

**Sermon preached by Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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The One Who Watches Over You

Psalm 121

In case you haven't been outside much this week, it is hot. Summertime is on us. It really is, with recent temperatures rising above 100 degrees. It gets hot in the summer. It is also the time for vacations. Some from our congregation are away this morning enjoying their summer excursions; Pastor Neil is away today for his summer vacation. Most of us will go somewhere away from our homes – off to some favorite vacation spot or trips to visit friends and family; perhaps somewhere like the beach or the mountains to get some relief from the heat. We'll put up with the possibility of delays, bad weather, busy roads, and even lost luggage just so that we can get to where we want to go.

For those of you who plan to travel this summer, for a week or two (or just a weekend) Psalm 121 is for you. And it is for you if you've already gone somewhere. It has been dubbed the "Traveler's Psalm." That's because it is part of a special collection in the Book of Psalms called the "Songs of Ascents."

These songs were recited by Jewish pilgrims during Bible days as they made the difficult and treacherous trip to visit the Temple in Jerusalem. Travelers ascended from their homes in outlying areas in Israel up the hills to Jerusalem. During the trip, they might face fierce bandits, wild animals crouching around every bend in the road, and the hot desert climate. Travel in ancient Israel was serious, usually dangerous business.

As they made their journey to Jerusalem, these pilgrims would naturally wonder: "What happens if something goes wrong?" "Where can I find help if – when – I am in danger?" Those are the same kinds of questions we might ask. Psalm 121 reminded them – and us – that help comes from the Lord.

Our understanding of our situation is often distorted by what we do not see. Paul Tripp and Tim Lane in their book *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* (one I highly recommend) describe the need for imagination when we read the Bible. This sort of

"imagination is not the ability to dream up things that are not real; it is the ability see what is real but often unseen. . . Scriptures enlarge our imagination by helping us see things we don't normally see. The Scriptures increase our awareness of a God who is near, willing, and able to save.

This morning, I'd like us to use our godly imagination as we work through this psalm.

WE ARE TO LOOK TO GOD

The song begins with the question, "*I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?*"

It's understandable why hills or mountains would bring inspiration. They seem majestic, and perhaps even eternal. Often, they form the scenery of memory and imagination. Wonder and mystery arise and seem to beckon us to look at what lies beyond. As this thinking goes, when we connect with the solitude and beauty of the mountain, we will somehow find God in nature, quiet our souls, and find hope. But that is not the idea in this passage. In ancient Israel, the hills on the ascent to Jerusalem did not inspire such lofty and peaceful feelings.

These pilgrims saw the hills as a menace, a haunt of robbers and thieves. The approach to Jerusalem was along the steep Jericho Road – a bit of highway that shot up over three-quarters of a mile in elevation over a mere 20-mile stretch.

Travelers called it the “Ascent of Blood,” because of its crimson reputation as a thief’s haven. This steep craggy road with its prison-like ramparts was the unhappy setting for the robbery in Jesus’ “Parable of the Good Samaritan,” the place where murderous thieves concealed themselves and pounced on passers-by.

When our travelers lift their eyes to the hills, it was not for comfort, but in worry. Their prayer, “*Where does my help come from?*” may have been a cry from desperation and fear.

On the other hand, maybe their first impulse was to take refuge in the mountains. In ancient Israel and Judah, when the people turned from the Lord, they would erect stone or wooden idols on hilltops called “high places” so that they could worship substitute gods. They sought safety and security in someone or something other than the Creator. As the apostle Paul would later write to the Romans, “*They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator*” [Rom 1:25].

How often do we do that today? I don’t mean trusting in a carved statue like the pagans did. I mean looking for something other than God to provide security in your life. All of us want security; we hope that things will go well for us.

When something goes wrong, we may feel like we are in danger – not necessarily physical harm or injury, but at risk in not getting what we think we need. We often cry out for help from our own high places.

We depend on the things that we can control, we think that the things that are created will take care of us – our jobs and education, our good health, well-managed finances, or carefully sculpted reputations. We build up idols in our hearts, hoping they are powerful enough to actually provide for us.

Friends, when we take refuge in these things, we’ve crossed the line from using created things as stewards of God’s creation to letting those things use us. When we fear that our jobs or health or money or good names might be taken away, or that they will not be enough to make us feel secure and significant; when we react by worrying, grumbling, or complaining, these things have become our high places.

When the psalmist looked to the mountains, he remembered that his *help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth*. God is the Creator of everything! The psalmist recognizes that as Creator, He made the mountains through which he'll travel. He knows that God is sovereign, that as Creator, God permits and designs both our blessings and our problems.

GOD WATCHES OVER US

Now it is easy to uncover the dominant theme of the song because the Psalmist uses the same word over and over again. The Maker of heaven and earth keeps watch over us. In this short psalm, the word "watch" is used five times; actually six times because the word "keep" in verse seven is the same Hebrew word translated "watch" in the other verses. When you think about it, that's pretty comforting. God watches over us. Let's unpack this idea.

First, God watches over us in a way that guarantees our safe arrival at our journey's end. "*He will not let your foot slip. He who watches over you will neither slumber nor sleep.*" The picture is of a traveler going through the mountains, over a rocky pathway. A false step could send him into the gorge. This is not a simple stumble or trip, but a fall to the death.

If you've done some mountain hiking, you may have walked on trails that are only a yard or so wide, and there were places where a false step could send you over the edge. It can be a little treacherous if you are not careful.

