

Psalm 121: A Funeral Sermon

Ministry Today 42: March 2008

By Paul Beasley-Murray

Chair of Ministry Today and Senior Minister of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford

I can't remember when Alan and Alison first began to attend our church - it must have been toward the end of the last millennium. That sounds light-years away, but in fact it was only seven years ago! What I do remember was visiting Alan at the London Chest Hospital when he had his triple by-pass operation. He was at the time a very sick man. On that occasion I read to him from Psalm 121, and then we prayed for him. It was his experience of God in his life at that time which resulted in a renewal of his faith, and soon both he and Alison were regular members of the congregation.

As Alan discovered, God does not live in some celestial tower, remote from the world he has made. He cares for his world. He cares for us amidst all the twists and turns of life's journey. It is that conviction which underlies Psalm 121, a Psalm I read again to Alan in the last week of his life, a Psalm which Alison has chosen for today's service of thanksgiving.

Psalm 121 is sometimes called 'the traveler's Psalm'. It was a psalm sung by pilgrims as they made their annual journey to Jerusalem. It expressed their faith in God, but also reflected the unease they felt about travel.

"I look to the mountains; where will my help come from?" (v.1). Mountains may be beautiful, but they can also be dangerous. Mountains are places where people lose their lives. The Authorised Version was wrong when it turned this verse into a statement: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help". No, the hills are not the place from which help comes - rather they are the place where help is needed. Here in this Psalm, the hills or mountains represented the perils of the journey, for it was in the ravines and gorges of the mountain ranges that wild beasts and robbers hid.

As the pilgrims looked to the mountain ranges they had to cross if they were to reach Jerusalem, they were filled with foreboding and wondered from where their help would come. It is in this situation that the Psalmist declares: "My help will come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (v.2).

What was true then, remains true today. As we go through the ups and downs, and twists and turns of life's journey, we travelers need to remember that God is there to help, if we will but let him. God doesn't force himself upon us, but he is there if we will but turn to him. God doesn't guarantee that difficulties will never occur, but he does promise that when trouble arises, he will be right there.

Some people have argued that religion is a crutch, only for the weak and the neurotic; it is only for the 'no-hopers' and the 'no-copers'. The strong can do without God, they say! But that is a nonsense. Just as it would be stupid to try to climb Everest without a rope and a pick-axe and all the other paraphernalia of climbing, so it would be stupid to try to live life without God's help. God is not just for the weak. He is there for us all, for the truth is that in our own strength all of us are weak; all of us need him if we are to rise to life's challenges.

When I was reading this Psalm to Alan in hospital, I highlighted verse 5, where the Psalmist declares that the Lord "will neither slumber or sleep". God, I said, is the great insomniac. God is always awake; he never has forty winks; he is there on duty in the night hours, as well as during the day, keeping guard over us.

All nice comforting stuff, you may say, but is it really true? Were the pilgrim people of God never attacked by robbers? The fact is that God does not allow us to live in some kind of protective bubble. As many of the other Psalms demonstrate, the writer of Psalm 121 knew from his own experience that life can have its ups and downs. However, says the Psalmist, whatever experiences life may bring, the Lord is there to protect us in the way that really matters, for, "The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life" (v.7). "He will keep" us, not in the sense that we will not know suffering, but rather he will protect us from the evils that suffering all too easily brings: the evils of bitterness and of cynicism; the evils of complaining and of despairing. Alan knew that protection in full measure

The Psalmist ends with the statement: "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore" (v.8). I believe that this was particularly true for Alan in the last few difficult years of his life, as first his sight began to go, and then his hearing. In spite of all the difficulties associated with his cancer and multiple myeloma, God kept Alan positive. He was there for him right up to the end, and now has taken him into his eternal Kingdom.

Yes, in all life's experiences - in its sorrows and its joys, in its failures and successes, and at its beginning and at its ending - God is there to give the help that really counts, if we will but open ourselves to him. So today we give not just thanks for Alan's life, but also for the God who sustained Alan in this life, and who continues to sustain him in the next.