

“Help in the Hills”

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Psalm 121 is a poem, not a promise.

Psalm 121

November 3, 2019

(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Hickory’s psalm

Next to Psalm 23, Psalm 121 may be the best-known and best-loved of the 150 psalms. At least the first line: “I lift my eyes to the mountains.” Or “...the hills.”

Mountains for most people I’ve talked to this week represent a place of refuge, a symbol of strength and beauty. Then again, most of the people I’ve talked to this week live here, in the foothills. Here in Hickory we tend to associate mountains with retreats and overlooks, waterfalls and shade, maybe with hikes into God’s creation or long, leisurely bike rides.

That’s one reason we love this Psalm. It seems like *our* Psalm. We read it like this: “I look up to mountains, and I remember where my strength comes from...” Mountains are tall and strong and beautiful and peaceful. I love Psalm 121!

It’s quite possible I’m going to ruin Psalm 121 for you today, at least temporarily. If that happens sometime during this sermon, hold on. My goal is to make your love for this psalm richer, deeper, and truer to its original intent.

This past week has illustrated and deepened one of the reasons I love what I do. Whenever I dig into a passage of Scripture, inevitably I find fresh insights and angles that deepen my love for the Lord and my sense of awe in front of an open Bible. If you attend one of my Bible study groups, you know that I’m famous for my rules. The number one rule is that you stick to *this* text, at least at first. So let’s do that with Psalm 121. We’ll examine two verses at a time.

Help in the Hills (1-2)

Verse 1 probably means the opposite how most people read it. Me too. I think it's because I grew up on the King James Version and it stuck: "I lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help."

The King James translators thought this sentence should end with a period. More recent translations almost unanimously see it as a question. My favorite translation for Psalm 121:1 is the Complete Jewish Bible (CJB): "If I raise my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?"

It's probable that for the psalmist the hills are not the *source* of comfort; they are the *reason* the psalmist needs comfort. When you read the psalm, don't think about four-lane roads into Blowing Rock or Asheville.

A better way to imagine the psalmist's journey into or through mountains is to recall Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee traveling to Mordor. They're concerned about predators, sinister forces, dangers of falling, mudslides and rocks, and whether they'll have fresh water or enough food. Will they get lost along the way? Is Gollum a trustworthy guide and friend? Will the sun be too hot or the nights too cold and dark?

I remember one Thursday afternoon mountain hike at Grace Bible Camp in the 1970s. I was about 14 or 15 years old, and on the way down the mountain somehow I got lost from the group. I went down the wrong side of the mountain. I had no idea where I was going. There were no cell phones, of course. I wound up having to ford a river in waist high water. I finally found a highway and flagged down a passing car.

The psalmist needs help for the journey into and across the mountains. Where will that help come from? It won't come *from* mountains. It's not that mountains are always negative in the Bible. David hid in the mountains. Jesus went up to the mountain to pray. But in this psalm the mountains are obstacles and perils.

The psalmist does have an answer to the dilemma. From where will help arrive? His help comes from the LORD. This is his personal name. And he "made heaven and earth." "Help" is an important word in the Bible. This Hebrew word (*ezer*) is used 21 times in the Old Testament, and almost all of them refer to God. One exception is in Genesis 2, where Adam is alone and God is going to give him "help." Don't ever let anyone tell you that whole "helpmate" thing is about Eve being Adam's little helper. Man by himself needs so much help he's going to need someone a lot like God.

The psalmist needs help *through* the mountains. He doesn't need help *from* the mountains. At the time this psalm was written, the hills of Judea were places of false worship – shrines and high places they called them – places where Israel had been led astray to gods that could never truly offer any help. Thus that CJB translation I like: "If I raise my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?"

Alert watchman (3-4)

The pronoun changes from the first person to the second person for the remainder of the psalm. Remember, the Psalms are songs, most likely intended to be sung by groups. This pronoun change seems to indicate that one individual starts the song and then a priest or maybe a choir responds.

We find three couplets in the response, all of which offer the psalmist assurance for the journey through the dangerous mountains.

