

PSALM 121

“What sort of travel insurance are you taking?” is a question we might be asked if planning a trip or holiday. The search for adequate cover at a price you can afford can take some time – although there is no shortage of companies offering to take your money
It’s a question this psalm raises too, because it is about people on a journey.

[Most of the 150 Psalms in our Bible were written by David, but not all. Others are included by other authors (e.g. Ps 90 is attributed to Moses)]

Many of the psalms give us a heading (*italics in NRSV*) which is very helpful in understanding the occasion on which it was written (context).

This Psalm is one of the fifteen “Psalms of Ascent” (120-134) and that gives us a really good start in understanding and applying it today.

Every year pilgrims went up to Jerusalem (in a hilly area) for the Feasts (e.g. Passover and Harvest). They went in family groups including children, young and old. En route, they would meet family and friends from other villages and towns. There was a holiday atmosphere, but a serious purpose too – to worship together and sometimes to get disputes settled in the legal courts in the capital.

The journey could take many days, and as they went they sang, and this Psalm is one example. What they sang about was significant – as singing is on our Christian journey today. Notice how it starts:-

v.1-2 “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth”.

HILLS AHEAD! That meant the road was going to get steeper, as they got nearer to Jerusalem. For most of them there was nothing romantic about those hills.

2.

- (a) Hills make strenuous physical demands. These travellers had children with them and plenty of baggage too. “Where will my help come from?” means “How will I manage?”
Have you ever felt that when facing another week? Tight programme? Hard few days ahead? How will I fit everything in?
This is a psalm for those wondering “How will I manage?”
- (b) Hills could also mean Danger Ahead. Vulnerable travellers could be attacked by robbers. Hills could conceal thieves lying in wait for slow-moving, encumbered pilgrims. The possibility of a sudden attack was a scary thought.
So this is a psalm for those feeling vulnerable.

The song encourages us to look at our problems square on (“I lift my eyes to the hills...”) Looking away doesn’t help. Problems which are undefined and not faced up to can take on a life of their own and get out of proportion in our imagination..

By taking a cool look at the hills ahead, this pilgrim could get prepared, take a deep breath or two, plot a path through the hills, - and plan a rest stop (or two!). That’s not a bad plan for any week ahead... The problems don’t go away, but everything changes if we can join the Psalmist in what comes next.

It’s a STRIKING AFFIRMATION

“MY help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth”

Verses 1-2 are very personal (“I lift my eyes...My Help...”)

Can we make that same affirmation today?

“I am going to face the hills ahead in the strength that comes from the Lord”.

On our Christian journey we get help from all sorts of secondary sources (not least from fellow Christians who understand and pray for

3.

us), but ultimately our trust is in the LORD (Yahweh) who is described in this Psalm as

- Creator
- Companion
- Keeper (or Guardian) used 6 times in verses 3-8

The rest of the Psalm (verses 3-8) is descriptive. It explains why those who may be weary, apprehensive or feeling vulnerable can
TRUST THIS CREATOR COMPANION WHO WILL KEEP HIS PEOPLE.

- He stays awake at all times (3-4), unlike some watchmen or alarm systems.
- He is a shield (5), placing himself between us and evil.
- Day and night make no difference; he guards from real daytime problems (sunstroke) and night-time worries and imaginings (moonstroke!)
- He can ward off all sorts of evil (7)
- He can guard our whole person (our 'life')
- He is reliably there in our everyday activities, our going out and coming in. (8)
- This is not time-limited but for ever (8b)

This all sounds like a pretty amazing insurance policy, doesn't it?
The promise is to keep us, guard us, in all circumstances, at all times.

So we have to ask: Is it fair to describe this as a sort of Universal Comprehensive Insurance, valid for all time and all circumstances? If we have these promises, does it mean we do not need any other sort of insurance?

We have to reply:
IF YOU MEAN...

- Will I never have an accident?

4.

- Will I always be kept from getting ill?
- Will I be kept from losing a partner?
- Will I be guarded from getting old or from dying?

...the answer has to be No. God's people in the O.T. and Christians today, experience all these things. And if you are going abroad on holiday you would be well advised to get insurance cover like other people!

BUT IF YOU MEAN

- Will I be guarded from being overwhelmed by any of these experiences?
- Is God great enough and faithful enough to match anything life may throw at me?
- Is he big enough to cope with my failures too?

the answer is YES.

The promises in this Psalm and elsewhere in Scripture are not that we will be saved FROM these experiences but be saved IN them and as we pass THROUGH them.

Some insurers won't cover travellers to certain countries. With the Lord, wherever he leads us, we are never off his territory geographically. Nor are his promises time-limited. He is never having 'time out', or 'time off' and so unavailable.

Here's an important point:

We do have to look to him...keep our eyes on him, keep our trust in him. That's when he can guard and shield us. Indeed, Scripture gives us clear examples of what happens when those who had the promises of God failed to profit from them. Perhaps you can think of examples. Here are two which come to mind:-

5.

(a)

In the O.T., the Lord had brought the people from Sinai to the very border of the Promised Land which they were to occupy, and he told them to move ahead in faith because he would be with them.

See Deuteronomy 1: 21. “The Lord has given you the land...go up, take possession.. do not fear or be dismayed.” It was a clear command and a clear promise.

But when the spies went ahead into the Land, they noticed the size of the opposition. They reported back, and most people were so filled with discouragement they got cold feet.

They decided the opposition was bigger and stronger than them, and their hearts failed them, so they decided to turn away.

The opposition may indeed have been bigger than them – but they were not bigger and stronger than the Lord – who had promised to be with them.

And that decision to turn away cost them dear. They were the losers, because for 38 more years they wandered in the desert before another opportunity came. God’s promises always need to be matched by our trust and obedience.

Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

How slow we are to learn this lesson.

(b)

A similar example from the N.T. would be Peter, who stepped out of the boat to walk on the water to meet Jesus. (Matthew 14: 28-32). All was fine at first as he kept looking at Jesus.

But then he moved his gaze from Jesus, and seeing the wind and the waves he began to sink...

6.

There are plenty of winds and waves about in the world about us today - and in our lives as individuals and families...

Where will our help come from? We need to keep looking to the LORD who is

- Creator
- Companion
- Keeper

The Christian life is not an easy ride. We may often wonder “Can I keep it up?”

Like trying to balance a pencil upright vertically on your hand without support– it’s almost impossible. But if you use your other hand or finger to support the top of the pencil, it easily holds firm – it is kept from above.

We can’t keep it up, but He can. We are kept by God’s power – when we look to him in trust. As the old children’s chorus puts it:-

*Kept by the power of God,
Kept by the power of God;
Day by day, come what may,
Kept by the power of God.*

That’s the message of this Psalm:

The hills are ahead, so where will we find help?

“My help comes from the Lord who has made heaven and earth.”

That’s the same Lord who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – our Saviour, Protector, Guide and Friend.

Sermon prepared by John Briggs for St Martin’s, Higher Poynton,
21st January 2018.