

LIFT UP YOUR EYES
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August 31, 2008

Psalm 121

INTRODUCTION: We do not know when this Psalm was written, or by whom it was written. Some scholars believe it was written after the exile to Babylon—perhaps as the pilgrims were coming back under the edict of Cyrus. If that is the case then this psalm was written in the plains of Mesopotamia, and the psalmist was thinking about the mountains round about Jerusalem. Others believe this psalm, called a psalm of ascent, was written as the pilgrims were going up to Jerusalem to worship, quite before the exile. In either case the psalm refers to the mountains of Judea, specifically, the mountains around the Holy City of Jerusalem. To the worshippers, these mountains were holy just as the city was holy. John Durham writes in the *Broadman Bible Commentary*: “The reason for his look to the mountains is well known to any who have ever seen mountains, but the specific reference is to the hills of Zion, where Yahweh’s presence was known specially to dwell.” Durham goes on to say, “His question (from whence cometh my help?) means “which way, how soon, just how shall I look for hope?”” Obviously, then, the mountains were not the real focus of this man’s desire, as important as those special mountains were, as holy as they were to the devout Jewish worshipper, as deeply embedded as they were into the memory of the exiles.

But being a ‘mountain boy’ myself, as was Jesus of Nazareth, and most of Israel’s worshippers, I know just how mountains can bring us to a sense of awe that leads us to God. When we look up and see that grandeur, or, as our great hymn says, when we “look down from awesome mountain grandeur,” we cannot help but think of our Great God who made all the mountains of the world. Well I remember that after I became a Christian, during my summers between semesters, I would trek to the top of the highest point in my community, the ‘high rocks’ and look down upon the tiny houses and the ribbon of highway that traversed from Bosco to Garrett, Kentucky, and I would praise God and thank Him for my (now strip-mined) ‘high rocks’ and for the world that went on in the deep valleys below as if I had never been there. No wonder the Jews believed that Yahweh dwelt on Mt. Sinai; no wonder their hearts, and pulses, and anxieties, and joys, were quickened as they approached Yahweh’s City, Jerusalem. It meant for them celebration, connection to God, forgiveness of sin, and even Life itself.

The Psalmist cried, “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills.” Today, in this place of worship, where many have met God before, where sins have been forgiven, and men have been touched by more than an angel, by the God of Almighty Himself, I am asking you, will you to LIFT UP YOUR EYES?

I. LIFT UP YOUR EYES, THERE’S HELP BEYOND THE HILLS.

You have come here today because you love this church, and Caney Mountain also, on whose side she rests. As a great man said, we have been to the top of the mountain, and with awe we have looked down upon this green valley. We have had our

sunrise services there; moreover many of us have stood on the high rocks overlooking Alice Lloyd College, and enjoyed the grandeur those great rocks allowed us to have. But as important as these mountains are to us, as homesick as we are for them when exiled in Dayton, Detroit, or Chicago, we know that they are here to point us to God.

There is help beyond the hills—the psalmist knew this. He looked at the mountains, and not satisfied with a material world, however beautiful and awesome and wonderful it was, he knew where to find real satisfaction, real help, real beauty. So he looked at his own emptiness, even in the face of this ‘everlasting’ mountain, and saw as our own James Still must have seen when he wrote Rivers of Earth, that these hills are just ‘rivers of earth,’ impermanent, and temporary. They are not everlasting after all!

Isaiah the Prophet saw this impermanence. In Isa 40:26, he writes: “Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who created these things, that bringeth out their host by number; he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for he is strong in power, not one faileth.” In Isaiah 6, the prophet himself had the great grief of having his king die. When Isaiah entered the Temple to pray and grieve, he looked up and saw the Lord. This great God of his was ‘high and lifted up’ so he had to lift up his eyes to behold the King of Glory. Listen to Isaiah again (51:6) “Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be for ever, and my deliverance will never be ended.”

Mountains stand in magnificence, silent in the fog and snow and wind and rain. But what we don’t see is that they are being weathered away by the elements. Their end will come and they will be no more. They will ‘vanish like smoke. They will wear out like shoes. But our God is eternal. And those who look to Him find their permanence in Him.

Ps 123:1 “To thee I lift up my eyes, O thou who art enthroned in the heavens!”

Ps 141:8 “But my eyes are toward thee, O Lord God; in thee I seek refuge; leave me not defenseless!”

