



Firwood Church

These are the notes of a sermon preached at Firwood Church by Andy Evans on the morning of the 8 February 2009; these notes are, therefore, intended to be read in conjunction with the sermon. To download sermons and other free resources, visit www.firwoodchurch.com or subscribe through iTunes.

SONGS OF ASCENT - PART 2, THE LORD MY KEEPER

Psalm 121

A Song of Ascents

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**

1. INTRODUCTION

a. Background

The Songs of Ascent are a series of fifteen Psalms (120 through to 134) that were sung by pilgrims as they went up to the temple in Jerusalem to observe the major festivals and to worship the living God.

As we considered last week, the procession of Psalms begins with lament. The Psalmist is living in a foreign land among a people who are opposed and hostile towards the people of God. The Psalmist was in distress.

In Psalm 121, the Psalmist has moved forward, he is no longer in that place synonymous with Meshech and Kedar. We know that this collection of Psalms will finish with the Psalmist standing within the temple calling the people of God to worship the living God:

Psalm 134:1

Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord

We must ask then, how does Psalm 121 fit within the procession from 'distress' through to the Psalmist's call to worship? In order to understand this, we must first understand the Psalmist's situation.

2. RISK AND RESCUE

a. 'I lift up my eyes...'

Psalm 121:1

**I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does my help come?**

Psalm 121 begins with action; the Psalmist looks up from his path to the hills that presumably he must cross in order to reach Jerusalem. This action then leads to a question, 'From where does my help come?'

Why would the prospect of crossing hill terrain cause the Psalmist to call for aid?

b. '...to the hills'

When we read the word 'hill', it is likely that we have a particular, and somewhat domesticated, image in mind.

To better understand the situation the Psalmist is contemplating, it might be helpful to understand that the root Hebrew word *har*, here translated 'hills', is elsewhere translated mountains.

It is likely, therefore, that the Psalmist is looking up towards something more intimidating than gently rolling mounds of grass, it is more likely that he is talking about mountains. I remember as a teenager climbing Mount Snowden. I was at that age when the simple notion of climbing a mountain conjured up images of ice hammers, crampons, impossible drops and probably yetis. Any of you who have ever climbed Snowden will probably understand my disappointment. We took the Pyg track, the weather was fine and I discovered that some crazy had built a restaurant yards from the summit.

Although Snowden certainly can be dangerous in the wrong conditions and with a lack of preparedness, it does say something about the dangerousness of a mountain when, (1) a restaurant can be built on the summit and, (2) people are able to climb it in sufficient numbers to keep the aforementioned restaurant in business.

The point being this, I don't think there are any plans to build a restaurant on the summit of Everest, K2, the Matterhorn, or the Eiger anytime soon.

You see, there are mountains and then there are *mountains*.

The hill/mountains of Psalm 121 fall into an altogether different category than, say, Snowden. A more helpful analogy would be to think, say, of the mountain regions towards the north of Afghanistan. There is a reason why terrorists and drug traffics hold out up there. The region is vast, inhospitable and bleak.¹

The hill/mountains facing the Psalmist hold three very real and present dangers:

i. Isolation²

The hill country and mountain regions were largely unpopulated and, therefore, desolate places of abandonment. When Micaiah prophesies, 'I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd', he is prophesying judgement (1 Kings 22:17).

Not only were such regions desolate, they were also the haunt of wild animals. Again, the danger from such animals is viewed in Scripture as a sign of judgement. Indeed, Ezekiel prophesies against Gog,

Ezekiel 39:4

You shall fall on the mountains of Israel, you and all your hordes and the peoples who are with you. I will give you to birds of prey of every sort and to the beasts of the field to be devoured.

Furthermore, in such inhospitable regions, there was a very real danger of accident, injury and even death.

ii. Enemies

Because the hill country and mountain regions would have been largely unpopulated, travellers would have been in real danger from bandits. The journey to Jerusalem for the festivals would have been particularly dangerous as bandits would have been able to lay ambush more easily as the pilgrims' route would have been easier to anticipate. Jesus, albeit hundreds of years later, tells a parable in which a Samaritan is waylaid by bandits along a similarly inhospitable stretch of road in a mountainous region (Luke 10:25-37).

iii. Idolatry

The mountainous regions and high places were historically a place of pagan worship.³ Moses instructs the people,

Deuteronomy 12:1-4

1“These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. 2You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. 3You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. 4You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way.