“He will not let your foot slip,” comes the comforting reply. This line is one reason I’m quite sure that we’re talking about the mountains as danger in verse 1. One of our church members, Brian Anauo, has a goal of hiking the entire Appalachian Trail. I’ve only been on short sections of it, and they were easy, relatively level saunters through the woods. Brian tells me that parts of the trail are like rock climbing – up or sometimes down – and just as dangerous. He’s had to take unexpected breaks due to injury. And of course he’s sleeping under the stars in unfamiliar wild places.

Ancient people believed their pagan gods slept as well. You may recall that one of the taunts Elijah the prophet made to the prophets of Baal when Baal didn’t answer with fire was, “Maybe he’s sleeping!” It was rather risky for them to sleep at the same time their god was sleeping. The psalmist is assured that the God who made the heavens and the earth does not sleep.

We’re introduced in these verses to a word that will be the theme of the rest of the psalm – “watch” (*shamar*). It doesn’t just mean to “look.” It means to protect, to keep, to guard, to preserve. In verses 3-4 it’s a participle – a verb that functions like a noun. God is “the one watching.” He’s “the keeper,” “the guardian,” “the protector.” And he’s not napping! Ever.

Sunstroke and Lunacy (5-6)

The same word is now used as an active verb: “The LORD *watches* over you.” He’s engaged, involved, proactive. “The LORD is your shade at your right hand.” The right hand is where the king’s champion, or bodyguard, would stand at his right hand.

When you read this psalm for the first time, you might be puzzled by verse 6. “The sun will not harm you by day” – that part makes sense, especially following the comment about shade in verse 5. But what about the end of the verse – “nor the moon by night”? Why do you need to be shaded from the moon?

I would like to tell you that it’s only ancient people who had a superstition about the harmful effects of the moon, but I’ve heard it from teachers, nurses, counselors, and even business people. The moon, especially a full moon, does weird things to humans and animals alike. You do realize that the words “lunar” and “lunatic” are from the same root! There’s modern science behind the negative effects of the moon.

Regardless, that's not the psalmist's primary point. What we have here is a poetic device that uses two opposites to be completely inclusive. Sun and moon are his way of saying that God is protecting and keeping 24/7.

Coming and going (7-8)

That all-inclusiveness continues with the final couplet. "The LORD will keep (there's our word again) you from all harm." Some translations say "from all evil." "He will watch (one more time) over your life."

Then we have two more opposite pairs – "coming and going," and "now and forevermore." "Coming and going" may refer to a traveler who is leaving home and returning later, or leaving the temple after one festival and returning later in the year. It also may refer to birth and death – coming into the world and leaving it. The specifics don't matter; what matters is that "coming and going" are inclusive. God is always watching, keeping, guarding, protecting.

"Now and forevermore" ends the psalm. There's no moment from the present to eternity where God is not seeing and overseeing. It's beautiful and comforting, isn't it? God, who made heaven and earth and never sleeps, is your keeper.

Climbing Higher

I skipped over something significant while walking through Psalm 121 verse by verse. I missed the title. Often that's OK in Bible study because the captions have been added by an editor. In the Psalms many of the captions were in the original language. Psalm 121 is one of fifteen psalms with the title – A Psalm (or Song) of Ascents.

As I wrote in my Pastor's Pen in the newsletter this week, there are a number of theories as to why these psalms are titled this way. The most popular theory, and the most likely, is that these are psalms written for ascending to Jerusalem. Regardless of geography or elevation, Jerusalem is always "up" for a Jew. The Old Testament required faithful Jews to go up to Jerusalem three times a year for festivals. These were songs for pilgrims on the way there and on the way home – coming and going.

One reason this is such a popular psalm is that we do so much coming and going. We're always on the move. Life is a journey, but it's a series of journeys. This psalm provides so much comfort. Some believers recite it before a trip. David Livingstone turned to Psalm 121 before heading to Africa. It's read at baptisms and funerals.

Ten days ago I began the funeral service for 11-week-old Jack Williams with Psalm 121. But I only read the first two verses. Honestly, it seemed insensitive on that day to read, "The LORD will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life."

In addition to those who find this psalm comforting, I've heard from others this week who find it troubling. Other psalms are similar. If you've been following the daily readings this week, you've read these words of comfort –

- Psalm 91:1, "If you say, 'The LORD is my refuge,' and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent."
- Psalm 34:10, "The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing."

