

BEYOND THOSE HILLS

"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 life; the Lord will watch over our coming and going both now and forevermore."

Ever seen one of those pictures or paintings where the eyes are always looking at you wherever you are in the room? You sit on the sofa and it is looking at you. Move over to the love seat and it is still looking at you. You lean against the wall and it is still looking at you. My Aunt Connie had a painting like that. At first, it was amusing, then a little creepy. We usually don't like it when people are watching us all the time. Some call it stalking.

But then again, there are times when we want someone to watch over us. Would you feel better if no police were on duty at night or you call the fire department and all you get is a recorded message, "Sorry, gone home for the night. Leave your name and phone number and we will get back to you first thing in the morning?"

Psalm 121 is a favorite psalm and for good reason. It assures us that the Lord is keeping a constant eye on us, and it is not stalking. Psalm 121 is a perfect psalm as we leave one year behind and prepare for a new one. It encourages to look beyond the hills. The Lord is watching over us and he will get us beyond those hills.

I. The Lord is watching over us.

How old should a child be before you can leave him or her home alone for an evening? I am sure it varies from family to family and it depends on the maturity of the child. But until that age, parents keep their children under 24 hour surveillance. If the parents have to leave, they get a babysitter. Otherwise, parents watch over their children day and night. Even when children are old enough to be alone at home for a while, parents keep checking up on them.

How old should you or I be before the Lord no longer has to watch over us? Thank God, never. He is our Father and we are his children and the Lord assures us that he is watching us 24/7. He never gets a babysitter. ***"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 life; the Lord will watch over our coming and going both now and forevermore."*** This psalm is one of the psalms of ascent. That means it was sung by Old Testament pilgrims as they climbed the hills and mountains leading up to Jerusalem. Of the eight verses of this psalm, the Hebrew word translated watch or keep is used six times. It is an interesting word. It doesn't mean to watch something like you or I watching a football game. It is the same word used for the watchman of some town or fortress who keeps constant vigilance for any criminals or invaders. This is how the Lord watches over us.

You can understand why this psalm is a favorite among railroad workers or pilots and anyone who must travel by land, sea or air. It is referred to as the traveler's psalm. This psalm is a prayer for a safe journey. ***"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 traveler sees many dangers. I remember driving through the Rocky Mountains many times, the thousand foot drop offs, the switch backs, signs warning of falling rocks. Then throw in snow and ice and winds, and it can become quite a white knuckled trip. Or imagine a merchant sailor and the storms and waves they must face at sea. It is almost two months since the 45th anniversary of the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald. Travelers may encounter danger. No wonder they pray this psalm.

But traveling through life is dangerous, too. We face obstacles and dangers in life that seem like treacherous hills and mountains with narrow roads and thousand foot drop offs. We look around at the hills and wonder, "Who is going to help us get past those hills?" ***"My help comes from the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth."*** The Lord who created the heavens and the earth still controls those things and he is powerful enough to help. ***"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."*** Any slip while climbing a hill could lead to injury. The Lord is watching our every step. Likewise, too much sun can lead to illness, harm to the skin, and even cause death. That's why shade is good as it offers protection from the sun's harmful rays. The Lord will be that shade as he gives us comfort and rest.

Using these pictures the Lord assures us that he will guard and protect us all the way. But he isn't just getting us past those mountains. He has a destination for a place, a place he guarantees we will reach. Where are we going? Look beyond the hills. The Lord is going to make sure we get home in heaven.

III. The Lord will lead us over the hills.

This Psalm has special meaning to us tonight as we look back on the year that is about to pass. The picture in our psalm is a traveler standing in a small valley looking at the hills that surround him. Before him are hills he must still climb, but behind him are hills that he had crossed.

What kind of hills have you crossed this year? Everyone here tonight knows of someone who has died this past year. Maybe it was only an acquaintance, or maybe it was someone near and dear. When someone close dies, someone we depend on, there is fear that says, "How can I go on? Why should I go on?" Yet the Lord promises, **"Never will I leave; never will I forsake you."** It is a struggle. The days and weeks and months go by. Often without noticing it, we will find ourselves crossing those mountains because the Lord has been there to strengthen and support us the whole way.

What hills do you see behind you? Was it moving to another grade level in school? Was it a financial obstacle? What health issue plagued you this past year? What are they? How did you get through them? Those hills are behind us thanks to the Lord. Been to a play? Usually all you see are the actors, but behind the curtain are several times more people—property masters, costumers, directors and assistant directors, stage hands—all who make the play possible. That is how the Lord works. He intervenes directly or he works behind the curtains, behind the medications and job market and doctors and friends, to take care of us and protect us. **"I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from?"** We made it this far because of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Look back at those hills. You will also see hills and mountains of unfinished tasks and good intentions we never carried out. Behind us are mountains of our own failings and shortcomings, sins we committed against God, and hurts we have inflicted on our loved ones. Like the apostle Paul we look back and confess, **"For what I do is not the good I want to do; no the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. . . When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. . . Who will rescue me from this body of death?"** Paul saw evil in his life. It frustrated him. As a follower of Christ he truly wanted to do only that which was good, but he so often failed. And Paul reminds us what this means. Every sin and every failure to do good last year was an insurmountable mountain that should have forever kept us from going any closer to God or heaven.

And yet, we look back and notice that those mountains and hills are behind us. Why? Jesus Christ. Through his death and resurrection, he has leveled those mountains flat to the ground so they exist no more. Because of him we can see sins that has been wiped clean by the blood of Jesus. Behind us is shining the sun God's grace in Christ.

All those hills are behind us. But there are more hills ahead. And there are hills we are on right now. I don't think the pandemic will end tomorrow. What other hills surround us? Some are small, some are high and lofty and intimidating. What is ahead? Will we have prosperity or disaster, sickness or health, success or failure, happy relationships or pain? Only the Lord knows. But remember what the Scripture says, **"The righteous shall live by faith."** In other words, we live and walk in faith, trusting that even though we don't know what the future will hold for us, we know who holds the future and God will get us over those hills. Walking by faith is the blind man who walks with confidence because a loved one is leading him by the arm. Trust the Lord. Let him lead you with his promises like in our text: **"He will not let your foot slip," "He who watches over you will neither slumber nor sleep," "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," "The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore."**

When we approach the foot of each hill, we may not realize how God will do it, but he will get us across it. And then one day we will see no more hills as the Lord safely leads us across the last hill known as death. Even death is not an obstacle as we follow Jesus through the grave to heaven. Then the journey is over. Then the danger is past. We will be home.

This is the confidence this psalm gives us. We are confident that the sins of the past are forgiven. We are confident that the hills ahead will not keep us prevent us from going to heaven. We are confident our feet will never slip. Whatever lies ahead, remember this: the Lord will get us through. So don't look at the mountains. Look beyond them. INJ Amen.