**DAVID S. DOCKERY**, President, Union University

“This volume considers Edwards responsibly and correctly. A balanced assessment of Edwards as an orthodox thinker, yet one with ‘creativity, spice, and derring-do.’”

**KENNETH P. MINKEMA**, Executive Editor and Director, Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University

“A significant work that advances the growing scholarship on Jonathan Edwards and contributes to the current debates on justification.”

**DENNIS P. HOLLINGER**, President and the Colman M. Mockler Distinguished Professor of Christian Ethics, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

For more information, visit crossway.org.
“These expositions are clear, well-organized, exegetically careful, and theologically faithful. These qualities make for very good preaching and a very good book.”

KEVIN DEYOUNG, Senior Pastor, University Reformed Church, East Lansing, MI

“Paul’s Letter to the Galatians so strongly and passionately articulates the gospel of grace that it has proved transforming in many generations of preachers from Luther to Wesley and beyond. Here Moody reinforces that heritage for the twenty-first century.”

D. A. CARSON, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Blends attention to the text, theological insight, and pastoral application in a model of scriptural exposition. His focus on Galatians is a great choice, since this letter addresses so clearly the nature and importance of the gospel.”

DOUGLAS J. MOO, Blanchard Professor of New Testament, Wheaton College

For more information, visit crossway.org.
"Josh Moody does a masterful job of leading us through the Psalms of Ascent in a way that touches and transforms our lives."

TREMPER LONGMAN III  
Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies, Westmont College

"True happiness comes from within." At least that’s what our culture tells us while beating the drum of self-esteem as the route to real joy.

But what if this is wrong? What if true joy comes not from within, but from without? What if it comes from God himself?

Embedded in the Bible is a little-known guidebook to the lasting joy we long for: the Psalms of Ascent—a set of 15 Psalms that share honestly about the heights and the depths of life while celebrating the faithfulness of God.

Helping us to engage and explore Psalms 120–134, pastor Josh Moody offers practical counsel, perceptive insights, and personal experience as a fellow pilgrim on the joy-filled journey to the father heart of God.

JOSH MOODY (PhD, University of Cambridge) is senior pastor of College Church, Wheaton, Illinois, in the Chicago area. He is the author of several books, including The God-Centered Life and No Other Gospel, and blogs at GodCenteredLife.org.