

New Year's Eve/Day
December 31, 2004/January 1, 2005
St. Mark's Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI
Pastor Bill Heiges

Psalm 121 – *I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? 2 My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. 3 He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber 4 indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. 5 The LORD watches over you – the LORD is your shade at your right hand; 6 the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. 7 The LORD will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life; 8 the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.*

My dear fellow travelers on the journey through life,

I read a story just a couple of weeks ago that would strike terror in any parent's heart. A mother had left her baby in the care of a nanny while she left to run some errands for the day. She returned home briefly to pick up something she had forgotten. When she arrived home, she found her baby all alone abandoned by the nanny. The nanny had taken one of the woman's cars (without her permission) and left the baby sleeping all alone so she could do some shopping. I can certainly understand why that mother was horrified at first and later angry enough to press charges against the irresponsible nanny.

Few things matter as much to us as the care and safety of our babies and families. When it comes to leaving them in the care of another person, we want to know they will be closely and carefully watched. It's no different for God our Father. We are all his children through faith in Jesus (Gal 3:26), bought and brought to God by the blood of his Son. Our heavenly Father wants us to know that wherever we are in life, whatever we are facing, and no matter what we are going through:

GOD IS WATCHING OVER YOU!

Don't you think this is a hope-filled, comforting psalm? It certainly was for the Israelites who used to sing it. It has often been called the traveler's psalm. It is one of the Songs of Ascent the Israelites would sing as they made their way up to Jerusalem, to the temple, to worship at one of three major festivals all Jews who lived within a certain radius of Jerusalem were required to attend.

Jerusalem was built on a series of hills. The journey to Jerusalem was always uphill. Some of the roads were steep and rocky. They were also dangerous. Do you remember the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus taught? It begins, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead" (Lk10:30). That's why people traveled to and from Jerusalem in groups. As drew closer to Jerusalem they would sing

these Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134). Psalm 121 is one of the first songs. It speaks of God's protective care over us, something we desperately need in this day and age.

Would you agree these are pretty scary times we live in? This past year alone we've seen hurricanes hammer the coasts Florida. I managed to fly down there to give a presentation right after the first hurricane hit and right before the second one. We've seen more tornadoes tear up the Midwest and the south than ever before. Killer storms menacing the west, and who can forget the Tsunami that wiped out over 150,000 people in the Far East? Those are just natural disasters. We have terrorists on the loose all over the world, and, of course, Osama bin Laden still hasn't been captured. Our soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq face danger every day from insurgents. Yeah, it's a pretty scary world we live.

How do we face the future with stuff like this happening? With fear? Or with faith! We are told again and again in the Bible that we, the just, shall live by faith, not by sight. We don't have to fear the future. We don't even have to have the future all figured out. We know that the One who holds us in his hands is the same One who holds our futures, "*My times (my future) is in your hands, Lord*" (Ps 31:15). So, the first thing we learn in this psalm is:

1. **You Know Who To Turn To In Times Of Trouble**

You know whom you can count on. You know who you can trust to always be there, to always come through. "*I will 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*" (vv 1-2). Who are you going to call on? Where are you going to go? To the Lord who has promised, "*Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you will honor me*" (Ps 50:15).

We turn to the LORD, the Savior God, who has a proven track record of delivering his people again and again in times of need. I can speak from personal experience on the truth of God's promise. Notice the name LORD is in all capital letters. That is the special Old Testament name for God by which he chose to be known. It reminded the Israelites of his saving love for them. In Ex 19:4 God reminded them, "*You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.*" Before God gave his people the 10 Commandments, he told them, "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery*" (Ex 20:2). God gave a beautiful definition of what the name LORD means when he appeared to Moses. He said, "*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin*" (Ex 34:6-7). That is the God we turn to, the God we trust.

This is the LORD who sent his Son on a search and destroy the enemy mission, and a search and rescue the lost mission. Those missions were successful. Jesus encountered our enemy, Satan and his evil forces all throughout his ministry. Satan dogged Jesus' footsteps and engaged him in guerilla warfare every chance he had. Each and every time Jesus successfully defeated him. A last-ditch attack on Satan's part took place when Jesus was nailed to the cross. That is when Jesus decisively destroyed our enemy, did away

with sin, and paid for our freedom with his life. And three days later when Jesus rose to life, he successfully conquered our last great enemy – death – and secured for us eternal life and a sure home in heaven. Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus reached out to lost and hopeless sinners and won their hearts, giving them forgiveness and hope, their lives meaning, and a position of dignity, honor and acceptance with God. Jesus said that he came to seek and to save that which was lost. He successfully completed the mission His Father sent him on. All mankind was rescued through Jesus. This is a LORD we can trust in to deliver us from all our enemies!

