

Psalm 121

This Psalm is broken into two parts:

- Part 1, is verse 1
- Part 2, is verses 2-8

And if I was to try to summarise the Psalm in one sentence, it'd read something like this:
Man looks up the mountain, but God watches over the man.

Man looks up to the mountain

Verse 1 is a desperate plea for help. We often read it in a very twee way, knowing that the rest of the Psalm is there to answer the writer's question. But imagine it wasn't, just read the plea on its own.

It's not very likely that the Psalmist needed some extra energy to climb a physical mountain, he instead took the rich visual language of creation to help explain the scale of his plight. And whatever was in front of his mind, to the Psalmist it felt like a challenge of mountainous proportions. Something that he felt unable to conquer and defeat. Something that loomed over him, intimidated him, threatened him and that was not going to budge. This "mountain" was impossible to climb without help.

We don't know who wrote this Psalm. It may well have been David, and if it was, we can look around scripture to easily see what kinds of issues in his life were problems of mountainous proportions. Perhaps most obviously would be David's weakness in sexual temptation.

We know that the incident with Bathsheba was not a one off, Psalm 51:5 says "*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*"... this tells us that the issue at the heart of David's indiscretion with Bathsheba sat with him for a long time. For us, we may suffer like David, perhaps with sexual sin, or perhaps another addiction. Many watching in the room, or at home, will understand how mountainous any addiction, or habitual sin can feel. Completely unconquerable, threatening, looming.

But there are many other things that could have been on the Psalmists mind when he wrote about his mountain:

- **Finances** can be a mountainous problem, either with debt building up like a mountain, spending going out of control, or materialism and needing the next best thing, never satisfied or content with what we have.
- **Health**, maybe there's a long term or recurring health challenge, or a preoccupation with worry over bad health that doesn't exist.
- **Mental health, or depression**, which often seems mountainous and never ending. Those who have suffered with this know exactly how big and difficult this particular mountain might feel

- **Guilt** from past misdemeanours, words spoken, actions undertaken for which we are ashamed, and we can't seem to shift the memory of them.
- **Desperate need for approval**, and the despair when it's not given
- **Fear...** all consuming phobias, fear of the future, fear of failure or missing out.
- **Loneliness**, and how a lack of companionship can feel so totally overwhelming
- **Grieving and loss**, missing a dear loved one can feel so dark, and so hard to 'get over'... maybe something inside us doesn't really want to either.

Our own personal mountain could be any of these and more, or maybe a combination of all of them! One thing is true for sure, *we all know what our mountain is*. It's impossible to ignore, and we simply can't help but look at it and feel overwhelmed.

Where on Earth are we going to get the help we need to conquer our mountain?
Verse 2 tells us, nowhere on earth!

God watches over the man

But the great promise of this Psalm is reflected in the majority of it. 1 verse sets out the challenge (man looks at the mountain), and 7 verses the answer (God watches the man).

Firstly, the mountain observer answers his own question in verse 2:
"My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth."

The mountain watcher changes perspective.

From our point of view, the mountain will always be huge, impenetrable, unconquerable and threatening, because the truth is, compared to us and from our point of view, *it is*. That doesn't change. I've lost count of the hill walks I've dragged my family on, where every time we think we've reached the top, we just discover there's a new peak looming behind. Our heart sinks as we realise there always seems to be more to climb! The mountain seems endless.

But the Psalmist quickly shifts perspective away from his point of view, and towards God's. A new perspective.

Help comes from Yahweh... the covenant-keeping God. We can rely on His promises 100%, they are not vague or indistinct, they are clear and true. The LORD is the divine authority, sovereign ruler, God of all. When we seek Him for help, we are not seeking wise advice and counsel from a peer who has the same perspective as us, but from God whose perspective is very different. He is God Almighty - The Maker of Heaven and Earth. Not just the One who walks with us (although He does), nor just the One who made the mountains, but the One who made Heaven and Earth. All things are in His control and sit under His rule. Even our mountains.

When we struggle, or we counsel a friend who is struggling, glib platitudes saying simply "it'll all be fine, don't worry, hang in there" etc. are not really very loving or helpful. Because they

try to reduce the size of the mountain compared to us. We should not try to do that, rather we need to focus on the infinitely greater power and love of our Sovereign Lord, maker of Heaven and Earth. *The mountain is only smaller, when it is viewed from God, The Maker of Heaven and Earth's perspective.*

This is not a unique point of view from this Psalmist:

- When Hezekiah was under siege, he first prayed:
“Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth.”
(Isaiah 37:16)
- When Peter and John were released from prison, under threat to not speak the gospel, the believers gathered and prayed:
“... ‘Sovereign Lord,’ they said, ‘you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them...’”
(Acts 4:24)

And there are tonnes of similar prayers, songs and poems, scattered throughout scripture, where the primary focus of the pleas of God's people goes out the 'Maker of Heaven and Earth'.

It's all about shifting perspective from the large and threatening mountain, to the infinitely larger, more powerful and more loving God Almighty.

We look up to the mountains and they appear enormous. But they are nothing compared to the greatness and love of our LORD.

But interestingly, from verse 3 onwards, we read from a different author. Almost like a companion to the mountain-watcher is offering up his wisdom. And there's no glibness in sight, just a fantastic explanation of who God is, and a focus on Him.

He says two things, basically:

- *God will not take a break from watching over us.*
- *He will keep us from all harm.*

God will not take a break from watching over us.

Day and night, whatever we do, wherever we are - He is watching over us. We should not feel threatened by this, He is not watching to catch 'in the act' but out of His great love for us, protecting us. It is not a 'Big Brother is watching you' thing... when you walk down a dark alley, we don't want to hear that someone is watching us, but we'd love to hear that someone is *watching over us*. And this is God's promise, He is always *watching over us* (vv 3, 4, 5 & 8).

At all times (Day and night, v5-6; now and forever, v8)

- There are times where our lives are in the “day”... in the light, out in the open. But in the open, where we live out ‘public’ lives at work, in our communities, on social media, in the church or among our families, our mountain still looms large. God is *watching over us*.
- And then there are times where our lives are in the “night”... in the dark, hidden, private. These times where no one can see what we’re up to or how we’re feeling, when our thoughts and fears, temptations, sadnesses seem louder than ever. The mountain is more obvious to us then, but God is still *watching over us*.

Wherever we are, whatever we’re doing (coming and going, v8)

- Christian integrity is all about living out our relationship with Jesus in an authentic way, wherever we are. But often we lack integrity. We find ourselves among groups of people who don’t think and feel as we do, and that can easily make our mountain feel larger, or perhaps to turn our backs away and escape, pretending it doesn’t exist. But we can’t hide from God, He is the Maker of Heaven and Earth. Wherever we are, God is still *watching over us*.

Over our whole lives (v7)

- In every aspect of our lives, and with life itself - God is still *watching over us*.

God is a *stubborn God*. He stubbornly refuses to take His eye away from you, nothing will change His mind. We have often gone camping in a site in Somerset owned by friends of ours who also keep donkeys. As children, my kids would ride the donkeys around the site, but if the donkey didn’t fancy it, there was no budging it. It would not move for anything. Stuck fast, stubborn.

This is a pale reflection of the stubbornness of God, in His love for you and me. He will not be budged, nothing will convince Him to change His mind. No matter what, He never takes a break (v3) and the promise of this Psalm is that He never will (v8).

Moses understood this when he wrote:

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Deuteronomy 31:6

And this promise is also made by Our Saviour, Jesus, when He said:

“I am with you always, to the very end of the age” - Matthew 28

And He will keep us from all harm.

But there’s an elephant in the room...

Verse 7 clearly promises “*The LORD will keep you from all harm...*” will He? What is our experience? Have we been kept from all harm? Surely the pain we suffer at the hands of our mountains feels extremely harmful? And it’s true... our earthly experiences are not easy, we suffer, some of us a lot. But this promise is not that we won’t struggle, it’s that *we won’t come to harm.*

In his book “[With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God](#)” by Skye Jethani (thanks for the reference, Eddie!), he says:

*“It may sound like a rudimentary idea, but God’s protection over His sheep cannot be quickly glossed over on the way to deeper theologies. It is a truth that must be deeply internalised and experienced in communion with Him, because it is only when we come to a profound trust in His love and care for us that our vision of the world is transformed... Dallas Willard observed that once we embrace the reality of God’s love and care for us, we see that **‘this present world is a perfectly safe place for us to be.’**”*

Jesus helpfully allows us to understand this too, in His spectacular promise, in John 10:

*“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and **they shall never perish; no-one will snatch them out of my hand.** My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; **no-one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.**”*

In this instance, the word ‘harm’ refers to ‘evil, in adversity’. In other words, adversity will likely come our way, but we are safe from harm in that adversity. Because our God is *watching over* us, we will not perish, we cannot be snatched out of our Father’s hand.

Summing up

A young man, born in 1842, grew up with a strong desire to study God’s Word. To learn it and preach it. At the age of 20, whilst studying theology at university he was engaged to be married to the love of his life. But he noticed his eye-sight deteriorating. The doctors could do nothing to help him, and his fiancée broke off the engagement, saying that she could not life the rest of her life with a blind man. Once his eyes failed him completely, he came under the care of his sister for years.

When his sister was 40, she was engaged to be married and on the evening before her wedding, George Matheson’s mountains loomed into view:

- His health
- His dreams of studying God’s word impeded (although he pushed through!)
- His love leaving him
- His pride, in needing constant care

It was this night that he wrote a hymn, he says:

“I am quite sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes, and equally sure that it never received at my hands any retouching or correction. I have no natural gift of rhythm. All

the other verses I have ever written are manufactured articles; this came like a dayspring from on high."

The hymn he wrote was O Love That Will Not Let Me Go:

*O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee.
I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.*

George Matheson knew what it was to face a mountain or two. He also knew from where his help came, and he knew that despite that he suffered he was kept safe from harm from his Lord, the Maker of Heaven and Earth.

This is the promise of this Psalm. We should take encouragement from it, because it doesn't shy away from the fact that we struggle... a lot... but the remedy is found in our God, who is infinitely more powerful and loving than any challenges we face. We, like George Matheson, like the Psalmist, like everyone who is in Jesus, are safe from all harm, forever.

Questions to reflect on:

1. What is / are the mountains that you face?
2. Do you see Lord, the Maker of Heaven and Earth as your helper?
3. Do you feel safe from harm?