The people of Israel were historically very poor at fulfilling this command. Indeed, Scripture tells us that, in the reign of Rehoboam,

1 Kings 14:22-24

...Judah did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and they provoked him to jealousy with their sins that they committed, more than all that their fathers had one. 23For they also built for themselves high places and pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, 24and there were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations that the LORD drove out before the people of Israel.

Even under a relatively godly King, Jehoshaphat, pagan worship continued in the high places,

1 Kings 22:43

He [Jehoshaphat] walked in all the way of Asa his father. He did not turn aside from it, doing what was right in the sight of the LORD. Yet the high places were not taken away, and the people still sacrificed and made offerings on the high places.

As the Psalmist looks to the hills, he sees a place of very real threat and danger and he cries for help.

c. The Psalmist calls to the Lord

Psalm 121:1

**I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does my help come?**

In Psalm 120, the Psalmist responded to distress in a godly way, he called to the Lord:

Psalm 120:1

In my distress I called to the Lord

In Psalm 121, the Psalmist is faced with real danger and his response is the same, he calls to the Lord:

Psalm 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.**

c. 'My help comes from the LORD'

The question 'where does my help come?' is answered in the following verse, 'My help comes from the LORD'. This is more than a cold, intellectual statement; it is a profound truth that gives the Psalmist confidence.

The Psalmist's confidence is rooted in three truths:

i. Relationship - YAHWEH

The Psalmist states that his help comes from the LORD. The word translated here as 'LORD' is YAHWEH, the covenant name for God. His help does not come from one of the many so called gods; his help comes from *the* God who has made a covenant with his people.

The Psalmist's confidence is grounded on the truth that this God has made himself known to people, has called people to himself (and specifically called the Psalmist to himself).

His confidence is grounded in relationship and this relationship is personal. Elsewhere, the Psalmist speaks of God as the protector and helper of Israel,

Psalm 115:9-11

**90 Israel, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield.
100 house of Aaron, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield.
11 You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield.**

Here, in Psalm 121, the Lord protects the Psalmist specifically and individually, 'My help comes from the LORD'.⁴

So too, as Christians, our confidence is grounded in relationship, a relationship in which God makes himself known and calls us by name:

John 15:12-17

12 “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. 16You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. 17These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

ii. Power – Creator⁵

The Psalmist elaborates further, his help is found in YAHWEH, creator God ‘who made heaven and earth’.

This is significant; the Psalmist’s fear of the dangers posed in the mountains is measured by his confidence in the mountain-maker.

The Psalmist’s confidence is grounded in the truth that this God, creator of heaven and earth, helps his people.

iii. Character - God does not slumber

Psalm 121:3-4

**3He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
4Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.**

In this respect, YAHWEH is different from all other so called gods. He is ever watchful, ever active. He is not like Baal who is ridiculed by Elijah, ‘Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.’ (1 Kings 18:27). Our God neither slumbers nor sleeps.

d. Where is our confidence?

There is both a great challenge and reassurance in this.

Firstly, the challenge: the Psalmist is faced with very real danger; he looks up and sees obstacles and danger. As he sees obstacle and danger, his heart cry is, 'where does my help come?'

The truth is, there are a great many answers to this question. When danger, difficulty and opposition come, we can turn to a great many 'saviours'.

For example, I have a mind which is logical and inquisitive: I like to ask questions and I think problems through in particularly methodical way. Now, don't misunderstand me. I believe wholeheartedly that this is a God-given gift, given to use in his service and for his glory. There is an inherent danger, however, in any such gift and I must be constantly vigilant and guard my heart and mind.

The danger for me is that when difficulty, opposition and problems come my first gut-reaction is to strategize. I try to think my way through and then out of the problem. The challenge posed by the Psalmist is this: when difficulty comes, where do I look for help? Now, for me, it might be my strange, pedantic, freaky way of thinking; for you, it might be that you have great charisma and are able to charm your way out of difficult situations, you might be wealthy and are able to buy yourself out, God may have given you great influence. You may have a strong family support system, you may have an amazing job, and you may be a lethal kick-boxer and are able to kick your way through pretty much anything.