Not only that, but our LORD is the Maker of heaven and earth. That means his power is unlimited. As Israelites made their way up to Jerusalem they would lift up their eyes to the surrounding hills and mountains. These hills were full of secret grottos that contained altars to the idolatrous gods of the baals. Jer 3:23 states, *“Our worship of idols and our religious orgies on the hills and mountains are completely false. Only in the LORD our God will Israel ever find salvation.”* We lift our eyes above the hills to the One who made them. This is the God who says to us, *“Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me” (Ps 50:15).* Think of it! Our LORD is the God who held the oceans in the palm of his hand. He set the stars in the sky with the span of his hand. He is called the *“Lord, your Helper”* for a reason. Is any trouble you face too big, any problem too tough, any obstacle too great for the LORD our God to handle?

There is a story in the Old Testament that illustrates this. In 2 Kings 3:4-27 we see that a coalition of forces that was going after the army of Moab was faced with a seemingly impossible situation. They had to cross the Desert of Edom, but had no water for themselves or their animals. They turned to the prophet Elisha for help. He told them to dig ditches in the desert floor and then told them something that defied human logic, *“This is what the LORD says: Make this valley full of ditches. For this is what the LORD says: you will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink.”* And then he made the point that applies to us, *“This is an easy thing in the eyes of the LORD.”* Any difficulty you find yourself in, any trouble you are facing, any obstacle in front of you – it is an easy thing in the eyes of the LORD to take care of.

Yes, you and I know who to turn to in times of trouble. We know who can rescue us and keep us safe. It is not Pres. Bush, nor would it have been John Kerry. It is not Homeland Security, not the CIA or the FBI. Not even our Armed Forces, as much as we respect them for what they do. We don't turn to the Secretary of State to negotiate peace for us. We turn to the LORD, because:

2. **You Know What He Will Do (For You)**

We already know what he has done for us in Jesus. He has rescued and saved us forever. He has forgiven us and given us the gift of eternal life. We have eternal security because of him. But God also watches over us in this life. Five times he tells us in this Psalm that God watches over us. He uses several different pictures or images to describe how God watches over us.

- A. **He won't let your foot slip (vs. 3).** When you get to steep and rocky and dangerous paths in life, God will be there to keep safe from falling. When you get tired and weary and feel like you can't make another step, God will be there to lift you up. He is described in the book of Jude 24, *"To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy –"*.
- B. **He won't slumber or sleep on the job (vs. 4).** In other words God is watching over you 24/7 365 days a year. He never takes a break or a nap. He never lets his guard down. Even the best of guards have moments when their mind starts to wander. Not God. His eyes are always on you; his ears are always open to your cries for help (Psalm 34). He promises to always "be there" for you. *"A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all"* (Ps 34:19). Isn't that comforting to know?
- C. **The Lord shades us (protects us) from harm (vs. 5-6).** He provides shade and relief from any influence that would leave us scorched or parched. His relief is refreshing and renewing. My son Brent emailed me one day from Iraq telling me that the temperature that day was 139 degrees, 127 degrees in the shade. It's hard to survive, let alone work in those kinds of conditions. God says that the moon will not harm you by night. Nighttime in when the predators come out to prey on the weak and the helpless. I think we sometimes forget that we have a very real enemy who is bent on destroying us. Jesus warned us about Satan's mission. He said (Jn 10:10), *"The thief (Satan) comes only to steal, kill and destroy."* That is Satan's goal. He wants to steal your faith, kill your soul and destroy your chances of ever getting to heaven. Fortunately for us, God sent Jesus who tells us in the second half of that verse, *"but I have come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly."* He is the loving Shepherd who leads us to green pastures and besides still waters, and stands as a protective guard over us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Pretty awesome God we have!
- D. **The LORD will keep you from all harm (vs. 7).** He watches over and preserves your life (and soul). In Ps 91:10-11 God states, *"No harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."* I can't begin to tell you how comforting this psalm (and psalm 121) was, as I prayed it over my son Brent the whole time he was in Iraq. I don't know all that he went through. He doesn't share everything with me, but I do know there were plenty of nights where there were mortar attacks and he would have to leave his tent for the safety of a bunker. I just pictured in my mind, believed and confessed what this psalm says. I knew that God's angels were watching over him.