But when we use our imagination, we see that this is a picture of life. Sometimes we're going uphill; we have an uphill journey with our finances, for example, or with our jobs or with our marriages or with our kids. Other times, we're going downhill and things are a little easier. We may slip and slide a little bit, and the gravel may roll under our feet. But Psalm 121 says that God's eyes are on His children, and He isn't going to let us go over the edge. He promises that we'll complete the journey.

We sometimes forget that when God saved us, He stamped His ownership on us and has a personal stake in bringing us all the way to heaven. God does not sit empty-headed, ignoring what goes on around him; He is always on duty.

He never "slumbers nor sleeps," but is always watching over us, always accomplishing His plan and purpose in our lives. Nothing happens without God's knowledge, design and approval. He is our Maker and He guarantees our safe arrival.

When someone asked Alexander the Great how he could sleep so soundly at night and not fear assassination, even though surrounded by death and danger on every side, he replied that Parmenio, his faithful guard, was always standing watch through the night. How wonderful to know that we have a Faithful Guard whose eyes are always watching out for us day and night.

Second, God watches over us to provide safety during the journey. "*The LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.*"

In the wilderness in Israel, it could become dangerously hot during the day and bitterly cold at night. The desert is a strange place, a place of extremes, and a place of discomfort and danger.

As pilgrims on a journey, protection from the elements was essential. The ancient travelers usually traveled at night to avoid the hot daytime sun, but they had two problems to overcome. They needed sufficient shade or covering so they could rest during the heat of the day.

They needed to know that they were safe from what they thought were the harmful effects of the moon. The ancients were superstitious and thought that the moon brought disease and insanity; we get the word “lunatic” from the word “lunar” referring to the moon.

When the psalmist put “sun” and “moon” together, he brought home the idea that everything in life is under God’s protection, both the real threats to our safety and the irrational fears that we often hold.

Third, God watches over our comings and goings: *“The LORD will keep you from all harm-- he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going.”*

God watches over our daily lives, our coming and going. That’s an allusion to going out to work in the fields and coming home at the end of the day. God will protect every aspect of our lives.

Do you ever feel that some of your troubles are too insignificant for God? Too petty and personal to gain the attention of the God of the universe? Does God care about your daily lives?

But our problems do gain the attention of God. He’s a roll-up-your-sleeves Creator who cares about the mundane stuff of our lives – families, relationships, our jobs, and our sports and what we do for fun, our hopes, and dreams, and disappointments, and heartaches. Nothing escapes His attention. Our Creator is in the business of carefully watching over us.

There are so many things that can happen to us, so many dangers, so many toils, and so many snares. There is the stuff that happens in our life’s journey, as we say just “part of life” – the forces of nature and the complexity of living and growing old in the 21st Century in an urban area like Washington, DC.

There are the things that other people do to us (intentionally or unintentionally) that may cause trouble. There are things we do to ourselves when we are foolish or disobeying the Lord. But Psalm 121 says that God watches over these travels – over the comings and goings – of His children.

Does that mean that Christians whose eyes are on the Lord – Christians who are in God’s will – will never have accidents? That’s right. Christians are never involved in accidents.

That doesn't mean Christians won't have things go wrong. Train wrecks in the course of life. Most of us know dedicated Christians who have been hurt, discouraged, or distracted through some kind of trouble. But not in an accident. There are no accidents for those whom God is over-watching. As A. W. Tozer puts it:

To the child of God, there is no such thing as accident. He travels an appointed way.... Accidents may indeed appear to befall him and misfortune stalk his way; but these evils will be so in appearance only and will seem evils only because we cannot read the secret script of God's hidden providence.

Use your imagination and know that your safety and security come from a God whose perspective on the mountains of life is bigger than yours.

God will see us through the journey; working all things together for the good according to His plan. He has our best interest at heart. The problem is not our safekeeping, but our willingness to believe that we are safe. We have to trust in God. His character, His promises and His perspective guarantee our safety.

“He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

CONCLUSION

When life gets scary and uncertain, we need to run to the Maker of Heaven and earth, the One who watches over us.

It is like the woman who was driving home when she noticed a huge 18-wheeler truck driving closely behind her. She tried to put distance between her and the truck, but as she sped up the truck remained close behind. In frustration, she left the freeway; yet the truck followed.

When she turned down a busy street, he kept following. She began to panic, fearing the worst. Finally, she turned into a gas station and jumped out of her car, crying out for help. The truck driver pulled into the station behind her, jumped out of the cab of his truck, and ran over to the woman's car.

He quickly opened the back door and pulled out a man hiding in the back seat. The woman was running from the wrong person. From his high vantage point, the trucker could see the would-be rapist when the woman could not. His chase was not to harm her but to save her!

How often do we run from God, fearing what He might do – when His plans are to rescue us from the hidden sins that endanger our lives? We should be encouraged by that promise – we don't really know what's out there for us, beyond this very moment. But we can remember that in life's scary uncertainties, the One who made us watches over us.

When you feel afraid or life at the moment does not seem clear, when uncertain, when those slippery uncertainties overwhelm you, where do you go for help? When fear creeps in like a bandit to steal away your joy and peace of mind, who do you call?

Our journey has difficulty – concerns that bear the street-worn scars of real life, tough obstacles, and painful heartaches. However, our Helper is real – He is the Creator who made and sustains the universe. Go to God when you need help.

Don't waste your time looking for help at all the wrong places. God's business is to keep us safe and bring us home. When life gets scary and uncertain, run to the Maker of Heaven and earth, the One who watches over you.