

Denbigh Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 121
Title: Mountain Perspectives

On January 11, 2008, Sir Edmund Hillary passed away. Sir Edmund was probably the earliest historical figure I was aware of. When I was five or six, I was in awe as I read of his conquest of Everest with the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay (who passed away in 1986). Hillary's reason for climbing, "Because it is there," impressed me even at that young age as being a strange attitude toward the world. A lot of things are "there." Maybe there was another reason to ascend mountains. I think Sir Edmund may not have wanted to admit that. When I took a course in phenomenology of religion in college, we noted the importance of high places, mountains in particular, because they were close to a heavenly God. In some religions, the creator god stood on top of a mountain and pulled up the rest of the world from the deep. When I climbed my first mountain, and from the hard-won summit saw creation arrayed below me, I immediately understood the idea of God dwelling in the high places. Mount Olympus, Kilauea, Mount Sinai – these all are the homes of the gods of various religions. Is that really where we find God?

I grew up in the King James Bible, which starts this psalm, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." This is a statement. We lift our eyes to the heights because clearly that is where God is. We are lowly and God is on high – the natural relationship between us and our God is preserved. As we walk through the valley of the shadow of death down below, we keep our eyes fixed on God on high.

In other translations we see a different story. The New American Standard Bible says, "I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come?" This is a question. This same construction is seen in the New Revised Standard Version and in the New International Version, the NIV. The psalmist clearly fears what he sees on high, and calls for help. This could be a natural response, too. Cliffs, ravines and canyons in the hills and mountains can conceal ambushes by thieves or wild animals. Rockslides or avalanches can obliterate a traveler or a caravan. Furthermore, ancient Canaanite sanctuaries were built on those hilltops. Solomon and Rehoboam erected some of these shrines; Manasseh restored some of them. You can read about that in Kings. These cultic shrines posed a spiritual threat over the centuries.

This Psalm is a “psalm of ascent.” As the follower of Yahweh starts his pilgrimage to Zion through the mountains, perhaps he is both attracted to worship at these high places, and still fearful of the cultic associations they bring. The threats are on high – God of Israel save us from them.

We have talked about life as a pilgrimage before. Many of us can testify that the trip is beset with dangers and disappointments. Sickness, grief, depression, addictions, troubles with children, troubles with parents, troubles at work, need I go on? We are about to host the homeless for a week. We know from our previous experience as hosts that some of them are just like us, only one mis-step removed. If you are jaded by our everyday miseries, think more broadly to the people living in cardboard shacks surrounding Tijuana, or the people who eke out their lives on trash mountains in Nairobi or Manila. We have mountains of trouble that beset us on our pilgrimage. As we ascend the mountains of life, we slip, we struggle, we fail. We look up and see the sudden, sharp beak and talons of the predator about to claim us.

This text has spent only two verses framing the problem. The other six verses claim that we have a protector, that God never sleeps and that His protection shields us:

He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.

Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand.

The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.

The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

God’s oversight is tireless and even heavenly bodies cannot harm us....or so we hope! The psalmist invokes a reality of protection through his poetry. Furthermore, the questionable sacredness of the threatening high places pales in comparison to the Lord which made Heaven and Earth. Even the mountains in their majesty cannot contain Him!

That is why the psalmist is full of hope when he says, “The Lord will preserve you from evil.” Our God is not a God of Protection, but a God of Accompaniment – he is always with us to comfort and guide. Our personal relationship with God does not mean He is our servant or good-luck charm. Life can be difficult. Life **is** difficult! Some say God will never lay on us

more of a burden that we can bear, but sometimes as we groan and sob under the weight of our problems, we wonder. Why should we follow this God and forsake the magnificence of the highlands?

For part of that answer, let's move to the mountains of another country, The Peoples' Republic of China. There, Brother Yun is one of the leaders of the "Back to Jerusalem" missionary movement. Now that's a pretty catchy title, like the Jewish Passover Seder call, "Next year in Jerusalem!" But the Chinese Christians are realistic. They know that between them and Jerusalem lie the three other largest faith systems: Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. It is fairly certain they will **not** be in Jerusalem next year. When these Christians set out for the mission fields, they set out ready to die.

Brother Yun is "one of China's most persecuted house church leaders." He tells the story of a day when he was beaten and paraded around town, then led into a room where he was tightly bound, beaten some more and questioned cruelly. Through his pain and anguish, Yun says he felt unusually strong confidence in God's protection. Here are his words, "Suddenly I remembered how the angels had opened the prison gates for Peter to escape. The rope that bound my arms behind my back suddenly snapped by itself! I didn't tear the ropes off, but kept them loosely in place. I decided to try to escape." While his tormentors answered a phone call in the next room, he simply stood up, walked through the middle of a closely guarded courtyard and jumped over an eight-foot wall. Yun says, "The God of Peter wonderfully helped me leap over the wall and escape." But Yun's focus when he speaks is not on the many miracles the Lord has brought him, but on the character and beauty of Christ. Far exceeding the mountains in magnificence and span, God is closer than our heartbeats.

Recently I was talking to a man who lost his house and his son-in-law in a fire. Since he lived on the county line, his calls to 911 went first one way, then another, causing a half hour to elapse before one of the fire departments arrived. By then, his home and his daughter's husband were gone. "The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night." Where was this God, off stalking through the mountains? The man told me where God was. God was with him even as the flames were raging. Through the surging adrenaline, the crushing tragedy and the mental whirlwind of memories and guilt, the man told me a peaceful sense of calm poured over him. With that, this man knew that God would be with him through the grief and sorrow and rebuilding. That Peace has never left him.

A friend of mine has told me of many troubles throughout her life, and how God was always there – sometimes with resolution, sometimes bringing someone or an event to comfort her, or sometimes filling her with a sense of peace. Do we need to look to the mountains for God? Do we need fear the threats from the mountains? No, our God is a faithful God. Our God loves us. He is right here with you, and He asks you to accept that love. It will change your life and your afterlife. And that is on the level.