Today the call of God to you is LIFT UP YOUR EYES BEYOND EVEN THE WONDERS OF THIS PERISHING WORLD, and you will cry with old Simeon, “MINE EYES HAVE SEEN THY SALVATION!” Said the knowing psalmist, “My help cometh from the Lord which made heaven and earth.” There is help beyond the hills, and that help is not in the hills themselves. “We are so attached to the earth, and yet we are incapable of holding onto it.” —Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Cancer Ward

“We are pilgrims, not settlers; this earth is our inn, not our home.”

—J. H. Vincent

II. LIFT UP YOUR EYES AND YOU WILL SEE, THERE IS ALSO HELP BEYOND HUMANITY.

We are entering the grand political season of electing a president and his running mate. These political figures publicly extol their greatness, give long speeches about their virtues, categorize their numerous accomplishments, and tell the world how wonderful their party is, and then, as if it has to be like that, cast huge stones, and roll great boulders at the other for their inadequacy. The truth of the matter is that neither candidate can possibly deliver what each of them says he will deliver. The truth of the

matter is also that each of them has both good and bad qualities. And, lest we forget, the truth is also that they are poor weak human beings who wear skin suits like ours, who eat bread to live, and whose bones will be around when their smiles have vanished a thousand years. Why should we give such credibility to man, whoever that man is. The psalmist looked for help beyond humanity. Listen to his words, PSA 121:3 He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. 121:4 Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The reference is to poor, sleeping, snoring, humanity. Our psalmist is simply saying what was said by another psalmist in (Psa 60:11 KJV and Psa 108:12), “Give us help from trouble: for vain is the help of man.” Man needs sleep. If he fails to sleep for very long, he loses energy, focus, and direction. In many cases men are asleep when great trouble comes. Our nation slept through the years before “9/11.” The government slept, as did the many people who thought nothing could happen to them—and then Katrina! We have a proclivity to sleep even when danger is near. While Jesus wrestled with the devil, Peter, James and John slept. Jesus had warned them to stay awake, to watch and pray. But, like us, they miserably failed..

The problem is we are all sinners, and that is compounded by the fact that we are all mortals. We sin and we die. Mark Twain was probably right when he said, “Everyone is a moon and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.” The psalmist knew that “human flesh would fail him, he dared not trust his own.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “When it is dark enough, men see the stars.” But I must add, not unless we look up, and not if the streetlights of worldliness are too bright for us to see them. But, if we will look up we will find that what we could not get from humanity we can find in God. That is why St. Augustine would say, “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee.” That was also the reason the great philosopher Augustine wrote about ‘disordered’ love. His view was that all of us are looking for love and fulfillment in things and in human beings, and they cannot be found there. The wife expects the husband to be the perfect husband and to fill the spiritual void in her life; and the husband has the same expectation from the wife he wants to be the perfect woman who can fill the void that only God can fill. These disordered expectations often leave us with bankrupt spirits and vacuous souls.

But thanks be to God, He will not leave us or forsake us. He neither slumbers or sleeps. He is always watching over His own. As the wise grandmother told the little boy who wondered if God always watched him to catch him doing something bad, “Why, honey, He’s like your grandmother, He loves you so much He can’t take His eyes off you.” If His eye is on the sparrow, then I know He watches me.

A little boy was sitting on the park bench next to a kindly grandfatherly man. The man noticed the boy had a nice watch on his arm and he complimented him and asked if the watch told the time. The little boy looked puzzled, then said to him, “Why, no sir, this watch don’t tell time. You’ve got to look at it to see what time it is.” Like Isaiah, we must Look Up to See the Glory of God.

Our God is not man that He should lie, not man that He should die, and not man that He must sleep. The Keil-Zelitzsch Commentary says, “He does not fall into slumber from weariness, and His life is not an alternate waking and sleeping. The eyes of His providence are ever open over Israel.” Indeed, and they are ‘ever open’ to all who know and Love the Lord, and trust in His power.

LIFT UP YOUR EYES AND LOOK—THERE IS HELP BEYOND HUMANITY.