Now none of this is in itself a bad thing (except maybe the kick-boxing). The problem is when we look anywhere other than God for help which leads me to the reassurance we find in Psalm 121.

When we call to God, we come before the Creator who holds all things in his hand. You see, this is how the challenge and the reassurance connect. The truth is that we often turn for help apart from God because we do not truly believe that he is able to do what he says he will do.

John Calvin, the great Reformer, writing of this very passage puts it like this,

'Did [men] in good earnest acknowledge him as Creator, they would also be persuaded, that as he holds the whole world in his hand, and governs it as seemeth good in his sight, he is possessed of infinite power. But when, hurried away by the blind impetuosity of their passions, they have recourse to other objects besides him, they defraud him of his right and empire. In this way ought we to apply this title of God [Creator] to the case

in hand. The amount is, that whilst we are naturally, more anxious than is needful in seeking alleviation and redress to our calamities, especially when any imminent danger threatens us, yet we act a foolish and mistaken part in running up and down through tortuous mazes; and that therefore we ought to impose a restraint upon our understandings, that they may not apply themselves to any other but God alone.⁶

Calvin's point is two-fold, in turning elsewhere for aid, we defraud God of worship and, in doing so, we do great harm to ourselves.

The Psalmist looks danger square on and knows, 'help comes from the LORD'.

3. THE LORD MY KEEPER

The Psalmist specifically describes the way in which this help comes.

Psalm 121:3-8

**3He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.**

**4Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.**

**5The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.**

**6The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.**

**7The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.**

**8The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore**

a. 'He will not let your foot be moved...' (v. 3)

Psalm 121:3

**He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.**

The promise is that whatever the obstacle, God will not let us slip or fall.

The purpose of Jude's epistle is to encourage believers to 'contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' in the face of false teaching and apostasy (Jude 3). Jude signs off his letter, however, with a great encouragement:

Jude 24-25

**24To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you
before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy-
25to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and
authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and
forevermore! Amen.**

The Psalmist knows that the Lord is able to establish our steps and prevent us from stumbling. For the believer, we have confidence that he is able to keep those who believe from falling irrevocably or finally. We persevere knowing we are safe within his hand.

b. '...the LORD is your shade on your right hand.' (v. 5)

Psalm 121:5

**The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.**

The application here is profound. We may see danger, difficulty and hardship looming on the horizon, but God is closer still. Indeed, he is as close as our shadow. More than this, God is at our right hand. We are, therefore, in a place of favour (remember the request of James and John, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.', Mark 10:37).

We are also in a place of protection. The image of the right hand of God is intended to represent his powerful activity (for example, see Exodus 15:6, Psalm 20:6, Psalm 45:4, etc.). The LORD is both our Keeper and our Champion.

The Psalmist describes the effect of the closeness of this Keeper/Champion God:

Psalm 121:6

**The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.**

This is more than a simple promise to protect the believer from sunstroke or exposure. The promise is that God is actively keeping and protecting the believer whether at night or during the day. This is the outworking of the truth that God does not sleep. He is *for us* 24/7; night (in the darkness) and in the day.

c. ‘The LORD will keep you from all evil...’ (v. 7a)

Believers tend to fall into one of two camps with regards to spiritual warfare. Some believers are totally unaware that a life of obedience is to engage in spiritual warfare. When we share the gospel with a friend at work, we are engaged in spiritual warfare; when we provide for the needs of the marginalized and poor, we are engaged in spiritual warfare; and when we are out with our friends on a Friday night and we behave differently by not getting drunk we are, in fact, actively engaged in spiritual warfare.

To not understand this is to leave ourselves unprepared against Satan’s devices. The Apostle Paul reminds the church in Ephesus,

Ephesians 6:12

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

There are some believers, however, who obsess and fixate upon this aspect of Christian life. Whenever there is difficulty, opposition or hardship they are looking for demonic activity. The truth is some of us are too easily spooked...

