

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills - where does my help come from?

The Protestant Reformation that began in the sixteenth century

- Brought a new emphasis to Christian worship
- And a new impetus to involve the people (the congregation) in the music of worship
- Something that had previously be confined to clergy
- Or to the choir (which would have been composed of clergy)

There were differences among the Reformation movements over the type of music used

- German-speaking Lutherans and Pietists developed a tradition of hymnody
- Producing chorales and devotional texts, and using instruments, especially the organ
- This is the heritage in which the Methodist Church stands
- Meanwhile, the French-speaking Calvinists of Geneva held a stricter view
- And limited their music to scriptural texts, Psalms and scripture paraphrases
- Although it was possible to chant Psalms, this was not so easy for the congregation
- And so the Reformers looked to develop a text that was singable
- But changing the words as little as possible – though that proved difficult
- The Genevan Psalter (first published 1542) set a very high standard
- And Metrical Psalters (Psalms in our poetic style) were soon produced
- For use in the Reformed Churches of Holland, England and Scotland
- A Scottish Psalter first appeared in 1564
- The Free Church of Scotland and some other Presbyterian Churches
- Guard this heritage and, to this day, sing only metrical Psalms without instruments

In the Puritan era, metrical psalms were introduced into the Church of England

- The most popular were the translations of Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins
- But this ‘Old Version’ was largely replaced by the ‘New Version’ (1696)
- With translations of the Psalms by Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady
- The Old Version gave us the standard patterns of music S.M., C.M., L.M.
- Isaac Watts also wrote hymns that were much freer paraphrases of the Psalms
- Alongside this another form of Psalmody developed, ‘Anglican Chant’
- Which had the advantage of preserving the Hebrew parallelism of the Psalms
- (that scheme of repetition which characterises Hebrew poetry)
- but was definitely more suitable for choirs than for congregational singing
- nonconformist churches did not readily take to chanting Psalms
- and soon congregational singing was dominated by a new wave of hymns
- written in the eighteenth and nineteenth century

All this history has left Methodism in a unique position regarding the Psalms

- we are not a Presbyterian Church with a strong tradition of metrical psalms
- although our roots are in the Church of England
- very few of our churches have read morning prayer and chanted Psalms
- and if it were very few in the past I would think it is hardly any, if any, today
- our own heritage of evangelical hymn-writing is unsurpassed in the English language
- while we also embraced nineteenth and twentieth century hymns
- and are now readily using ‘worship songs’ (which date from about 1970)
- but my years in Scotland taught me not to neglect the use of the Psalms

I think if there is a favourite Psalm in Scotland – it is probably Psalm 121

- Highland scenery is inevitably dominated by hills
- Which probably explains the popularity of this Psalm, as it begins
- I lift up my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from?

Psalm 121 is one of the fifteen Psalms heads ‘A song of ascents’ (Ps. 120-134)

- Which were probably pilgrim songs as the people ascended to Jerusalem
- In the three annual festival processions (Exodus 23:14-17)
- The Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover) commemorating the Exodus from Egypt
- The Feast of Harvest (Weeks) for grain commemorating the giving of the law (50 days after the offering of the ‘first fruits’ - Pentecost)
- The Feast of Ingathering for olives/grapes commemorating the wilderness wanderings (Feast of Tabernacles)
- whether or not they were originally composed for these pilgrim processions is unclear
- but they were so suitable for the purpose they were gathered in this small collection

Despite it being only a short Psalm, it does present us with some difficulties

- is the Psalm writer engaged in some kind of dialogue with others
- or is he having a conversation with himself – thinking aloud as we might say
- I incline to the view that it is what we might call a personal meditation

A rather more difficult question is what the first verse actually means

- I lift up my eyes to the hills - where does my help come from? (Psalm 121:1)
- What does the Psalmist see when he looks up to the hills?
- Does he look up fearing bandits or robbers, or just the mountainous terrain?
- Does he look up despairing at futility of pagan worship in the high places?
- Does he look up hoping for deliverance, the cavalry coming over the hill top?
- Does he look up with expectation (journeying to Jerusalem, the Holy City)?
- Does he look up with hope to the heights realising God is greater even than these?
- All in all it is difficult to say but when looking for an interpretation
- We should begin by comparing similar passages of scripture together
- The Psalm writer is looking up to the hills and asking if help comes from there
- There is a similar passage in Jeremiah (3:23)

