

SERMON SERIES: WILLPOWER

WORRY

We are in a series we are calling “Willpower,” and the big idea is that in important things in life like developing our character or growing to be more like Jesus, our willpower is NOT enough.

In the Bible, Paul describes our situation! He wrote: *“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can’t. I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.”* Romans 7:18-19 *“Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”* Romans 7:24-25

The first week we talked about the struggle many of us have with anger, and the power of God that is found in the cross of Christ which transforms us into people of peace. Last week we discovered how God’s awesome grace moves us to respond with giving our lives to live for Jesus. That moves us from laziness to expressing our love for God in acts of gratitude to God and acts of serving other people. Today, we are learning about the struggle we all have with worry.

There is a card in your bulletin today called *My Worry List*. Please pull that out right now, have a pen or pencil handy. At the end of our time together we're going to offer our worries up to God. So, while this sermon is going on, you might think about something you're worried about. Instead of letting that distract you, write it down on your worry list. Then we're all going to give them to God.

Every morning somehow Sue and I have gotten into the habit of asking her each morning, "How did you sleep?"

When you think about it, this is a strange question. "What was the quality and duration of your unconsciousness?"

Little children never ask each other this question. You never hear one three-year-old say to another one, "How'd your nap go?" They have more interesting things to talk about.

You can tell you're getting old by three ways. One is, you make noise when you get out of a chair. (*Grunt!*) Second one is you talk

to yourself when you're looking for a parking space. -- You ever notice people doing that? *"Wonder if this guy's going to leave. Yeah, I think...oh I guess he's going to stay there. I'll keep going."* -- Then the other one is you ask people, "How'd you sleep?"

The writer of Psalm 4 says: *"I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."* Psalm 4:8

Now I'll tell you something I'd rather not admit. I do not always lie down and sleep in peace. More often than I would like to admit, I wake up in the middle of the night worrying about a problem I don't know how to solve. Sometimes I'll worry about a decision I know I have to make but I don't want to. Sometimes I'll worry about a difficult conversation with somebody. I know I have to have it, but I'd rather not.

God does not want you to worry. Yet, in this world you'll never have a worry-free life if your primary goal is to have a worry-free life. God is not a means of reducing your anxiety.

Our Old Testament Reading today is God's Word to us in Psalm 121. What we will do in these minutes is just walk through these images used in this Psalm, this fabulous language, so that you and I can actually begin to live in this reality.

"I lift up my eyes..." What does this mean? Well it's a common expression in Hebrew Scriptures. And it doesn't just refer to your physical eyes. It means to notice something. It means to become aware of the possibilities. It means to find your attention grabbed or arrested.

It's a vivid, Hebrew way of expressing one of the greatest of human freedoms that nobody can take away from you. Not even if you were kidnapped or held prisoner for years could you lose this freedom. It's the freedom to decide where you will place your mind; the freedom to focus your attention. Lift up your eyes.

I can focus my attention on my problems, I can focus my attention on my worry, **I can focus my attention on my trouble, or I can focus on God.** I can do that. You can focus on the sickness in your body, your bank account, your world, your house, your work, or you can focus on God.

"I lift up my eyes to the hills..." Now we tend to think of hills as positive things because they are beautiful to us. But in the ancient world, if you wanted to travel, hills were kind of problems. They got in the way. They were trouble. This is why Isaiah says in the day of the Lord when God straightens everything out, *"Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made..."* (what? It will be ... made low,) *"...the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed..."* Isaiah 40:4-5

In the ancient world, hills were kind of problems. They could be beautiful, but they were also a place where there was danger. Thieves, wild beasts, kidnappers, who could not hide in the plains, could hide in the hills. So now for the word *hills*, you might want to substitute the word *circumstances*.

I see my circumstances. Sometimes they might be beautiful. Sometimes they're problems. Money problems. Job problems. Family problems. Health problems. Emotional problems. Relational problems.

And now on your worry list you may want to write some of these things.

I see them and I think, *How am I going to make it over that hill? Where am I going to find help?* And even before I face the problem -- money, job, whatever it is -- I have this internal, spiritual problem of worry and it sucks life out of me. There are people who never lift up their eyes. They just walk around head down, and no life in them, because worry is killing them.

The word **Worry** originally meant to strangle, or choke. That's worry.

For a moment right now, turn to the person next to you. Just real quick. Turn to the person next to you. Put your hands on their throat and gently choke them till they turn red. (No, just kidding. Don't do that. Do NOT try this at home.) But that's what worry does to somebody. Worry chokes the life out of you.

But God is into LIFE. He created life. Jesus said: *"I have come that [you] may have life."* John 10:10 So worry is never God's will for anybody's life. It never is.

