

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills— where does my help come from?

My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

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.

If you're writing a novel, you know that point of view, plot and characters are all integral aspects of your work.

But you also know that setting or sense of place cannot be ignored. It's critical.

Where does the story take place? As the novelist, you have to help the reader feel it, see it and experience it.

Consider where you grew up:

- near an ocean, large lake or major river,
- in a desert, prairie, deep forest,
- in sight of tall mountains,
- rolling hills and plains?

The sense of the place has left its mark on you.

It's the stuff of songs like:

James Taylor- In my mind I'm goin' to Carolina.

John Denver- Rocky Mountain High or Take me home country roads, to the place I belong.

The story of ancient Israel can't be told without mountains.

Israel's homeland was a hilly and mountainous place — a riot of hills in some areas. When the psalmist says, **"I lift up my eyes to the hills,"** he's seeing what every resident of that land sees.

Psalm 36.6 says of God, **"Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains."**

While hills were a constant factor of geography in ancient Israel, they weren't always welcome topographical features. In addition to being difficult to farm and requiring hard labor to move goods through, the hills were sometimes hideouts for bandits or sanctuaries for those running from justice. Recall that as a young man, David had to spend time in the hills to escape the clutches of the jealous King Saul, who wanted to kill him. And while in those hills, other men joined him.

1 Samuel 22: "Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him; and he became captain over them. Those who were with him numbered about four hundred".

Does that sound like a band of fellows you'd want to run into while you were in the hills tending sheep or simply passing through? Not likely!

It could be that at least for some Israelites, lifting their eyes to the hills sent shivers down their spines! That's why Jesus chose that setting for the parable of the Good Samaritan.

So perhaps the opening line of Psalm 121 could be paraphrased this way:

I'm surrounded by dangers from the hills. Where will I find help?

My help is from the Lord.

Some people love the mountains. They leave civilization behind, build off the grid and endure all of the difficulties and dangers of extreme elevation and weather in order to live on their own terms in a place they are inspired by.

Others physically can't deal with the elevation or lack of oxygen and might only admire mountains from a distance but never choose to live there.

For them the mountains present a slippery slope. That is shorthand for the idea that a small action will trigger a chain of events that will lead to a negative outcome. There was a tongue-in-cheek example of the slippery slope idea that aired in a DIRECTV commercial a few years ago. The narration went like this:

- When your cable company keeps you on hold, you get angry.
- When you get angry, you go blow off steam.
- When you go blow off steam, accidents happen.
- When accidents happen, you get an eye patch.
- When you get an eye patch, people think you're tough.
- When people think you're tough, people want to see how tough.
- And when people want to see how tough, you wake up in a roadside ditch.
- Don't wake up in a roadside ditch.
- Get rid of cable, and upgrade to DIRECTV.

Other examples of a slippery slope:

- If the speed limit on the interstate is increased from 70 to 80, drivers who already exceed the posted limit will go even faster, and if they drive faster,

it will lead to more accidents and more fatalities. So, we shouldn't increase the speed limit.

- If I smoke, my kids will see it and are more likely to start smoking themselves.
- If I let my temper get out of hand, I will end up hurting people I love.
- Regarding temptation, if I play with fire, I will get burned, and those around me will be collaterally damaged.
- If I follow every dream, I won't be able to make a living.

Jesus was faced with many slippery slopes:

- You can't forgive a cripple's sins ... who knows where that will lead?
- You can't heal on the Sabbath ... who knows where that will lead?
- You can't decline to condemn a woman with an adulterous past ... who knows where that will lead?
- You can't heal a Gentile ... who knows where that will lead?

Fear of the slippery slope may paralyze us in fear!

Many slippery slope concerns are based in fear, but consider again the words of the Psalmist-

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the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

Once the psalmist said that his help was from the Lord, he talked no more about the worrisome hills.

Rather, he talked about God as the one who stays awake so we can rest without fear.

He talked of God as one's **"keeper,"** using the Hebrew word **shāmar**, which means **"tending," "watching over" and "taking care of."**

Because of God's care, we need not live in fear of slippery slopes or any other terror. God is with us, even as we go in and out of our homes. God is with us, the psalmist said, **"from this time on and forevermore."**

There is a big difference between having and keeping. For instance, You might have a favorite sweater. It is your possession. However, you keep your dog; not merely a possession; but beloved, dear to you. Therefore, you watch over your dog not for your sake, but for his. You protect him from harm because if he suffers, it hurts you too.

Likewise, God does not merely have us. God keeps us. We are God's beloved, and immeasurably dear to God. We are not merely possessions in the eyes of the Lord, because if we suffer, it hurts God, too.

Does it come as a shock to you that God is your keeper?

- You balance you own checkbook and pay your own bills.
- You stay on top of your own medical appointments.
- You do your own shopping.

- You take personal responsibility for yourself and your loved ones.

So, in what way is God your keeper?

Romans 4:1-3

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

For what does the Scripture say?

“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

Abraham took care of business, every day, every way but his righteousness, his standing before God as his chosen and forgiven child, came as a result of believing in the Lord and his promises. God kept him in the faith.

John 3:1-3

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him,

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

Jesus answered him,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus took care of business, every day, every way but his righteousness, his standing before God as his chosen and forgiven child, came as a result of being born again, born from above by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

You see, this is the slipperiest of all slippery slopes!

Once we start climbing that hill of self-righteousness, we are just asking to end up in a roadside ditch somewhere.

Once we start up that slope of earning God's favor by the things we do or don't do we're likely to find ourselves filled with fear and paralyzed by it. How can we be sure we've ever done enough? How can we be certain that we can reach the top and be safe?

Look up to the cross and see the Savior there paying for your sins and the sins of the world.

Look up to the risen Lord as he ascends to the Father victorious over sin, death and devil, with us always as our keeper for all eternity.

Lift up your eyes to the Lord knowing that it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that you are in the faith and that God himself keeps you in the faith both now and forever more.