The Psalmist understands that there is evil in the world and that believers face serious opposition (both physical and spiritual). With this, however, comes a confidence, he knows that the Lord keeps us from all evil.

d. ‘...he will keep your life’ (v. 7b)

The New King James Version translates this verse as, ‘He shall preserve your soul’. This is, however, more narrow in scope than the Psalmist intends; the ESV more accurately translates this as ‘he will keep your life’. The Psalmist point is that God is actively at work in the life of the believer, regulating, protecting and keeping us.

Jesus similarly teaches that God is actively at work in creation and the life of the believer even at the most minute of levels,

Matthew 10:28-30

28And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.

God is at work in creation to such a degree that not even a sparrow (a relatively insignificant bird) falls to the ground outside his sovereign will. Jesus is clear that this same principle applies to us, only we are more valuable. God is at work, therefore, in keeping our lives on the minutest level. Jesus implies that not even a hair falls to the ground outside God's sovereign scope; our hair is numbered.

e. 'your going out and your coming in'

Psalm 121:8

**The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore**

The Lord is not limited by geography, he will keep our 'going out and [our] coming in'. The issue for the Psalmist is whether God is limited to working within the temple only? We would not think in these terms today, but we too easily compartmentalize God and limit him to a particular area or aspect of our lives. For example, we believe that God can work powerfully in our ministry, but not in our family. Or we believe that God can work powerfully in our family, but not in our workplace.

The Psalmist understands, as he leaves his home for the temple, that God is as close as his shadow keeping and guarding him. The Psalmist understands that God will guard him also as he leaves Jerusalem and returns home.

4. APPLICATION - JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

i. The Psalm is God-Centred and the Psalmist is God-Bound

Psalm 121 leads us to ask whether Scripture is promising that believers are immune from all life's difficulties and hardship? Does Psalm 121 promise that we will never stumble, slip, experience suffering or opposition?

In order to answer this we must remind ourselves of the purpose and destination of the Psalmist's pilgrimage. The Psalmist journey represents something more than a pilgrimage. The temple was the place that God had set his name. To travel to Jerusalem was to travel, to draw near, to God.

This is why the New Testament uses the picture of pilgrimage to describe the Christian walk. We are sojourners and exiles in this dark world, but we are bound for heaven, bound for the New Jerusalem, destined to be with God (1 Peter 2:11-12).

The promise is this, that the Lord does not rescue us from Satan, sin and death only to let us perish on the way. The Lord will keep those who trust in him. The Apostle Paul understands this and is confident that, 'He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ' (Philippians 1:6).

For those of us that he has saved, we will see him face to face, we will be with him on that final day and will be presented to him as a bride beautifully adorned for her husband.

The promise for believers is that the Lord will keep us: we will make it.

Therefore, Paul can write,

Romans 8:35-39

35Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36As it is written,

**“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”**

37No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

ii. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who protects the sheep

The language and imagery used by the Psalmist is that of a shepherd protecting, keeping and guarding his flock. The promise of Psalm 121 is most fully realized and fulfilled in Christ Jesus who says,

John 10:11-15

11I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

John 10:27-30

27My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30I and the Father are one.”

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¹ Broadly speaking there are two readings of the reference to hills in v. 1. The alternative view holds that v. 1 refers specifically to Mount Zion and the hills surrounding Jerusalem. In which case, the hills would be representative of God's justice, faithfulness, might, etc. See J.L. Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation* (John Knox Press: Louisville, 1994), p. 389

² For more discussion with regards to the Old Testament view of the dangers associated with mountainous regions, see D.G. Barker, "The Lord Watches Over You": A Pilgrimage Reading of Psalm 121' in *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 152*, pp. 171-172

³ The 'high places' referred to in the Old Testament fall into two categories, those dedicated to YAHWEH prior to the construction of the temple and those dedicated to pagan Gods. See B.T. Arnold & H.G.M. Williamson (ed.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* (Intervarsity Press: Leicester & Illinois, 2005), pp. 413-417

⁴ J.L. Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation* (John Knox Press: Louisville, 1994), p. 390

⁵ For a fuller discussion of mountain imagery in the Psalms, see T. Longman III & P. Enns (ed.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* (Inter-Varsity Press: Dovers Grove, Illinois & Nottingham, 2008), pp. 481-483

⁶ John Calvin, 'Commentary on the Book of Psalms' in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. VI, trans. Rev. J. Anderson (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Mich., 2005), p. 64