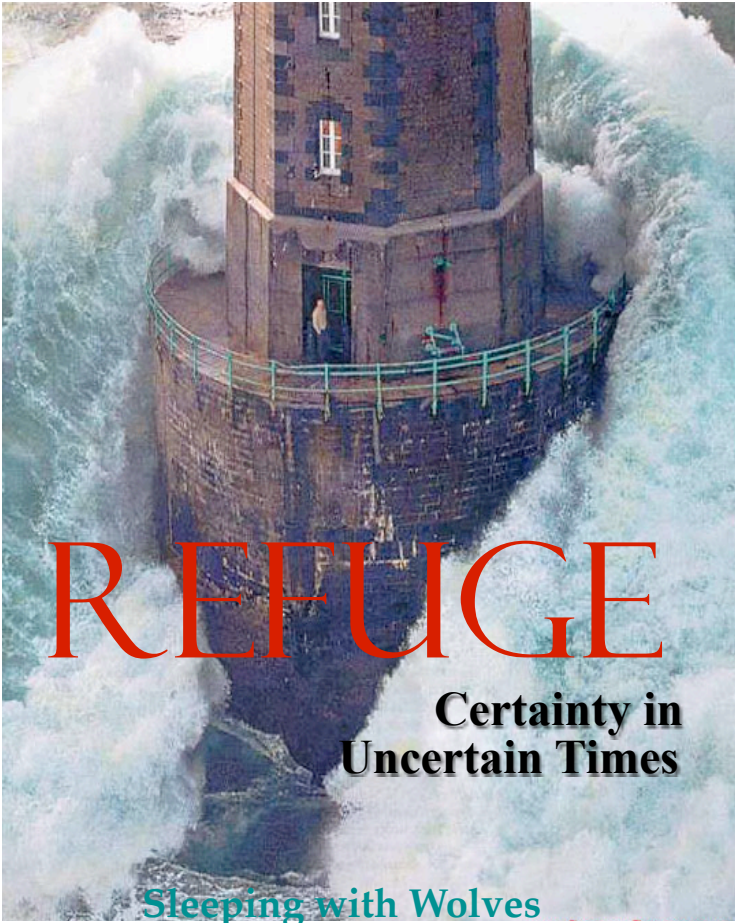


*The Covenant Pulpit*



**Psalm 121**

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You can hear it in the first notes of his glorious *Symphony Number Nine*. The strings of the orchestra create a haunting melody that pierces the soul with an exquisitely-painful loneliness.

I think that it is the most beautiful piece of music ever composed.

The composer was a Prodigal Son running from family and friends. In the throes of a midlife crises, he wanted to spread his wings in faraway America. So he sailed to New York City in the 1890's to bring his musical genius to a new audience. He landed a job as the Director of the National Conservatory of Music. Overnight, he became the darling of society's elite. But fame left him empty. He soon grew bored feeding the narcissistic appetites of his rich patrons. He began to long for the simple life of his beloved Bohemia.

Every night he would look across the waters of New York Harbor, desperate for home. He spent his summer vacations in a Czech village in Iowa. But that made him all the more homesick. Then he met an African-American baritone by the name of Harry Burleigh who sang a spiritual that black slaves had moaned as they labored in cotton fields down South—a song born out of lament for their lost homes in Africa and hope for a better home in heaven. That night, the lonely Czech composer took the words of that old Negro Spiritual to his apartment:

Going home, going home,  
I'm a going home.  
Quiet-like, some still day,  
I'm just going home.  
It's not far, just close by,  
Through an open door.  
Work all done, care laid by,  
Going to fear no more.

Mother's there, expecting me,  
Father's waiting too.  
Lots of folk gathered there,  
All the friends I knew.  
Nothing's lost, all's gain,  
No more fear or pain  
No more stumbling by the way,  
No more longing for the day,  
Going to roam no more.

