

EYES LIFTED UP

Flo and I were in Layton, Utah last week visiting our daughter, Darcy, and our 22 month old grandson. We were helping them get settled into a new home near Hill Air Force base where she and her husband, Aaron, will be residing for the next 3 or 4 years. Until we arrived, she had been there by herself while Aaron wrapped up his command duties in Montana where he had been stationed the past 3 years. When we arrived, it started snowing pretty heavily, but the next morning was fairly clear. So, I got up a little early and went down stairs to look out the bay window of their home. The previous day, all of the low lying snow clouds had hidden from view a sight that was nothing less than awe-inspiring. When I looked out that window, it seemed like the Rocky Mountains were springing up right out of her back yard. It is truly one of the very beautiful parts of God's earthly creation, and it made me think of what the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 121. He said: ¹ "I lift my eyes toward the mountains. Where will my help come from? ² My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth." Psalm 121:1-2 (CSB Bible)

Sometimes we read these Psalms without thinking about the purpose for which they were written. This particular Psalm is one of a group of psalms known as the *Pilgrim Psalms*. The people of Israel would make three pilgrimages to Jerusalem each year to participate in the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the spring, the Feast of Weeks in the early summer, and the Feast of Tabernacles in the fall.¹ Those coming down from the Judean hill country had a very dangerous trip to make. The roadways and paths were rough and difficult to travel, and it was not at all hard to stumble and fall only to be seriously injured. And there were robbers and murderers that waited in the shadows for

any unwary traveler. And so as they traveled, these pilgrims would sing the words of Psalm 121 to remind them of God's greatness and His faith in protecting His people. Those first two verses were sung by the leader of a group of travelers and the rest of Psalm 121 was the answer of the Holy Spirit that all of the people sang in unison.²

Back in Utah, I lifted my eyes up to the Rocky Mountains. But when the faithful Israelites "lifted their eyes unto the mountains," they were focusing on the highlands upon which the City of Jerusalem was located. For it was there that they recognized God's presence in the Temple built by Solomon. And viewing the beauty of nature all around, this Psalm would remind them that if God could create the vastness of the earth, sky and stars beyond, then He was certainly more than capable of protecting them. But, this isn't merely an ancient psalm with no application to us today. Rather, we too can look around and see the wonders of creation all around us. The Rockies in Utah are impressive—that's for sure—but, Utah has no advantage over Virginia as far as the beauties of nature go. And as spring approaches with the greenness of the trees, the blooming of the flowers and the wonderful sites of nature all around, we are reminded that God is our Creator as well, and that we also can rely upon Him during our life's journey.³

Now when the leader of the group of pilgrims reminded those traveling with him to lift their eyes toward God, what was the response of the Holy Spirit that the people sang together? Well, it was one of the most encouraging things that they could have recited on a dangerous journey because it went like this:
³ He will not allow your foot to slip; your Protector will not slumber. ⁴ Indeed, the Protector of Israel does not slumber or sleep. ⁵ The LORD protects you; the

LORD is a shelter right by your side. Psalm 121:3-5 (CSB Bible) Now when the pagans conceived of their gods, they would have never sang out anything like that. They could not conceive of a god who did not sleep. And when the things of life turned bad, they were always afraid that maybe their gods would not wake up in time to rescue them in their hour of need. But, that was not the case for the Israelites. The God of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. He never gets tired of meeting the needs of His people. He is always there to help⁴, and so the Psalmist elsewhere would declare: **“I sought the LORD, and He answered me and rescued me from all my fears.”** Psalm 34:4 (CSB Bible)

And notice this as well. When we read these verses about someone who is always watchful, it is not all that apparent to us, but the ancient Israelites would have quickly recognized a certain definite image that the Psalmist was expressing in these verses. It is the image of a very watchful, caring and unsleeping Shepherd who takes great pains to assure that His flock will be led successfully through the rocky paths of life.⁵ If you are one of the sheep belonging to this faithful Shepherd, He would never allow you to slip into a ravine and remain there un-rescued. He would never leave you in the valley of the shadow of death. Rather, His rod and His staff, they would always be there to comfort you and give you strength—as another Psalm assures us.⁶

And while they would have recognized this Shepherd-like description, since they were so familiar with the occupations of shepherds in their agrarian society, we have an advantage over them in seeing something even more wonderful. We know that this Shepherd is, indeed, unsleeping, because we can recognize this Good Shepherd as Jesus Christ—the One who was resurrected from the sleep of death. Jesus said: ¹¹ **“I am the good shepherd. The good**

shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹⁴ . . . I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.” John 10:11-15 (ESV) And where is this Good Shepherd when these trying times descend upon us? Is He way out there somewhere, far away sitting upon His throne and inaccessible to us? No, not at all. Quite the contrary. The Psalmist assures us that this Shepherd, Jesus Christ, protects you because He is always *“right by your side.”*

Verses 6, 7 and 8 go on to tell us: ⁶ The sun will not strike you by day or the moon by night. ⁷ The LORD will protect you from all harm; he will protect your life. ⁸ The LORD will protect your coming and going both now and forever.

