

Psalm 12, St Luke's Modbury, 240929

"I lift up my eyes to the hills: but where shall I find help?"

These opening words of Psalm 121 are laced with anxiety. Picture a youngish man about to set off for Jerusalem from his village somewhere in Israel. If it's the first time he has made this journey he'll be anxious because he's heard the stories, he's anticipating hardship and possibly danger, but he's not sure precisely what to expect, he's anxious because he doesn't know what this journey will mean for him, and maybe he's anxious for his family as well. On the other hand, if he's made the journey before he's anxious because he does know what to expect. He's seen people slip and fall on hillside paths, he's crossed arid valleys, risking the heat of the day and the dangers of the night, and all the time he's aware of the threat posed by thieves and wild animals.

Now, this scenario may seem a long way from our own life context, but I suggest to you that most of us, at one time or another, have found ourselves asking similar anxiety-laden questions. After all, by and large, we're old enough to know that life's journey is unpredictable. You know how it is, things can seem to be going along very nicely and then, in an instant everything can change – the future which seemed assured is so no longer, instead it holds uncertainty and perhaps threat. If we don't know this from our own experience, we would all know others whose lives have been changed, in a moment, perhaps through injury, perhaps through grief, perhaps through a frightening medical diagnosis. The truth is that most of us will experience this kind of shock, at some stage or other, if we haven't already. And the question is: how will we handle both the anxiety that comes with these threats, and the life changes they might bring upon us. And, as I'm sure you're aware these life challenges can also challenge our faith – and, on the other hand, they can also be an opportunity for growth in faith. Faith and life are completely intertwined, what affects our lives affects our faith, and what affects our faith affects our lives.

Psalm 121 is one of fifteen Psalms – Psalms 120 to 134 – which have the title 'A Song of Ascent'. At some time, these Psalms were grouped together to form a kind of hymnbook used by pilgrims as they journeyed, from their hometowns and villages to Jerusalem, for the three key festivals of the Jewish Year. They were called 'Songs of

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Ascent' in the first place because Jerusalem was the highest city in the country and getting there from anywhere in Israel involved some difficult walking through the hills of Judea. But these Psalms also speak of a spiritual journey, an ascent towards a closer relationship with God, which many pilgrims experienced whilst on their way to Jerusalem. In much the same way as the physical journey this spiritual ascent involved dealing with and overcoming opposition, hardship, anxiety, criticism and self-doubt as well as, at times, celebrating moments of triumph and joy. The pilgrims recorded these moments in their songs, and so these songs became known as 'Songs of Pilgrimage' and as such they continue to speak to us today, as we undertake the pilgrimage of the Christian life. Some of the psalms clearly use the journey experience as way of thinking about the life of faith. Others simply capture the psychological or emotional aspects of moments on the journey – the anxiety, the despair and the joy - and their raw honesty can bring encouragement and comfort to us as we travel our own, sometimes challenging faith journeys. Ps 121 speaks, in particular, into the anxieties we might experience as we contemplate a major life challenge.

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For the pilgrim in OT times, the Judean hills represented both threat and temptation. Threat because these hills offered plenty of hiding places for murderous gangs of thieves and for wild animals, as well as the dangers of steep and often slippery paths. Temptation arises because the high places – the tops of the hills – were where pagan deities were worshipped - and remnants of these pagan beliefs remained in the society of the time – as they do in our own society. The temptation, then, was for the pilgrims to try to ensure his safety by putting their trust in these other gods. It's a temptation, I think, which still exists for us today. So, here's something to think about: Which modern gods do Australians, Christians included sometimes, tend to look to for security on the journey of life?

Now, in our Psalm, it seems as though the pilgrim takes some time to think these things through, and then he comes up with an answer. In verse 2 he responds to the anxieties

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and temptations expressed in his initial question – and his answer conveys assurance in place of anxiety and faith in place of temptation:

My help comes from the LORD: who has made heaven and earth.