Going home, going home,  
I'm just going home.  
It's not far, just close by,  
Through an open door.  
I am going home.....  
I'm just going home....

That night, Antonin Dvorak, the greatest of all the great Czech composers, took that old spiritual and began to turn it into his Symphony # 9—known to music lovers everywhere as “The New World Symphony.” I believe that it is among the most popular symphonies ever written because it stirs within each of us that most powerful yearning of all: the desire to go home—whether we are slaves a world away from our African villages, or Christian saints a universe away from heaven.

Shortly after he finished his New World Symphony, Antonin Dvorak packed his bags and went home to his beloved mountains of Bohemia.

C.S. Lewis said, “There is a deep loneliness within every person; an aching for that paradise lost by our first parents, and a longing for a paradise yet to come.” Herman Melville wrote in *Moby Dick*, “Life’s a voyage that’s homeward bound.” My favorite definition of home is that written by Robert Frost: “Home is a place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” I think we love Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son because we all want to believe that when we’ve wasted our lives we can still go home and find a Father who welcomes us back with unconditional love.

Everyone longs for home. I get choked up every time I hear the words of Janis Joplin’s rock classic, *Me and Bobby McGee*: “One day up near Salinas, Lord, I let him slip away. He’s looking for that home, and I hope he finds it.” That song was Janet Joplin’s tortured cry of loneliness. She destroyed herself with drugs, booze, and sex looking for a parent’s love she never had, and a home she could never find. The ancient Greek writer, Aristophanes, wrote, “Not going home is already like death.”

Maybe it’s our yearning for home that has made Psalm 121 one of the most beloved Psalms. We don’t know who wrote it, but we do know that it was someone going home. The Psalm is entitled, “A Song of Ascents.” There are fifteen of these “Songs of Ascent” in the Psalms. These were songs sung by Jewish pilgrims who were coming home to Jerusalem. The Holy City sat high up in the mountains of Judea. As the Jewish pilgrims ascended the steep mountains, they sang these songs. It was a dangerous pilgrimage for

most of them. Some had come from a thousand miles away for a once-in-lifetime visit to their spiritual home—across stormy oceans, burning deserts, and mountainous ravines where wild beasts roamed and predators robbed and killed. When they finally got close to Jerusalem, the most rugged and dangerous mountains were still ahead. These songs were written to give courage for tough walks and sleepless nights. Psalm 121 can be reduced to this takeaway:

**Because God always watches,  
we can walk anywhere.  
Because he never slumbers,  
we can sleep anytime.**

I remember the first time I saw Jerusalem. We had just come up from Jericho—from the lowest spot on planet earth into the high mountains of Israel. We traveled in an air-conditioned car on a modern highway in searing heat through some of the most rugged wilderness on planet earth. I couldn't imagine what it must have been like for ancient pilgrims to inch their way on foot up these dizzying heights in choking heat and dust.

I cannot describe the emotions we felt when we came to the summit, and there stretched before us was Jerusalem. We pulled over to the side of the road and wept. That was the closest I've ever felt to going home. I understood why Jerusalem has stirred the passions of spiritual pilgrims for 4,000 years. This was where Abraham walked, David built his palace, Solomon erected his temple, Jesus was crucified, and the Apostles preached. It was the birthplace of my faith and the home of my spiritual ancestors.

But this Psalm is bigger than coming home to Jerusalem. Those ancient Jews were scattered throughout the pagan world, living among the Gentiles. But they were never home in those foreign lands. Jerusalem was their home. And it wasn't until they made a pilgrimage to their spiritual birthplace that they felt like they were coming home. St. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:20, "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ." The old gospel hymn puts it this way: "This world is not my home; I'm just a passing through." We are all pilgrims on a journey to a higher place—a place much higher than the Old City. In Revelation 21:2, St. John wrote, "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband." That's our ultimate destination.