Surely the [idolatrous] commotion on the hills and mountains is a
deception; surely in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel.
(Jeremiah 3:23)

I am not sure that is the answer that our Scottish friends would most want to hear

- It seems to me that the writer is saying that there is no help from the hills
- Using hills to represent the pagan worship that so often took place on top of them
- But I am not ruling out that he used hills in the much more positive sense
- To represent the Holy City of Jerusalem – the focal point of Israel’s worship
- Or that he uses hills as an example of the greatness of the creative power of God
- The Psalm writer is clear – his help comes from the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth
- By ‘help’ he seems to mean protection, guidance and blessing

I GOD: CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE (vv. 1-2)

In the world of the Old Testament, gods (small 'g') had specific territories and roles

- A god might be a household or local god (like the teraphim)
- In Egypt, gods were often animals, like the hawk, the cat or the bull
- The Canaanite gods were nature-gods, Baal and Ashtoreth
- But Yahweh, the LORD (or as sometimes in Old English – Jehovah)
- Was greater than all gods (Exodus 15:11; 11:18)
- Later prophets, such as Jeremiah and Isaiah, said these gods did not exist
- But such a thought was difficult to the ancient mind
- A god that you could see and touch seemed more real than an invisible God
- But Isaiah points out the folly of such a notion:

Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me; you are my god." They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so that they cannot see, and their minds closed so that they cannot understand.

(Isaiah 44:16-18)

The contrast could not be plainer – the LORD, the God of Israel

- Is creator of heaven and earth, creator of the universe
- In the worship at Jerusalem, God was acclaimed as maker of heaven and earth
- As the pilgrims journey to the holy mountain, they affirm the basis of their hope

The Psalm writer asks, 'where does my help come from?'

- Using the internet search engine *Google* I asked, 'where can I find help?'
- The issues people are facing where they want help were
- Alcohol and drug abuse, pregnancy, immigration, finance, Inland Revenue forms!
- I am sure that many of the agencies advertising are offering support and good advice
- But these are specific questions requiring specific answers
- What about ultimate questions?
- In his book, *Ultimate Questions*, John Blanchard asks 12 questions – here are 1-3:
- Is anyone there? Is God speaking? What is God like?
- Add to these the three of the great unasked questions of the contemporary age
- Why was I born? Why am I here? What happens when I die?
- And maybe we catch a glimpse of why the Psalm writer might be looking for help
- He is looking for someone to watch over his life – from beginning to end
- In times of trouble how easy it is to seek help in those things which render none
- With regard to the ultimate spiritual questions – the Psalm writer knows where to look
- His help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth
- In times of trouble, in times of loneliness
- The ultimate source of help comes from the LORD
- As creator, his power is unlimited
- God is our guardian in all things – but do we place ourselves under his protection?

II GOD: WATCHING OVER US (vv. 3-4)

He will not let your foot slip - he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

(Psalm 118:3-4)

The reference to Israel is an important one – Israel means the chosen people

- The community of faith, trusting in God's eternal promises
- The Psalmist's confidence for the people of God is focused upon God

A simple question needs to be asked – if the Psalm is in a collection for travelling pilgrims

- Is it saying that the Pilgrims never had any accidents, never fell or even slipped?
- If it means that, it either means that believers must be wrapped in cotton wool
- And that nothing unwelcome will ever happen to them
- But we recognise from the world around that unwelcome things happen to believers
- So, on the assumption that no one here wants to live in Cloud Cuckoo Land
- We must dig a little deeper – and that digging takes us to Psalm 55

Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.

(Psalm 55:22)

It seems to me that the verse refers to the walk of faith rather than an earthly walk

- The meaning being that people who entrust themselves to God's care
- Will not be let down by him
- If we keep in the way of faith and service, we shall be safe under his protection
- What then are we to say about millions of Christian martyrs?
- Ultimately, they are in God's care

If good people are exempt from terrible things happening to them

- Then we would expect Jesus Christ to be immune from all trials and suffering
- But, in fact, the very opposite was the case and Jesus was not exempt
- If God always answered prayers in the way that made things easiest for us
- Then we would at least expect the prayers of Jesus to be answered in that way
- In Gethsemane, facing the horror of betrayal, scourging and crucifixion, Jesus prayed

My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.