Some people have troubles with this Psalm. They wonder why God allows evil to happen to good people. Do you want my honest, straightforward answer? I don't know. Sometimes we find out in this lifetime, like in the case of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph's brothers hated him and wanted to kill him. Instead they sold him as a slave and pretended he was killed. Joseph was taken to Egypt and worked as a slave in an Egyptian captain's house. He was falsely accused of assaulting the captain's wife and thrown into prison. It seemed like things couldn't possibly get

worse for him. But God was engineering all those circumstances to put Joseph in a position where he would later be promoted to second in command over the whole land of Egypt. Later, during a famine, his brothers came to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph revealed himself to them and brought his whole family down to Egypt where he could care and provide for them. When his father died, Joseph's brothers were afraid that he would seek revenge on them. Joseph gave them a unique and very mature perspective on why God allowed all those bad things to happen to him. He said, *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children."* And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them" (Gen 50:19-21).

Of course, there are bad things that happen to good people in this life and we will have to wait till we get to heaven to find out why. That was the case with Job. He lost everything in this life, his possessions, his children, even his health. God never answered the question "why". He simply asserted that he is God and he is in control over everything that happens to us in this life. This much we do know: evil does not originate with God, but comes from the devil. God's love for you is eternal. God's care for you is constant. We may not have all our questions answered in this life. We simply put our simple, childlike faith in Jesus, who told us truthfully, *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"* (Jn 16:33).

I think there are at least two things this Psalm teaches us to do in times of trouble.

- 1) We are told to lift up our eyes. Too often we go through life with our eyes downcast. We are not to dwell downward on our problems and troubles, but upward on our solution. Would you agree there are times we are so focused on our problems we miss the solutions God has for us? That comes as no surprise. Sometimes our problems are so painful we can't think of anything else. It's exactly at moments like that we need to do what the writer to Hebrews suggests, *"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame"* (He 12:2). We know Christ has the answers to all of our problems. He is the answer. He has already met, faced and carried all our problems, weaknesses, infirmities, sorrows and diseases, as well as our sins on the cross. He has overcome them and done away with them forever. That's why we lift up our eyes to Jesus and the cross.
- 2) The second thing we learn to do is speak faith, not fear. Not only do we tend to fix our eyes on our problems, we also tend to talk about our problems instead of our solutions. We magnify our problems instead of magnifying our God. We speak fear, not faith - just the opposite of what we need to be doing. In Rev. 12 we are told the devil is the great accuser of our brothers. He points out our weaknesses, our problems, our past sins and failures. He uses guilt against us. He makes us feel like worms, like

we are beyond God's hope and help. His strategy is very effective. Just look at all the Christians who mostly talk about their problems, their mistakes, and their failures. Very seldom do they ever mention God or praise him for the victories he brings us. Do you want to know how the early Christians overcame this strategy of Satan's? We are told, "*They overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb [Christ] and by the word of their testimony*" (Rev 12:11). They knew Christ was their solution. They plead the blood of Jesus, which covers over us, washes us clean of all sin and protects us from any accusations Satan or anyone else can make. We are innocent of all past sins, including our mistakes and failures, because the blood of Jesus paid for them. The word of our testimony is simply speaking or confessing the word of God. When faced with a problem or obstacle that is greater than we are, we don't speak it. We speak what God's Word says. We speak faith, not fear. That's what the apostle Paul did when he was in prison facing death. Near the end of the last letter he ever wrote, he confidently stated, "*The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom*" (2 Ti 4:18).

Vs. 8, "*The LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.*" Wherever you go, whatever you do, God goes before you, he goes with you, and he follows after you. You can trust him to watch over you and protect you. "*Because he loves me,*" says the LORD, "*I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation*" (Ps 91:14-16). Your sins are gone. Your guilt is removed. Eternal life is yours in Christ. In the meantime, in this life, wherever you go, you can walk confidently in faith with perfect security, because you know GOD IS WATCHING OVER YOU! Amen.