

Psalm 121 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

Amen

Today I'm going to talk about Psalm 121 and it may helpful to have the copy of the psalm in your hand to refer to as we go along.

Before I start there is something you need to know. In the BCP, and your copy is from the BCP, verse 1 ends with a full stop, and is therefore a statement.

All modern Bibles however finish with a question mark and is therefore a question not a statement. Bearing in mind there were no punctuation marks in ancient Hebrew, modern theologians have decided, from the text, that verse 1 is a question and I am treating it as such.

Many commentators of psalm 121 have connected psalm 121 with life's journey of faith in God, which the psalmist has described in parables using everyday situations, of his day, that a traveller may encounter on any journey, much like Jesus did when speaking in parables to the crowds.

Verse 1 reads, "I lift my eyes up to the hills"; "from where is my help to come"? For those of us who are avid watchers of time team will know that Bronze Age people and Iron Age people built their houses inside earth work enclosures on top of hills.

Now since we are talking of a psalm written probably in the Bronze age, we can visualise the sort of scenery that the psalmist was seeing. There were many very good reasons why those ancient peoples built their houses in fortifications on top of hills.

It was easy to defend against an enemy, they could see approaching danger, and it was also out of the way of malaria carrying mosquitoes, which were prevalent in many countries at that time and may have included ours.

The psalmist who was walking through a valley has now realised the danger that he was in from marauding bandits.

Some of the passes in the Middle East between the mountains or hills were quite narrow, isolated and with many bends where bandits and thieves could wait in ambush in among the rocks.

And our traveller was looking to the hills for help, he was probably thinking of the security he would gain being inside a fortification with other people around, but then he realised that the fort was to defend the people from people like him, namely strangers, and he was beginning to think that perhaps if he climbed up to the top of the hill the gate keeper may not let him in.

It was a desperate man who then wrote, "From where is my help to come", I can't rely on the people in the fort they may not let me in, indeed they may think me an enemy and try to kill me, but I can't stay here because there are too many bandits in this area; what am I to do!

He must have thought that his situation was hopeless, he couldn't stay where he was for fear of bandits and he was frightened of the people in the fort.

But then in verse 2, the psalmist answers his own question when he wrote, “My help comes from the Lord; the maker of heaven and earth”.

The psalmist has now realised that when all else fails God can always be relied on to help; because the person who made heaven and earth can clearly do anything, and looking after one lonely traveller for God would be easy.

You see prior to that our traveller was looking to other people, to earthly things for help, and people are still doing that today because they either do not know God or they ignore him.

Charles Causley wrote a poem in 1682 about people who ignore God or who had forgotten that he is here waiting to hear from us.

Charles Causley wrote:-

I am the great sun, but you do not see me,  
I am your husband but you turn away.

I am the captive, but you will not free me,  
I am the captain you will not obey.

I am the truth, but you will not believe me,  
I am the city where you will not stay.

I am your wife, your child, but you will leave me,  
I am that God to whom you will not pray.

I am your council, but you will not hear me,  
I am the love whom you will betray.

I am the victor, but you will not cheer me,  
I am the holy dove whom you will slay.

I am your life but you will not name me,  
seal up your soul with tears, and never blame me.

We must all learn to turn to God in prayer and for guidance, and not to ignore God or even betray him by denying him in our every day lives.

You see God wants us to involve him in our ordinary lives, as Jesus said at the end of Matthews gospel, “I will be with you until the end of the age”, and he said that because he wanted us to know that he is always there and that we can always turn to him for guidance or help.

We like our traveller must have confidence in the Lord, and our traveller reassures us of God's infinite love and care he has for everyone when he writes in the following verses.

Verse 3 reads, “He will not suffer your foot to stumble, he who watches over you will not sleep”.

When I was a boy my mother used to say to me when I woke from a night mare, go back to bed and talk about it to Jesus.

You see my mother knew that God can be contacted at any time, and that's the lesson I learnt at a very young age.

The psalmist at verse 4 then broadens it out by saying that not only does he look after individuals he also looks after nations as well.

In verse 5 the psalmist wants us to know that God doesn't delegate the task of looking after us, he does it himself, The psalmist is confirming that God is indeed a loving Father to us all.

The second part of verse 5 reads, “The Lord is your shade at your right hand”. The psalmist here is using a visual aid of a bronze age warrior which would be well known to his audience.

Picture a Bronze age soldier fully armed; his shield is in his left hand defending his left side. His right hand, although holding a sword for attack, gives no protection from arrows, so the psalmist says God will defend your right hand side, so now the Bronze Age soldier is now fully protected.

You may take that with a pinch of salt if you wish, but I like it; the important thing to know is that God will defend us from Satan's snares if we turn to him for help, and Satan knows where we are vulnerable, and God knows where we need most help.

Verse 6 is partly understandable in that the sun of course can undoubtedly kill people, and in ancient times when there was no factor 7 sun cream people would be very cautious before they went out in the heat of the sun.

How the moon could have an effect on you is slightly more problematic, but possibly there is reference here to the belief in times past, of the harmful influence of the moon's light, a belief still remembered in the word lunacy.

Verse 7 reads, “The Lord shall keep you from all evil”; for me this is the most profound verse in the psalm, because this verse is all embracing and includes everything that Satan can throw at us if we only turn to the Lord.

There are no exceptions to God's protection of us, so much so that God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, sacrificed himself on the cross at Calvary for our ultimate protection.

And now, as we are told, we must do our part which of course is to have faith in our protection through Christ's sacrifice on the cross; however it is also through faith that it becomes clear that there is more that we must do.

We are all sinners, and if we want to stay in a relationship with God then we must be truly repentant of sin.

True repentance is about our attitude to sin, where we are actively trying not to do it again, and where we are grief stricken by it rather than indifferent to it.

And of course it is in true repentance that we are released from the burden of the sin, but above all it's where we are also putting our faith into practice and completing our part in the saving grace of God.

The second part of verse 7 “It is he who will keep your soul”.

While of course the psalmist is right in writing that, however we who live after the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ will know that our knowledge has changed, we now know that through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross that God preserves both body and soul; Jesus is saviour of both body and soul.

Which it is why my hope and my prayer is that one day I shall meet up again with those I love and who have died.

Verse 8 for me sums up the whole of the psalm and speaks of God's steadfast and unchanging love who we can rely on at all times, and who will always be there for us when we turn to him in faith.

But I think the psalmist is going further by encouraging us not only to turn to God in faith, but to put ourselves under his protection and commit ourselves to his providential care.

Finally, although I get great joy from singing psalms, and psalms were indeed written to be sung. I too cannot fully appreciate them by singing them.

I have to go home get my Bible down and read it several times and then I begin to understand the wealth, the depth, and the beauty of the psalms which speak of God and of his wonderful infinite love for us.

Amen