(Matthew 26:35)

We know that the cup was not taken from him and we know his last words on the cross

- Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (Luke 23:46) – quoting Psalm 31:5
- Ultimately, Jesus was in the hands of God, his eternal Father
- Unlike pagan deities God never sleeps, he is always watchful
- Jesus' incarnation reminds us that God does not always lift his people out of suffering
- Instead, he is willing to go through that suffering with us
- He watches over us, at birth, in life and through death, that we might be with him

III GOD: WATCHING OVER ME (vv. 5-8)

The Psalmist is confident that God watches over Israel (Psalm 121:4)

- But, as if that were not enough, he adds

The LORD watches over you - the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.

(Ps 121:5-6)

The same divine guardian of the people of God (Israel) in general

- Is the personal guardian of the individual believer
- For us where the appearance of the sun would mark the return of a welcome stranger
- We must not forget that in a different climate, shade from the sun is most necessary
- To be in the shade is welcome for protection and refreshment
- In offering these blessings God is not far off but at our right hand
- By day (represented by the sun) and by night (represented by the moon)
- the servant of God knows his protection and blessing

Six times in six verses the Psalmist uses the same word translated often translated 'watch'

- He who watches over you will not slumber (v. 3)
- He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep (v. 4)
- The Lord watches over you (v. 5)
- He will watch over your life (v. 7)
- He will watch over your coming and going (v. 8)
- But that's only five – the sixth use of the same word is hidden
- 'The LORD will keep you from all harm' (v. 7)

The original word literally means 'to hedge about' (i.e. guard, protect, keep, preserve, save)

- When Cain asked, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (Genesis 4:9), he used this word
- And when Isaiah spoke of the 'watchman' – he also used this word
- A watchman is more than a spectator, a watchman stands guard or keeps watch

The LORD will keep you from all harm - he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and for evermore.

(Psalm 121:7-8)

To get the emphasis of the verses we can usefully substitute the word 'guard'

- The LORD will guard you from all harm
- He will guard your life
- The LORD will guard your coming and going
- both now and for evermore

The important thing to notice is that the LORD's care extends to all adversities

- We should not interpret 'The LORD will guard you from all harm'
- To mean that nothing ill will ever befall us – rather that it will not seize us
- And carry us away, captive, back to the land of darkness

In all the paths of life the believer is promised the ever-vigilant protection of God

- As God made promises to Israel, so he makes promises to those who are his in Christ
- By God's grace, through faith, we are received into the community of faith
- The community of faith is the church – by church we do not mean a building
- But a gathering of people – the Greek word we render church is *ekklesia*
- The associated English word 'ecclesiastical' is even more misleading
- The word means assembly or congregation
- The Bible does not give the option of belonging but not assembling or congregating

After his death and resurrection, just before Jesus ascended into glory

- He appeared to the disciples on the Mount of Olives
- He commissioned them to make disciples in all the world
- And as they were going to baptise and teach
- We take that for granted but I am sure they wondered however they would do it
- But Jesus gave them this promises, 'I am with you always' (Matthew 28:20)

The life of the believer is not a life cushioned from all unpleasantness

- That was no more the experience of the Old Testament Israelite
- Than of the New Testament Christian or generations of believers since
- But believers have an important message from God
- I am with you, I am watching over you, I am guarding you
- Therefore, we may entrust our lives to a faithful creator
- Regardless of happenings at work or at home, whether we are asleep or awake
- God is there to guard us and protect us and ultimately deliver us safely home
- To his Kingdom – it is living in that assurance that is faith

For many years I have used a seven panel sheet of Bible verses *Day by Day*

- And when what to say in particularly difficult circumstances has not been obvious
- I have read the four verses for each day from it, confident that God will use them
- The writer to the Hebrews writes to encourage the early believers –
- Some are in prison, some are being ill-treated, others are suffering
- He does not expect God to wrap them up in cotton wool removing them from all ills
- Instead he reminds them of this promise:

God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."
So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be
afraid. What can man do to me?"

(Hebrews 13:6)

On the Sunday after Easter some years ago, I was feeling at a low-ebb in my faith journey

- A combination of factors weighed heavily upon me
- Some had been outside my control, others not handled very well
- I went to a morning service but it did not help and the evening service was little better
- The preacher announced the last hymn, 'In heavenly love abiding'
- "Funeral hymn," I thought to myself, "that's all I need."

My Saviour has my treasure,
And he will walk with me.