III. FINALLY THERE IS HELP BEYOND HELL.

We see in this psalm, first, the hell of the pilgrimage they had to make. 121:5 The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand. 121:6 The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

The Middle East has areas that are extremely inhospitable to humans. This psalmist knew the hellish power of the sirocco winds relentless blowing, of the desert heat that burnt the brain and made the world mirage, and of the strange moon that seemed to drive men mad. He sees no relief for man—the vicious sun smites him throughout the day, and the moon smites him throughout the night. The *Interpreter's Bible* says, "The ancients' fear of 'sunstroke' was based on the observation of obvious harmful effects of the sun's rays; their fear of 'moonstroke' arose from their belief in a correlation between the activity of certain diseases (e.g., epilepsy and fevers) and the moon's phases." The IB also gives the Greek word for moonstroke, Seleniazesthai, found in Matt. 4:24; and 17:15), adding these words, "The popular mind, of course, assumed that a demon in the sun or the moon was the agent of the evil."

Evidently, the people in the days of the psalmist, like some people today, saw the evil of disease and the problems of life as coming from demons. One wonders if they were not correct in many of their assessments. I read this fitting illustration recently: A young lawyer, an atheist, boasted that he was going west to locate some place where there were no churches, no Sunday schools, and no Bibles. Before the year was over, he wrote to a classmate, a young minister, begging him to come out and start a church. "Be sure to bring plenty of Bibles," he urged. "I have become convinced that a place without Christians, Sunday schools, churches, or Bibles is too much like hell for any living man to stay in."

Needless to say many find their own lives a 'living hell.' They look for help and find no one to help them; for they are looking in the wrong places. They will experience a living hell until they find Him who will be their 'shade' hiding them from the burning suns of this world's desert, shielding them from the sinister moon of the mind's lunacies, and keeping them in all the circumstances of their life's journey. That is true. That is fact. But they must trust! **They must lift up their eyes and see Jesus!**

But there is not just the hell that one sometimes lives in, and dies to escape. There is that literal hell that for many will be their final destination. I read this story: A dying girl said to her father, "Father, why didn't you tell me there was such a place?" "What place?" "A hell!" "Jenny," he said, "there is no such place. God is merciful. There will be no future suffering." She said, "I know better! I'm slipping into eternity this moment. I am lost! Why did you not tell me there was such a place?"

I believe that God is a loving and merciful God, but Jesus taught us that hell is a reality, 'where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.' I put the words of Jesus above the words of men, and even above the compassion of compassionate men, for no one was more compassionate than Jesus.

A minister once preached a sermon on the last judgment. On the next day some thoughtless men agreed that one of their number should go to him, and, if possible, draw

him into a discussion. He went accordingly, and began the conversation, saying, "I believe there is a small dispute between you and me, and I thought that I would call this morning and try to settle it." "Ah!" said the good man, "what is it?" "Why," he replied, "you say that the punishment of the impenitent will be eternal, and I do not think it will." "Oh, if that is all," he answered, "there is no dispute between you and me. If you turn to Matthew 25:46, you will find that the dispute is between you and the Lord Jesus Christ, and I would advise you to go immediately and settle it with Him."

There is a hell, a real hell, BUT LIFT UP YOUR EYES there is help beyond hell. Look at the words of this psalm that tell us who God is—vs 2 He is our Helper & Creator; vs 3 He is our Keeper; vs 4 He is His people's Keeper; vs.5 He is our Shade in this sun-smiting and moon-smiting world; vs. 7 He is our Preserver from all evil—He preserves our soul; vs 8 He preserves our going out and our coming in from this time forth and even forevermore.

If this is true, how can we doubt that God will Keep us? How can we fear that we will fall from His power? How can we believe that we can ever be lost when He preserves us from all evil, forevermore?

I may not do well in this life. I may make a thousand failures and a million mistakes; but my future, as my past and my present, is in the hands of my God. Is yours? LIFT UP YOUR EYES and you shall see the King in his beauty: Isa 33:17 "Your eyes shall see the king in his beauty; they will behold a land that stretches afar."

I love the verse in 2 Kings 6:17, "Then Elisha prayed, and said, 'O Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see' So the lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha."

But better still this verse, Mt 17:8 "And when they lifted their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only."

I am grateful that God guards His people with angels; but I am ten times—nay, ten million times more grateful that I came to His Son Jesus, met Him at Calvary, and His bloody and broken sacrifice paid the debt for my sin and redeemed my soul.

LIFT UP YOUR EYES AND LOOK UPON THE LAMB OF GOD WHO ALONE TAKES AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD!