

Distress is the catalyst for devotion. We are in trouble and we need help. We cry out to the Lord for his salvation, because we live in a culture of lies and deception (Psalm 120). So we set out on a journey of faith. We are sojourners on the way, seeking the Lord in the company of God's people, but it doesn't take long before we realize that there is a whole new set of dangers. The journey is not safe. We have escaped Egypt only to end up in the wilderness. One night out under the stars with the threat of lions and robbers and one day under the blinding heat of the sun is enough to convince us that we need the Lord's protection. To underscore this truth the psalmist repeats the Lord's personal name, Yahweh, five times and describes the Lord as our "keeper" six times. In eight short verses all those who have embarked on this journey of discipleship know that the Lord their savior is their daily guardian, their protector, their keeper. The apostles will grasp this truth as well and reassure believers that nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ (Rom 8:35-39).

My Help

*I lift up my eyes to the mountains –
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

Psalm 121:1-2

The opening question shakes off the naivete of denial and the carelessness of indifference. The journey is fraught with danger and only someone either Pollyannaish or narcissistic fails to ask it. "I lift my eyes" is a way of saying that the whole person is involved in asking this question. We picture the sojourner setting out, looking up, seeing the far distant landscape, and stopping dead in his tracks. The pilgrim's plodding with one foot in front of another requires something more than the will to travel, the fellowship of fellow travelers, and the excitement of the adventure. The way forward is not made possible on the basis of human fellowship alone nor in the "can-do" spirit of "I can do this." The psalmist is right to ask this question and we're eager for the answer.

The psalmist uses the hills and mountains metaphorically to represent a range of dangers. They stand for the physical challenge of making it over them and the spiritual challenge of what they represent in the surrounding pagan religion. They are as literal as a slippery path and a narrow gap haunted by thieves and robbers. And they are as symbolic as the pagan high places, dotting the landscape with shrines to Baal and Asherah. Disciples today face the same range of physical and spiritual challenges. Every time we look up we face some new diagnosis or deception that threatens to up-end the journey and fill us with anxiety.

However, the sojourner's pause to look up and ask his question is only momentary, just long enough, to remember: "My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." The answer dwarfs the mountains and those diagnoses and deceptions that the mountains represent. The all-encompassing nature of this reassuring answer puts the daily traumas and extended life

troubles in perspective. The apostles pick up on this answer and expound its meaning. They root our lives in the sovereign supremacy of the Lord our Savior. Paul writes, “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” The psalmist saw the climax of his pilgrimage in the faithful worship of Yahweh in the temple in Jerusalem. The apostle saw the climax of our pilgrimage in the very presence of the Lord. Paul writes, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel” (Colossians 1:16-23). The Anglican missionary statesman Lesslie Newbigin was asked if he was an optimist or a pessimist. He answered, “I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.” Likewise, Dietrich Bonhoeffer centered everything in Christ. “The fact that Jesus Christ died is more important than the fact that I shall die, and the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead is the sole ground of my hope that I, too, shall be raised on the Last Day. . . I find no salvation in my life history, but only in the history of Jesus Christ.”¹

Reassurance

*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.
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.
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 forevermore.*

Psalm 121:3-8

There is an antiphonal response to the psalmist’s confident answer. He is in the company of like-minded pilgrims who hear his answer with delight and respond with words of assurance. Oh, the blessing of this kind of life together. Question raised. Answer given. Songs of comfort and assurance sung as the company of committed move along the path.

The metaphoric picture of the Lord who neither slumbers nor sleeps recalls the prophet Elijah’s show-down with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. The prophet proved that there was no comparison between the never-sleeping, ever-alert, and always responsive Guardian of Israel and Baal, the god who was prone to nod off. After spending the whole day calling on the name of Baal, the prophets shouted in desperation, “Baal, answer us!” When nothing happened Elijah

¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 54.

began to taunt them: “Shout louder! Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” (1 Kings 18:26-27). And in the end, Baal never did wake up. Elijah’s water soaked bull-sacrifice was totally consumed along with the rock and sand when the fire of the Lord fell and burned everything up. This exceptional miracle only served to prove the rule. “Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps 121:4).

The psalmist does not intend to convey that God’s people live trouble-free lives without sprained ankles and skin cancer. We are as vulnerable to cancer and car accidents as the next guy. We live in a world where conquest, famine, starvation and death run rough shod over humanity. There are just as many Christians taking heart medication as non-Christians. The difference Christ makes is that in the midst of evil the Lord will keep us. “All the water in all the oceans cannot sink a ship unless it gets inside,” writes Peterson. “Nor can all the trouble in the world harm us unless it gets within us.”² We agree with the apostle “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). None of these troubles can separate us from the love of Christ.

We set out on this journey of discipleship knowing that salvation and shalom are bound together (Ps 120). They are gifts from God, “so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:9). But we are no sooner on our way when we we’re confronted by a host of troubles that threaten to undo us. The promise of protection implies anything but a trouble-free life. “The Lord will keep you from all harm,” assumes a battle the Lord aims to win. Danger is expected when the believer is told, “he will watch over your life” (Ps 121:7). The psalmist offers the Lord’s practical daily assurance of sure-footed grace and shade-protected companionship. But the promise of protection does not stop there. The Lord promises personally to be our “keeper” in every facet of life. Although we do not come close to meriting his loving attention, the Lord in his mercy promises to care for everything about us. For the Lord to watch over our “coming and going both now and forevermore” means there is no time or place outside of his loving protection. “This is our God; this is the God of our pilgrimage. This is the God of unending, unending watchfulness and keeping grace, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, and Companion.”³

² Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 39.

³ Motyer, *Journey: Psalms for Pilgrim People*, 36.