

Psalm 121 – we've already had a look at it which is great. It's a well known psalm, it's a well loved psalm, and poses a question.

I want to start by reading another poem. This came out of an experience the poet had a one day while on the beach. It's probably a poem you know, you don't know you know but you do know, or you know but you don't know you know. [Reads "Not Waving but Drowning" by Stevie Smith, "Nobody heard him...waving, but drowning"]

"I lift up my eyes to the Hills where does my Help come from?" And that's the question. To make sure I remembered it I've written it in red on every page. Where does my Help come from?

But first, how do we lift up our eyes? Well, by moving our head back, not just raising our eyes like that. But putting our head back and looking up to the hills or the mountains (as some ways translate it). The head for it is the source of intellect and knowledge, what we know. So we mustn't just raised our eyes, we must move our direction of sight. Where does our help come from? We want to know the answer.

Now very often when we warm up before exercise, or singing, or performing, or taking part in sport, we just sort of loosen up the muscles, and some people say "roll your head round". (I won't.) I heard a physiotherapist on the radio some time ago who said: not entirely good, certainly not too fast, don't crack the muscles and roll your head too fast. Because essentially there are only four movements that the head makes in general life. There's up and there's down, there's left and there's right.

Where does our help come from?

Does it come from looking down? Bringing up those reserves of strength we did not know we had? Bringing up that inner strength, looking down to find the answer for our help? There's a phrase "man the measure of all things". Kind of typified in a particular area of society. Man the measure of all things: don't need God, don't need anything out there – we are the ones who are in control. And the song came into my mind (I won't sing it – you can sing along if you like) "you've gotta search for the hero inside yourself, search for the secrets you hide, search for the hero inside yourself, until you find the key to your life." That's not where our help comes from.

Can we see the hills looking down? No. My daughter suggested (I will say it: she is my sermon checker, I run it by her and she puts me straight about things I should say and shouldn't say) you should encourage them to look up and look sides ways, but I won't do that, but can you see the hills if you're if you're looking down? No, you can't!

I lift up my eyes to the Hills where does my Help come from?

So, looking down's wrong. What about left and right? Does our help come from looking to our relatives, our friends, members of the family (not always good to turn to them – they know us too well), the family of the church, professional therapists. Looking left, looking right, getting help. It's not wrong to need, and it's not wrong to seek help. So look where you can get the help. But it's not the entire answer.

I lift up my eyes to the hills where does my help come from?

Looking down into myself, into those hidden strengths we didn't know we had? Looking left, looking right, seeking help from friends, councillors (as I say: not wrong to do that so long as we look up).

I lift my eyes to the hills where does my help come from?

Showing ourselves above God: Lord, if you can't help me nobody can. How many people have come to Christ that way in times of certain situations? Life's too much for them, and it just look up: Lord if you're there do something; I tried looking in all directions but you can do something Lord – please do it. As I say many people come to Christ in that way. Yes, as some versions have that first verse: I will lift up my eyes to the hills. So where does my Help come from?

Four points:

Firstly, my help comes from the Lord the maker of heaven and earth. My help comes from the one who is my creator. And a couple of verses that came to mind: psalm 139 [Reads Psalm 139:13-16 “For you created...and wonderfully made...” (and whatever the translation, you can't get away from that: I am fearfully and wonderfully made) “...your works are...came to be.”].

My help, says the psalmist, comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

And an interesting phrase from Ecclesiastes. (If you look hard enough you can see some interesting phrases in Ecclesiastes, it's a difficult book, but there are some good things) [Reads Ecclesiastes 3:11 “He has made...beginning to end.”] God has set eternity in the human heart, in the human soul. Today's society (it was prayed about), people are looking down, looking into themselves, looking to find gratification in the things of the flesh – if I do things – sex and drugs and rock and roll – then it will meet my need.

But God says, or tells us, he's put eternity in our souls. We are body – yes. We are soul – yes. We are also spirit. And there is that that's soullessness, there is that part of us that feels if we do things too often, we're not satisfied – there's something more. I think that's what, young people (I was going to say) are looking. Maybe they're not looking for it; maybe our message is to go and tell them that they should be looking for it. God has put eternity into our hearts, into our souls.

Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

He's my creator, he's the one who knows me better than anyone else, he's the one who gave us that sense of “there must be something more.” Reaching out. I've said it before, on Radio 4 there is an interesting series called “Soul music” (I don't know if you ever listen to it) and each week they take a particular piece of music, or a song, and different people talk about how it affected them, how it move them, how it stirred their soul, whether it's a classical piece or a song, or, even, you've got to search for the hero inside yourself – that could have spoken to someone – because we have a soul, something that wants more, and I always think that God is there, he's coming towards us.

There's the painting in the Sistine Chapel of God's finger touching the finger of Adam and giving life. God's hand is reaching out. He's reaching out, and if you need something more, reach up!

The word used here, in these first two verses.

I lift my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord.

The word there “help” is a Hebrew word that speaks of assistance, coming to the assistance of someone. And it has a military connotation as well which is wonderful.

Now the picture is, of course, the fort under siege and the enemy are against it, and the battering ram are smashing into the walls, and the walls beginning to crumble, and if it goes on any longer we'll be lost. And then that wonderful moment in the film (which brings a sob from the audience) over the brow of the hill comes the rescue – help is at hand, reinforcements have arrived. All was lost. Help has come!