Life is a journey to a higher place. We are all going home. Dorothy was right in *The Wizard of Oz*: home is where the heart is. But, like those ancient

Jewish pilgrims, the journey home is long and dangerous. We will walk in places that will terrify us. We will spend sleepless nights listening to things that go bump in the dark. Predators will attack. St. Peter said that Satan will come like a roaring lion seeking to devour us. We will lose our way at times. The heat will sap our strength and the steep grade will cause us to slip and slide—and even backslide at times. Companions will desert us along the way. We will even go through the valley of the shadow of death in this *Pilgrim's Progress* to the Celestial City.

Like those ancient pilgrims, we need some “Songs of Ascent” to put steel in our soul and a spring in our step. Though the way is uncertain, our destination is certain. More importantly, the God who watches over us is certain. Psalm 121 speaks of four different challenges we will face on the journey home. But one statement repeats itself over and over again: “God watches over you.” This God always watches. Therefore we can walk anywhere. He never slumbers. Therefore, we can sleep anytime. Let’s look at the four promises of this song:

### **1. When our way gets steep, God gives us strength**

There are eight verses in this song, divided into four sections of two verses each. They are antiphonal. That means one group of pilgrims shouts out the first verse and the other group shouts back the second. Right away, we learn something significant: the journey home is too tough to go it alone. We need traveling companions who will stick together as a united church, encouraging each other along the way, sharing our struggles, praying for each other, giving each other a hand up, and even kicking one another in the pants sometimes. St. Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 5:17, “And we urge you brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, and carry the weak.”

Psalm 121 begins with an antiphonal interchange. The first group shouts out a question in verse one: “I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from?” The second group of pilgrims shouts back in verse two: “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” When we get distressed and discouraged, we need brothers and sisters to shout back, “Everything’s going to be okay.”

What’s the fear in verse one? “I lift up my eyes to the hills...” In the original Hebrew language, we could translate this the *holy* hills. Verse one is speaking of the hills around Jerusalem. The pilgrims are almost home. But there are still hills left to climb. If you are coming from the east, you will go up the Jericho Road from the lowest and hottest spot on planet earth. It is

one of the steepest inclines in the world. You will climb through ravines where loose rocks and pebbles can cause you to lose your balance and fall to your death. In the shadows of the rocks lurk predators.

But here's the worst part of all: you are almost home when you approach the holy hills. That means that you are worn out from the long and arduous journey. And now you face the steepest mountains yet. Sometimes the last part of life's journey is the hardest. John Maxwell did a study of the 400 leaders in the Scripture. Less than 12 of them finished well. Most bankrupted their faith in middle-age or older. The cumulative wear and tear of the battles takes its toll. We want to bail out of the marriage, drop out of the ministry, give up on the relationship, let go of the dream, and run away from the fight. Are you tired of the climb and ready to give up?

You cry out, "Where does my help come from?" In other words, who will get me up these last mountains to the Celestial City? The answer comes back in verse two: "My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." The Hebrew word for *Lord* could be translated, "My help comes from the Great *I AM*..." This is the God who always is. He never changes. In the words of Hebrews 13:8, he's the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is the Maker of heaven and earth. If he made those mountains, don't you think he can get you over them? The steep trail ahead of you is uncertain. Your strength is uncertain. But the Great *I AM* is the one certainty in uncertain times. His strength is greater than the steepness up ahead.

## **2. When our way grows dark, God guides our steps**

If the steep climb is tough, climbing in the dark is even worse. It's impossible to get over the mountains that surround Jerusalem in a single day. As it grows darker, it gets more dangerous. The pilgrim's cry goes up in verse three, "He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber." There is an antiphonal response from the others in verse four: "Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither sleep nor slumber." We especially need to encourage each other during the dark times. There are times in life when we can't see clearly. We poke through the dark with uncertainty. The future is black, and we are confused. We lay awake at night and wrestle with our imagination. We beg for understanding, but none comes. We honestly don't know what to do next. We are blinded by our grief, or paralyzed by life's mysteries. Those are dangerous times. We know that our foot can slip in the dark night of our soul, and the fall might be fatal. St. John of the Cross calls this "the dark night of the soul."