Psalm 121:6-8 (CSB Bible) This reference to the sun and moon is hard for us to understand unless we consider the climate in Palestine. In that part of the Middle East, the sun can be scorching hot during the day, but when night fall comes the temperatures can plummet and, unless you are properly dressed, you could feel like you are going to freeze to death. But, if we trust in God and view Him as our Protector, then it does not matter—day or night—He will sustain us. And He does this even when those trials may switch radically from one thing to another, just as the sweltering heat of an Israeli day changes to the freezing cold of night.⁷ Furthermore, the reference to *“sun”* and *“moon”* has a temporal meaning with reference to the Jewish calendar. The *“sun”* refers to days—one by one, day after day, sunrise and sunset. And the *“moon”* refers to months because the Israelites used a lunar calendar by which months were determined by the cycles of the moon. In other words, day after day, month after month, year after year, God is with us and protects us, *“both now and forever”* more.

Now does God do this in just some *general* way? Or is He concerned about the *daily details* of your life? Well, this Psalm leaves no doubt about this. It assures us that God “*will protect your coming and going.*” So what does that phrase mean—He protects *your coming and going*? It refers to the *little things*, even the *ordinary things*, that you go about doing in every-day-life. God is interested in everything that you do—all the little details of life, not just your major endeavors. Orthodox Jews have a wonderful way of expressing this reality. They take small metal boxes and put little portions of Scripture in them and then attach these boxes to the right-hand doorposts of their homes. In fact, these boxes are called *mezuzas* which means exactly that—“*doorpost.*” Every time they go in or out of their homes, they reverently touch the box to remind them all through the day—whether they are in their houses or outside, God is always with them⁸ and His Word snatches them from the door of death.⁹

And so, now consider something else in verses 7 and 8 that brings us to the very nub of the matter. These verses assure us that the Lord will protect us “*from all harm.*” More specifically, God will “*protect your life.*” But, when we say that God “*protects*” us, ultimately what are we talking about? Exactly what does God “*protect*”? Warren Wiersbe explains it this way: “*This does not mean that obedient believers never find themselves in difficulty or danger, or that they will never feel physical and emotional pain. The things that God permits to happen to us in His will may hurt us, but they will not harm us. David had many experiences that brought heartache and even threatened his life, but the Lord enabled him to turn those seeming tragedies into beautiful psalms that encourage us today. The Lord at our right hand provides the [protection] that we need.*”¹⁰ Now what does Warren Wiersbe mean by that—God permits

things “to happen to us that *may hurt us, but they will not harm us?*” Well, verses 7 and 8 are quite clear on this. God *protects your life both now and forever more*. What does this mean for you and me?

We can begin to see the answer to this in what might otherwise appear to be a very tragic story told by a Ugandan bishop, named Festo Kivengere. Back in 1973, the Ugandan government had captured three rebels that were condemned to be executed by a firing squad. These doomed men were from the bishop’s diocese so he felt, at least, some responsibility in attending to their spiritual needs before they were killed. So the bishop made his way through a crowd of about 3,000 people who had gathered to see the firing squad carry out the three death sentences. He contacted the military commander in charge and, to his surprise, was granted permission to minister to the men’s spiritual needs before they were shot. The condemned men were unloaded from a pickup truck and stood there in shackles as the firing squad awaited their orders to finish them off. As the bishop walked toward the men they were facing in the opposite direction, so he could not see their faces. He was wondering what to say to them. He asked himself, “*How do you give the Gospel to doomed men who are probably seething with rage?*” All of a sudden, the three men turned around and faced him. What he saw took him completely by surprise. This is how he described it: “*Their faces were all alight with an unmistakable glow and radiance. Before we could say anything, one of them burst out: ‘Bishop, thank you for coming! I wanted to tell you. The day I was arrested, in my prison cell, I asked the Lord Jesus to come into my heart. He came in and forgave me all my sins! Heaven is now open, and there is nothing between me and my God! Please tell my wife and children that I am going to be with Jesus. Ask them to accept*