My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

Secondly, he will not let your foot slip. He watches over you, will not slumber. He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

Where does my help come from? My help comes from the one who is always awake, always alert. Because God is, (and I won't bang on about God being outside of eternity, but I will bang on about it because it's so important) he is, he is yesterday, he is today, he is tomorrow. He's always awake, always alert. It's just reminded me that when God came down and took on the likeness, and Jesus came down and took on the likeness, the likeness of humankind – he looked like us, not really the same as us. Jesus performed his ministry at the height of his physical powers, around the age of 30. He didn't start his ministry when he was a child. He didn't grow old and start his ministry then. No, he was alert, he was awake.

The word “Slumber”: to be drowsy, inactive. In this heat it's not hard to slumber, is it? I just find that I'm reading a book, or even the daily portion [of the Bible] and it says strange and bizarre things, and then I wake up and realise I've nodded off, and my subconscious mind was filling in the gap from what I was reading. God is never drowsy or inactive.

[Reads Psalm 121:3b-4 “he who watches...slumber nor sleep”] Sleep is slack language, and has the connotation of growing old. God isn't growing old because “he is”. God is never past it because he is – he is always at the height of his spiritual powers. How can we think of that?

So, where does my help come from?

Thirdly, the Lord watches over you, the Lord is your shade at your right hand, the sun will not harm you by day nor the moon by night; the Lord will keep you from all harm.

The sun will not harm you by day. I think that's pretty relevant at the moment, isn't it? And, of course, we know: keep out of the sunshine; keep out of the sunshine, keep in the shade.

The Lord is your shade at your right hand, the sun will not harm you by day nor the moon by night.

We're not sure what that phrase means, “the moon by night”, but certainly covers day and night. Day and night he is always awake, he's always watching, he's always there. The Lord is your shade. [Reads Psalm 121:5-7a “The Lord watches...from all harm”]. My help comes from the one who is my keeper and preserver.

A couple of passages came to mind. John 10[:26-28] “I give them eternal life,...” says Jesus about those who've received him, “...and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My father, who has giving them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my father's hand. I and the father are one.” We are safe in the hands of God our Father.

And a wonderful phrase from Isaiah [49:15-16] “Can a mother forget the baby of her breast and have no compassion on the child has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you. See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.” I've engraved you on the palms of my hands. We know what was engraved on the palms of Jesus' hands. Where's

my help comes from?

Fourthly, the Lord will watch over your life, the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forever more. My help comes from the one who is eternally watchful. Not only eternally awake, eternally alive, but eternally watchful. He will watch over your life, he will watch over your coming and going.

When does my help come from? The one who is internally watchful.

Now that word "watch" is a different word in Hebrew from the first two verses the word there. It appears six times – this same word appears six times. He who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord watches over you. The Lord will keep (same word) will keep you from all harm. The Lord will watch over your life, the Lord will watch over your coming and going.

Six times and the word there means "keep watch in a protective way, preserve", but it has the connotation of "keeping within bounds". He keeps us within bounds. Not just a case of "I'm watching you, so watch what would you do!" No, he surrounds us, he keeps us within bounds. And that great verse comes to mind from I Corinthians 10:13 "...God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But with temptation make a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

That's a great verse, a great promise, because we are tempted; Jesus was tempted, yet never gave into the temptation, and sometimes the temptation is very strong. But he says, that he's faithful: he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear – isn't that an encouraging thought? We have temptations and sometimes we give in and think "What could I do? I was powerless!" Well, in a sense, no, we were not powerless because God will never tempt us beyond what we can bear.

Fighting the devil – it's the devil that wants to destroy God's work. The devil who wants to bring us down, to bring us down to ruin, to turn our eyes away from God, to pull our hand away from the hand of God. (Although, of course, when we've made that connection, we are adopted into God's family: we are Children of God.)

The Lord will watch over your life, the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forever ore my help comes from the one who is eternity watch for now and forever more. My help comes from the one who is eternally watchful. Now and forever more. Long duration, antiquity, futurity, continuous existence.

Hebrew's a strange language (as my daughter and her mother discovered when they were doing some Hebrew studies). Hebrew words can mean two things at the same time, "coming" and "going" depending on where it's used.

So, the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forever more. He will watch over your coming in the past (he is in the past), he will take care of you in the present (he is in the present), but also he will be with you in our future (because he is in the future) – he's outside of time.

I lift my eyes to the hills from where does my help come?

My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

My help comes from the Lord who is always awake.

My help comes from the Lord who is my keeper and preserver.

My help comes from the Lord who is eternally watchful.

I want to finish with a story (why not, we do love stories, don't we?).

Some years ago a passenger liner was travelling from Liverpool to New York, and the captain's family were on board – they were going across to New York. And so his family were there, on board. In mid Atlantic during the night, a sudden squall blew up and a great wind knocked the ship on its side. I think, being a liner, it would eventually right itself, but, it just threw everything about. All the passengers woke up and were frightened. “What's going on? Things flying about the cabins!” Some of them quickly dressed in case there came a call to abandon ship. Below deck, the captain's 8-year old daughter woke up. She was frightened. “What's happening?” They reassured her. And she said “Is daddy on deck?” “Yes dear, daddy's on deck.” She smiled, laid down, and went back to sleep.

The Lord will keep your going out, and your coming in, from this time forth and forever more.

Where does my help come from?

My help comes from the Lord.

Amen