What are we to make of such statements in the Bible when a baby dies or a God-fearing person contracts cancer, or wildfires destroy homes and businesses without discrimination over their wealth or character or faith? Did God's promise fail?

My answer is two-fold. First, we need to compare other Scripture to remember that God definitely does not promise a life without grief, trial, stress or even premature death. Second, we need to understand how to read the Psalms and other poetry in the Bible.

I've often said from this pulpit that Christians overuse the word "promise" in reference to the Bible. We find favorite Bible verses and call them "promises." The Bible itself uses the word "promise" in a very different way – to refer to God's great program of redemption through Israel, through Christ's coming and his death and resurrection, through the Holy Spirit and the work of the church.

If you pick out verses like these from Psalm 121 and "claim them as a promise," you are probably setting yourself up for disappointment with God and disillusionment.

Psalm 121 is not a promise; it's a poem. That doesn't diminish the truth of what it says about God or its comfort as the Word of God; it enhances it. We use poetry to intensify our thoughts and feelings. Neither Psalm 121 nor other psalms "promise" nothing bad will happen to you on your journey through the mountains of your life.

Instead, this is a song, a poem, an expression of deep trust in God. It's a confidence builder in who God is – he's the helper, he's the watcher. Your life and that of those you love is safe with him – safe in him even in death.

When I say it's a poem and not a promise, here's what I mean. Yesterday I officiated at a wedding. A couple in love will often say to each other, "I will always be there for you." No one says that was a lie if she is paralyzed in an accident at work while he's playing golf. A mother will hold her child who's dying of cancer and say, "It's going to be all right. Mommy will take care of you." This is language that we use because in that moment what's needed is assurance. It's not an absolute statement.

If you think I've ruined Psalm 121 for you either by saying that the "mountains" in verse 1 are about obstacles and not strength, or by saying that we shouldn't "claim" these verses as promises, I'll close with three truths Psalm 121 is intended to convey.

First, the importance of blessing. We have forgotten the joy of using our words to bless others. It's just offering "good words." That's literally what "benediction" means in Latin. If you take Stephen Ministry training, you'll learn that blessing others is one of the key tools in Christian caregiving. Words have power. As believers we don't just use secular blessings, like "Have a good day." We use God-blessings. Maybe we should return to saying, "God bless you" instead of "Bless you," or "God be with you," instead of the shortened "Good-bye."

The Scriptures, Old and New Testament, are full of blessings. It is a wish turned into a prayer, and ultimately a blessing like this one acknowledges that we are in God's hands – for good or bad, in life or death, on mountain or valley, under the sun or moon.

Second, the unimportance of location. With apologies to the realtors in the congregation, from a faith perspective life is not about "location, location, location." Quite the opposite. A change of location doesn't change the heart. Mountains don't promise protection, but nor do they guarantee harm. We don't need mountains or valleys; we need the Maker of mountains and valleys. Life doesn't ultimately get better with a new house or a new wife or a new degree or a new church or a new job. The meaning of life is found in a relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ. He will be your help wherever you go and whatever you do, and he will never stop watching, guarding, keeping, providing.

Finally, the all-importance of your keeper. There's a psalm for every time of life. Whether you're sad or glad or mad or bad, you'll find a psalm to put your thoughts into words. What every psalm has in common is that it's about looking up.

You may remember when iPhone first introduced apps for smart phone, their slogan was, "There's an app for that." Well, whatever you're going through, there's a psalm for that. There's a psalm that will help you redirect your attention to the Lord, your helper and your keeper.

If you say, "I'm so mad I could kill someone," there's a psalm for that. If you say, "I can't stop crying," there's a psalm for that. If you say, "I've committed a horrible sin and destroyed my family," there's a psalm for that. If you say, "I'm in an emotional pit and I don't feel anything at all," there's a psalm for that. If you say, "God's not fair, because evil people keep getting more while good people fail," there's a psalm for that.

And if you say, "The mountains in front of me are terrifying," Psalm 121 is the Psalm for that. If you're thinking about obstacles and provisions and stumbling or becoming a lunatic, Psalm 121 is the psalm for that. If you don't know whether your journey will be a 4-lane highway or a rock wall to climb or dense underbrush with snakes or wolves on the prowl, find your peace in these words: "My help is from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He is my keeper." Amen.