I lift up my eyes to the hills. I see my circumstances. I think, ***Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord.*** Not from the hills. Not from me. From the Lord. This word *help* is a beautiful word.

It's used over 200 times in the Bible, most often to describe God. God is our help. It's a humbling thing for God to be willing to be known as "the help." But this is also humbling news for me. I like to think that I'm self-sufficient. We live in a culture that praises performance- praises those who don't need help. So, this is real humbling news that God is my help because it says I am the kind of little creature who NEEDS help. This is my situation.

Worry takes many forms and we all deal with it. Sometimes it's anxiety. But worry also takes the form of workaholism. It can take the form of procrastination, or worse, paralysis. Sometimes people *try* to avoid worry by medicating themselves with alcohol, or with achievements, or on social media. Very often we deal with worry by going into control mode.

Reality starts with the recognition, the truth that ***I am not in control.*** I am *not* in control. Let's all say that sentence together out loud. ***I am not in control***, of *anything*.

Can anybody here guarantee your body will stay healthy? Nope. You can eat right, you can exercise twice a day, you can see a doctor once a week, but that clock is ticking. You notice that? Have you looked in a mirror lately? The mirror tells you the clock is ticking. Ultimately your body is not in your hands.

Can you control the economy? No. You can work hard, you can try to save, but ultimately the economy is way beyond your power.

Can you make your spouse change? Often there is some ambiguity on this question. The correct answer would be "no," you cannot make your spouse change. God can change your spouse. That's good news, isn't it? And God can change your spouse's spouse. (You have to think about that one for a moment.)

See, I want to trust in me. I want to trust *my* strength, *my* gifts, *my* will, *my* education, *my* social skills, *my* finances, *my* network of people, *my* list of names. But one day I'm going to run into a hill

where none of that stuff can help. And one day you will too. And on that day you will want to know where to lift up your eyes. *"I lift up my eyes...where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord..."*

Now real important question: *What kind of help?* We usually want God to help us get our little projects done so that we can lessen our anxiety.

God's primary concern for you is not that you get everything on your "to do list" checked off. God has bigger concerns for you. He wants to bring bigger help into your life. I mean, God's main concern is not that you have exactly the kind of circumstances that you think you have to have to be happy. God's help is not to make your life comfy, cozy, snugly.

God's main concern is not that you get ahead, because you think it is so important to God that I get ahead. God loves you and wants to help you, but it is not important to God that you get ahead, have success, wealth, fame, comfort. That's not the help God wants to bring to your life.

The kind of help that God gives is in this one word: *watch*. This is the most important word in this psalm. It gets repeated over and over.

Over and over the psalm says this. *"He who watches over you. He who watches over Israel. He will watch over your life. He will watch over your coming. He will watch over your going."*

That little word *watch* gets used six times in these few verses. Whether you know it or not, the truth is God is the watcher; I am the watchee. I am the kind of being who **needs to be watched over**. If no one is watching over my little life then I am doomed, but if I have a watcher... *everything* is changed!

Back when our son was just a little guy of 3 or 4 years old, we were camping with some friends. We turned our back for a minute. The next thing I saw was our friend Ed running towards the pool. He threw his wallet out of his pocket and dove in to save Dan, our son Dan. Somehow he got through the gate into the pool area, climbed into the pool by himself, and he was going under. Ed saved his life. But Dan got into that trouble in just a moment when we weren't

watching. He needed watching, and for that moment, we weren't watching.

It was one of those moments where you just hold your child in your arms and say, "I am so grateful you are alive."

Over and over and over the psalm writer says, this God is real. He is near you. And He is always watching you. God is watching over you. Whatever is going on in your life, in your body, with your money, your relationships, He's watching you. He's watching. So you don't have to be afraid. This promise from God will change your life if you'll let it.

Then the writer says: ***"...the Lord will watch over your coming and going..."*** What is that about? It's actually kind of a technical phrase in Hebrew. When you wake up in the morning and you go out into the world, and you work, or trade, or play, whatever you do, and then when you come home at night to rest, to relax, to sleep, the Lord will watch your going out, the Lord will watch your coming in. It's a beautiful way of saying *every moment*. God watches over you ALL the time. You don't have to worry!

"...the sun will not harm you by day..." This is a Psalm that was meant to be sung as the people back then walked to Jerusalem to worship. When you're traveling by walking in the day, in the desert, sun, heat, then sunstroke and thirst, are a great danger. The sun can kill you. ***"...the sun will not harm you by day...."***

"...Nor the moon by night." Moon striking you sounds kind of strange to us. In the ancient world, the moon was often associated with mental illness. Even in English we still have this association with the moon...you know, *lunar* (moon), and *lunatic* (nutty as a fruitcake).

