

*Psalm 121. "I lift up my eyes to the hills..." Sound familiar? This beloved verse opens a psalm that gives hope in a world filled with uncertainty and trouble.*

War may be the most dominant thread in the fabric of history. Every ancient culture, without exception, knew of it. Babylon, Assyria, China, Egypt, Israel, Phoenicia. The Peloponnesian War destroyed Athens, the Punic Wars razed Carthage, and even after 800 years of stability, Rome fell to the barbarians. War engulfed ancient societies, and its destruction sweeps across our world today. The truth is that no century started with more promise than the twentieth, and no century proved more disastrous. In excess of 100 million died in two world wars, in addition to the millions of lives lost from other battles or actions.

If history is any indicator on a macro-scale, it would seem the world is marching from bad to worse. We live in a hostile world that's filled with problems of every kind and magnitude. That's not exactly a warm and comforting thought, but Scripture gives hope. One of those chapters filled with hope is Psalm 121.

In ancient Israel, the psalmist wrote on his way to an annual feast held in Jerusalem. Psalms 120-134 are a block of psalms called the, "Songs of Ascent." These were sung and recited at different stages along a pilgrim's journey to the city. Psalm 120, for instance, opens with anguish. Not quite what you'd expect for a worshipper on his way to the holy city. However, travel was dangerous. Ambushes were common along the journey, and pilgrims didn't look forward to what might happen. Being on guard was tiresome, and adverse temperatures made the trek worse.

Psalm 121 has a different tone. The psalmist is much closer to Jerusalem and is eager to celebrate the feast. He doesn't know for sure what might happen. Harm may still fall upon him. Nonetheless, his security lies in knowing that the God who made heaven and earth is with him. God's ever-present care gives him hope in the midst of a hostile journey.

## A REASONABLE HOPE

## (PSALM 121:1-2)

*Psalm 121:1-2—A Song of Ascents. I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*

It's hard for us to understand life without cars and paved roads. Imagine commuting to Springfield on horseback, galloping across valleys or along rivers. When the psalmist traveled to Jerusalem, he labored on foot upon well-worn dirt paths. Though singing at points, his body would've been sore after a few days, his muscles weary. Seeing the mountains leading up to Jerusalem, he says, "I lift up my eyes to the hills." (Psa 121:1a).

The plains weren't too bad. The hills, though, were difficult. Any traveler hiking up to Jerusalem at 2500' would've asked in exhaustion, "From where does my help come?" (Psa 121:1b). Exhaustion aside, one would also want help amid the dangers that loomed.

Remember the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37)? The man was on his way to Jerusalem when ambushed. This scene is similar to the psalmist's. Narrow, mountainous trails were a security issue with easy hiding places for thieves. Anything could happen, but Psalm 121 shows a man who's resolved in his mind to trust God.

The psalmist wanted strength and safety so he turned to the One who's great enough to provide them—the God who "made heaven and earth" (Psa 121:2). This is a reasonable hope. If God created heaven and earth, He's greater than both and all they contain. This means He has the ability to keep his people safe from harm. Trust Him. It makes sense.

The Lord is faithful in the midst of life's hardships. When He called Joshua as Moses' successor, He said, "I will not leave you or forsake you" (Josh 1:5). He gave the same comfort to Moses, to Gideon, to Jeremiah, and His disciples. God never leaves His people.

The Lord is great, and He's in control, but it doesn't guarantee He will help exactly as we want. The psalmist knew he could die along the way. So much for hope, right? The point is that God is able to provide, not obligated (Rom 11:33-36). He's promised to keep His own spiritually safe, eternally secure, and to bring them home to Him forever (Rom 8:35-39; Jude 1:24-25).

God didn't promise safe travel to the psalmist. He often uses trials into the lives of those He loves in order to test, humble, refocus, or develop their faith. There's always good purpose in His ways even when they're not exactly what we wanted (Rom 8:28).

# Hope in a Hostile World

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## MY SUPPORT, PROTECTOR, AND SAVIOR

(PSALM 121:3-8)

From doctrine to application, verses one and two transition to verses three through eight. A reasonable hope rests upon a God who's able. The psalmist speaks of God as his support, protector, and savior throughout life.

When a word is repeated multiple times, it usually intentional. In these verses, "keeps" (*shamar*) appears six times. It's a simple way of underscoring the point that God really holds onto His children.

### A DIVINE SUPPORT

*Psalm 121:3-4—He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*

Why would my foot be moved? Keep the imagery of hiking in mind. The psalmist was walking a rocky path, parts of which were steep with the possibility of sliding. One might fall into a gorge if he were careless.

Drawing from this picture, he speaks of God's protection. The Lord, "will neither slumber nor sleep" (Psa 121:3). As Jesus said to the Pharisees, God is always at work doing good. He never stops (John 5:17). The One who's able to protect an entire nation is able to care for its individual people.

If ever God made a promise, He promised it forever. This is true in part because He isn't a God who sleeps. When He speaks, He ensures His words come to pass. Even though His people have always stumbled and fallen, they are not moved in any real way. God is faithful, He lovingly watches over His own, and His plans for their lives will come to fruition. It comforting to know that, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion" (Phil 1:6).

### A DIVINE PROTECTOR

*Psalm 121:5-6—The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.*

Much of Israel is desert, and the sun's heat adds another dimension to the difficulties of travel. Its piercing rays quickly drain and burn

the weary. Shade was essential during the day, but warmth was necessary during the cold nights.

Figuratively, the psalmist says he's protected by the Lord. Whatever strikes him, he can rest in God's care as resting under the cool shade of a tree for respite.

God fashions the trials in the life of a believer with purpose (Gen 50:20; Rom 5:3-5, Jas 1:2-17). His protection doesn't mean a life without pain, but gives us the ability to rest peacefully in the midst of it (Phil 4:7). He's in control, and never allows any trial too great for any of His own to bear (1 Cor 10:12-13).

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face!*

### A DIVINE SAVIOR

*Psalm 121:7-8—The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.*

The final two verses exclaim that God is my savior. There are many kinds of evil: cataclysmic, spiritual, eternal, eschatological, moral. In what sense could the psalmist say, "The Lord will keep you from all evil?"

The psalmist didn't say the Lord would keep His people from experiencing evil things. He said the Lord would keep them. Evil will not win over God's people or destroy them. We live in a world that's fallen and stained by sin. The promise is that no matter how awful, God saves His own and keeps them both now and forevermore. The psalmist had an eternal perspective, which kept him rejoicing above his uncertain circumstances.

God is set on keeping His own safe: He supports, protects and saves them. The believer has hope in the midst of adversity only when his hope is fixed upon the One who is able. The Maker of heaven and earth is the great God who is able to help in our times of need. We should trust Him.

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<sup>1</sup> William Cowper, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*.