Him into their lives as I did.’ The other two men told similar stories, excitedly raising their hands which rattled their handcuffs . . . The three faced the firing squad standing close together. They looked toward the people and began to wave, handcuffs and all. The people waved back. Then shots were fired, and the three were with Jesus. We stood in front of them, our own hearts throbbing with joy, mingled with tears. It was a day never to be forgotten. Though dead, the men spoke loudly to [all of the people of our district] and beyond, so that there was an upsurge of life in Christ, which challenges death and defeats it.”¹¹

Now a non-Christian would not appreciate what went on in this story. A non-Christian might even claim that God failed to protect these three executed men. But, a non-Christian would not understand that when God says that He will provide His people with shelter from harm and protect their life both now and forever more, He is talking about our life in the here and now, as well as our eternal life. Many of those people standing in the crowd watching the firing squad execute those three prisoners, did not realize that those prisoners were actually set free by those bullets, while their executioners remained captive to a world that never looks beyond this one. When Jesus quoted Isaiah to say that He had come to set the prisoners free¹², He was speaking specifically about the ones who die knowing Him as Savior—for they are the ones who are truly protected because they are granted eternal life forever more in the Kingdom of Heaven. That’s why Warren Wiersbe could proclaim that while we may be “*hurt*” in this life by all kinds of suffering, grief and trials, God will never allow us to be “*harmed*” but rather preserves us eternally for a life with Him. Adapting the words of Margaret Clarkson, we might put it this way: “*Pain is pain and sorrow is sorrow. It limits. It impoverishes. It isolates. It restrains. It works*

devastation deep within the personality. It hurts in a thousand different ways. There is nothing good about it. But, the gift that God gives with it is the richest the human spirit can know—the gift of eternal life with Him.”¹³

On my way traveling up here, on clear mornings, I can lift my eyes up to the Blue Ridge Mountains. I am sure that, at times, you can too. But when you do that, ask yourself like the Psalmist did: *“From whence comes my strength?”* And then know with absolute certainty: *“Your strength comes from the Lord!”* In the pilgrimage of life, whatever journey that you may be on, in all your comings and goings, God is your protector too and is careful to watch over all of your affairs, both now and forever more.¹⁴ Often trials will happen during our pilgrimages that bring things that we would not choose to go through if we had a choice. Quite naturally, we’d want to turn away and head in a different direction. But this Psalm is not pointing in that direction—it is pointing in the only direction from which our hope derives. It is pointing upward, high above the mountains of this life, to God. And when we, as believers, focus in that direction, we come to realize that life is a gift from God—the Giver, Protector and Sustainer of life. The maker of heaven and earth is neither too great to care, nor are we, His children, too insignificant to go unnoticed, for the eye of the Good Shepherd is always upon us and never slumbers or sleeps. Know this during your difficulties, your suffering, your grief. And lift up your eyes beyond the hills, beyond the mountains, and trust in Him during all of our trials—day after day, month after month, year after year.¹⁵

Let us pray.

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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor
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¹ David Barker, “‘The Lord Watches over You’: A Pilgrimage Reading of Psalm 121,” – *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152, no. 606 (Apr), WORDsearch CROSS e-book: 164.

² William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: A Thorough, Yet Easy-to-Read Bible Commentary That Turns Complicated Theology Into Practical Understanding*, ed. Arthur Farstad, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 749.

³ Warren Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary – Be Exultant (Psalms 90-150)*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2003), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 335.

⁴ Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised – Psalms*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 895.

⁵ David Barker, “‘The Lord Watches over You’: A Pilgrimage Reading of Psalm 121,” – *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152, no. 606 (Apr), WORDsearch CROSS e-book: 175.

⁶ Psalm 23:4 (ESV) Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

⁷ Warren Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary – Be Exultant (Psalms 90-150)*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2003), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 337.

⁸ Warren Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary – Be Exultant (Psalms 90-150)*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2003), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 337.

⁹ Psalm 107:20 (NLT2) He sent out His word and healed them, snatching them from the door of death.

¹⁰ Warren Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary – Be Exultant (Psalms 90-150)*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2003), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 336.

¹¹ Ray Stamps, Los Gatos, California. Leadership, Vol. 6, no. 1. PreachingToday.com.

¹² Luke 4:18 (NIV) The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has . . . sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed.

¹³ Adapted from Margaret Clarkson in “The Banner” (Nov. 19, 1984), Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 18. <https://www.preachingtoday.com>.

¹⁴ Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised – Psalms*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 896.

¹⁵ David Barker, “‘The Lord Watches over You’: A Pilgrimage Reading of Psalm 121,” – *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152, no. 606 (Apr. 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book: 180-181.