But we can know this: our God never slumbers. He never takes his eyes off us. Jesus said that he is so intent in his watching that he sees every sparrow that falls from a tree and numbers every hair on our head. How intense is his watching? Psalm 139:3 says that he even reads our thoughts. Psalm 139:15 tells us that he even watched us as we were being formed in our mothers' wombs. Because he watches over us, we can walk anywhere—even in the darkest night on the precipice of the scariest mountains. Because he never slumbers, we can sleep anytime, even when the wolves of our imagination are circling us with nightmares of fear and fright.

### **3. When our way gets hot, God provides our shade**

If the climb is steep, and the night is dangerously dark, then the heat of day saps our strength. In verse five the pilgrims cry out a word of encouragement to their fellow travelers: "The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand." Given new courage, the others shout back in verse six: "The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night." There is no sun hotter than the Palestinian sun. In the bowels of the earth around Jericho the temperatures can reach 120° Fahrenheit in the heat of day and plunge to below zero at night in the hills above. People die from sunstroke and thirst, or they go deliriously crazy. There are times when life heat up. The battle grows hot. Tempers get hot. Our sinful passions get dangerously hot. In the heat of the moment we say and do things that we regret for the rest of our lives. A woman confessed to Billy Sunday, "I have a terrible temper. When I get hot, I lose my mind and say things that are horrible. But my temper never gets out of control for more than a few minutes." The old evangelist replied, "Madam, a shotgun blast only lasts a second. But the damage it leaves behind lasts a lifetime."

But thank God!—verse five says again that the Lord watches over us. "The Lord is the shade at your right hand." He's always at our side. When things get hot, we need to run to him. He will cool us down. Do you blast away at the person who made you hot, or do you get away to the one who will take your temperature down? Verse six says that God will even protect us from the moon at night. We get our word *lunacy* from the old Latin word for moon—*Luna*. The night makes us crazy. We can't see things clearly. But when the moon comes out, it's even worse. The moon gives light to the dark night. Wolves prowl when the moon is out. In the light of the moon, predators look for prey. For pilgrims, huddled around their campfires, the howling of wolves at the moon, the rustling of leaves and snapping of twigs around them, can drive them crazy with fear. But God watches. He will

protect us from the wolves. We can calm down and keep our cool in the heat of the day or night, for God who watches over us is our shade.

#### 4. When our way gets dangerous, God sees us home

As pilgrims, our destination is certain. But the journey is never certain. Jesus said in Matthew 7:13&14,

“...For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

God designed the way home to go over steep mountains, through deep valley, along dizzying precipices during dark nights, in suffocating heat and shivering nights sleeping among wolves, and in times when we even despair of life itself. God could have made our way broad and easy. But that would not build our faith, or draw us close to him. Scared saints cry out to paralyzed pilgrims in verse seven, “The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life.” And with renewed confidence they cry back in verse eight, “The Lord will watch over your coming and going from now and forevermore.” Twice in that last round of antiphonal singing we see the theme of Psalm 121: “The Lord will watch over you...” There is our ultimate certainty in uncertain times. He is our refuge! When will he stop watching over us? The answer is never! He watches both our coming in and our going out. He watches us right now. And he watches us forevermore. The Psalmist covers the whole journey, from beginning to end. Because he watches us, we can walk anywhere. Because he never slumbers, we can sleep anytime.

All of us long to go home. But we would make a mistake if we thought that home was Jerusalem—either the Old City or the Celestial City. In Psalm 121 we see something profound. It is in the journey itself—and not in its ultimate destination—that we find our home. In our struggles we run to our Refuge and God. Embraced in the arms of our Heavenly Father, we are already home before we ever get home. Are you home yet? You are, if you are resting in the arms of the One who is taking you home!

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