

Thought for the Week

Psalm 121 **A song of ascents.**

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains –
where does my help come from?
² My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
³ He will not let your foot slip –
he who watches over you will not slumber;
⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵ The LORD watches over you –
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
⁶ the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
⁷ The LORD will keep you from all harm –
he will watch over your life;
⁸ the LORD will watch over your coming and going
both now and for evermore. (N.I.V.)

There's something about hills that I love. Maybe it comes from being brought up in that part of Co. Down that is covered in drumlins - little hills left behind when the last ice age retreated. I miss them in flat Co. Antrim, though I have to admit it does make the roads better for driving. Co. Down people would find it hard to believe that you can actually drive for seven miles on a road that is straight.

Psalm 121 is one of the Songs of Ascent which were sung by people who were making a pilgrimage up to Jerusalem for one of the great Jewish feasts. Going on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem was no easy thing back in history. You didn't just hope on a train or bus or take the car - it was a long, and frequently dangerous journey on foot, or maybe if you were very lucky, on the back of a donkey. There was danger of getting sunstroke on a very hot day followed by a chill from a very cold night without shelter. Thieves and robbers frequently attacked pilgrims.

As we were thinking about last week - the Christian life is a pilgrimage and often there are difficulties, disappointments and dangers along the way. So, like the pilgrims to Jerusalem of old we can also take comfort and encouragement from the words of this psalm to give us assurance as we journey through life.

As I'm sure you know, for a long time, only the psalms were sung in the Presbyterian Tradition. Here is how the opening verse of Psalm 121 would have been sung:

I to the hills will lift my eyes,
From whence doth come mine aid
My safety cometh from the Lord,
who heaven and earth hath made.

The opening lines in this metrical version could give the impression that the psalm is saying that our help comes from the hills - but this is exactly the opposite of what is intended. Back in Old Testament times some of the Israelites had abandoned true worship of God and worshipped idols which were usually set up

on hills or in the mountains and were often referred to in scripture as "high places." The psalmist is saying that there is only one true and reliable source of help and so the question he asks "*where does my help come from?*" is soundly answered in verse 2 with - "*my help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.*"

Who or what are you relying on? Is it something visible or tangible? Is your security in possessions or status? Or are you looking beyond what this world has to offer to the one who is the creator of everything? When the travellers of old caught sight of Jerusalem, situated high up on a hill they were reassured that God was there and that he was their source of everything. When we look around us at the created world and everything beyond it, and we remember that God is our loving heavenly Father, what have we to fear?

In verse 3 & 4 we find further reassurance. The word translated "slip" in the NIV (or "moved" in other translations) means "to slip and slide, to stagger or to be shaken." What a danger that would be for pilgrims on the rough tracks of the ancient world, but equally how easy it is for us to slip and slide or to be shaken in our faith in these difficult times of pandemic, or even just in the frantic, crazy world of today. How good then it is to know that someone is watching over us. Some translations use the word "keep" here - in the sense that just as we would guard, protect and keep safe something that is very precious to us, so the Lord is our "keeper" because we are precious to him. And, as the psalmist might have put it if he was writing today - the Lord provides 24/7 security!

Another aspect of the Lord's care for us is outlined in verse 5 & 6 where he is described as a "shade" to shield us from harm. This does not, of course, mean that Christians will never find themselves in difficulty or that we will never experience physical or emotional pain. The things that God permits to happen to us in his will may hurt us, but they will never bring ultimate harm to us. The Jewish people followed a lunar calendar so the writer was referring to days (the sun) and month (the moon) and reminds us that from day to day, from month to month our heavenly Father is with us through the challenges and changes of life when we put our faith and trust in him.

And then in the last two verses there is the reassurance that we need not fear life or death, today or tomorrow, time or eternity when we are in the loving care of the Father. "All harm" ("all evil" is another translation) means anything that could harm us, but we need to remember that in his grace God turns into good things even those things we think are evil. Paul puts it like this in Romans 8:28, "*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*"

Remember how Joseph had to endure the slander hatred and cruelty of his brothers, thirteen years separation from his family, the false accusations of his employer's wife followed by years in prison. But in the end, he was able to say to his brothers, "*...you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.*"

Finally, in verse 8 it says that God watches over our "*coming and going.*" Isn't it good to know that God is interested in the daily tasks and schedules of our lives and even the minor details that we often think he wouldn't even notice? How reassuring to know that as we go in and out of the house, about our daily work and leisure and even as we travel across the land and even the world, our Father is with us, watching over us and caring for us, and that is something he will always do for us, throughout this life and then, because of the great salvation he has provided for us through his son Jesus, for evermore.

John Murdock