You'll notice that, in the text, the word LORD is in block capitals. This indicates that here the personal name of God – the name YHWH – is being used - and it's used throughout this Psalm. In the Jewish scriptures the four letters which make up the name YHWH are there in the Hebrew text, but Jewish readers never pronounce the divine name – instead they use the Greek word 'adonai' – which simply means 'Lord'. Our English bibles follow this tradition by using the word 'LORD' in block capitals instead of the name YHWH. Now, the reason I've laboured this, is that by using God's personal name, the pilgrim is emphasising his trust in the God whose love and faithfulness he has come to know personally – and it is this personal knowledge of God, as his creator and redeemer, that gives him the assurance of God's love and protection as he begins his journey.

Nothing focusses the mind quite like a good crisis! It seems to me that the journey he had to make forced a crisis of faith on to our pilgrim. As he contemplated what might be ahead, he had to decide where he would put his trust. He thinks it through, reflecting on the goodness and faithfulness of God to him and to the people of Israel, and on the empty promises of false gods – and he knows, with that sure knowledge of the heart, where he will find the help he needs.

In many ways the remainder of the Psalm might be seen as an outworking of the thought process which led the pilgrim to his triumphal affirmation of faith in verse 2. If you look at the psalm you'll see that the remaining verses are coupled together through linked words, one thought leading to another, and there's a steady building of faith from v3 through to the end. So the psalm continues:

3 He will not suffer your foot to stumble: and he who watches over you will not sleep.

4 Behold, he who has charge over Israel: neither slumbers nor sleeps!

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There's a sideswipe here at the pagan deities – the false gods – to whom the pilgrim was initially tempted to look. He recognises that YHWH - maker of heaven and earth - is in charge of creation, not some local god of the rocks and paths who might cause mischief by causing feet to slip. Of course, he knows that he might stumble – the paths were steep and rough – but he also knows that YHWH will not cause him to stumble. One of the pagan deities worshipped in the high places had a reputation for falling asleep, and it was the job of the priests of that cult to wake him, by making a great noise – on payment of a fee. So verse 3 is just out and out sarcasm, and verse 4 piles it on – it's close to contemptuous: 'Behold! He who keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps!'

The thought of YHWH as the keeper or guardian of his people is expanded in verses 5 and 6 – and continues through the psalm.

5 The LORD himself is your keeper: the LORD is your defence upon your right hand;

6 The sun shall not strike you by day: nor shall the moon by night.

The pilgrim has come know and trust in God as his 'right hand man' – the saying has its origins in the protection given to a warrior by the man who stood to his right – one's left was protected by the shield worn on the left arm – but the right side could be exposed. With God at his right hand the pilgrim is protected from actual threat (represented by the sun) and from spiritual threat (represented by the moon).

Then comes a final, triumphant, all-encompassing statement of faith. Again the thought of the Lord as the one who keeps safe his people is emphasised. Verse 7 reads literally:

7 The LORD will keep you from all evil: it is he who will keep your life.

8 The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in: from this time forward for evermore.

Our pilgrim knows, as we do, that bad things happen to good people. But along with this he also knows that it would be out of character for the God whom he has come to know and trust, to abandon his people to evil, and so in an affirmation of faith he declares that this will not happen, 'The LORD (he affirms) will keep you from all evil'. And while the

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psalmist cannot foresee exactly what the Lord's keeping of his people will involve, or how it will come about, the logic of his faith declares that God's keeping of his people must be 'for evermore'.

Our own experience of God in the Lord Jesus Christ allows us a deeper perspective on the psalm. On the night before his execution, Jesus tells an anxiety ridden group of disciples, 'Let not your hearts be troubled . . . "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you know^[d] my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." In the Lord Jesus Christ, God offers to us a deeper, more personal, trust relationship than was possible for the psalmist. And if the psalmist couldn't see how God's keeping of his people would be for evermore, we can look to the promise of Jesus, 'I am the resurrection and the life, those who trust in me, though they die, yet shall they live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.' It's a promise which is, of course, underpinned by his own resurrection from the dead.

All of us, sooner or later, will face some kind of difficult journey as part of our life pilgrimage, which is also our pilgrimage of faith. And while we may not use these words we may well ask 'Where shall I find help?' Ps 121, this song of pilgrimage, points us to God's answer, and to its fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ.