So, by sun or by moon you will not be harmed. Every moment of the day: in your waking, in your sleeping, in your coming and your going, through your day and through your night, God the watcher neither slumbers nor sleeps.

He is the shade at your right hand." -- That's where a counselor would be. That's where a bodyguard would be. That's where the one

you need most would be. God's not just around somewhere. He is at your right hand.

All this language is so loaded. And then the result of this is, "***He will not let your foot slip...***" This is another amazing phrase.

I remember 2 of our kids, up in Rocky Mountain National Park, high up, and they are running down a mountain trail racing each other on loose gravel. They were too young to know better and too fast to catch. Having a foot slip up on a mountain trail and you can fall to your death. Thankfully that turned out OK.

When the Bible says "***He will not let your foot slip...***" it does not mean what we might want it to mean. It does not mean you will be kept physically safe, or financially well.

You may know that in the Old Testament it talks about "the path of the righteous." The path of doing God's will. The right way. So to have a foot slip means to sin, to leave that path.

To say that God will not let your foot slip is not saying God will keep you from all problems, all pain, all trouble, all discomfort, all loss. It is saying God will help me stay obedient to Him. God will keep me from sin. God will guard my eternal soul. This is to say that God will not allow any outside force or person to harm the soul that trusts in Him; that nothing eternal is at risk.

This is the teaching of this psalm and the teaching of Jesus: ***nothing eternal is at risk in your life.*** So you can be at peace.

Now, everything *temporal* – everything of THIS world, IS at risk. My job, my body, the bodies of people I love, my money - everything is temporal. Nothing eternal. This is reality.

This is why Paul in Romans chapter 8, said, "***What then shall trouble me? Danger, hardship, famine, persecution, sword? No. None of these can separate me from the love of Christ. In all these things we are more than conquerors.***"

We're part of a people, who are not cushioned; ***WE ARE KEPT.***

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Christian who stood up against the Third Reich. He was a Lutheran Pastor, imprisoned in a Nazi

concentration camp, and martyred – hung – in his 30's, for his faith in Christ.

He wrote: ***"Peace is the opposite of security."*** [We want security.] ***"To demand guarantees is to want to protect oneself. Peace means giving oneself completely to God, wanting no security, but in faith and obedience, resting in the hand of Almighty God."***

God, all I know, all I hope, is that I'm Yours. I will lift up my eyes to the hills.

I mentioned how my son in that horrifying moment was almost lost, but a friend was watching and things turned out all right. And I think of a man I know who's 19 year old son needed someone to be watching over him as he was swimming in a lake and things did *not* turn out all right. That 19-year-old was to go off to college in a week's time, but he never lived to do it. I think about people in this room who have experienced in this life sorrow and sickness that few people could bear.

This is not a Hallmark psalm. This is not a promise that your life will be cushioned. These are words for a difficult journey.

I will lift up my eye to the hills. But God is here, by help at my side. Let's remember that God was at another hill, many miles away, many years away, and on that hill there was a cross, and on that cross there was a Man, and on that Man was all your sin. The name of that hill is Calvary, and the name of that Man is Jesus, and He died so you can live.

But the only way to really live is to die with Him first; to die to the smallness of my selfishness, to my fear of pain and discomfort. THIS is what we are called to. We are not free from worry. Believing in God does not cushion us from pain. Instead, we die with Jesus so that we can live. We die with Jesus – we give up trusting in ourselves, we give up all our ambitions for this world, we give up all our securities, we give up our love of material things, so that we can trust in Jesus. And doing so, we can live.

I want to invite you now to just pull out that little card that says *My Worry List*. We're going to take a moment right now. Just write down right now whatever it is that you worry about. Everybody came into this room carrying some burden, so whatever it is, take this card as a way of naming it before the Lord.

Maybe it's a child. Maybe it's money. Maybe it's work. Maybe it's a diagnosis. Maybe it's a loss. Maybe it's what other people think about you. Maybe it's failure. Write it down right now.

"I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. [The One who watches over you] will not let your foot slip..."

Here's what we're going to do to close -- Because we don't end with our worry. We let go of it. Nobody is walking out of here with any worries. We're going to take a worry offering.

During the next song, as you're led, just come up and place your worries in the basket here before the Lord.

You take your worry list and you just put it in the basket. Just give that worry to God. God loves it when we do that.

"God, I'm lifting my eyes. I am lifting my eyes. I am not going to walk out of here with this worry. I'm giving it to You."

AMEN.