

## “Pilgrims in 2009”

### Psalm 121

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#### Introduction:

With football still fresh on our minds in the midst of this year’s college bowl season and a more interesting NFL playoff season just beginning, I thought I would share one of my less than glorious moments between the hashes. When I was a campus minister at Baylor, RUF had a pretty good intramural football team. And, even though I was old to them, I was young to me now, and so I played with them. During the second half of one of our playoff games, after I had snapped the ball to the quarterback, I backed up to block for the quarterback. He was simultaneously scrambling to avoid being tackled. It was then that our heads collided.

Now I beg your pardon because the rest of the story has been gathered from reliable sources; I simply don’t remember. Apparently, I was laid out on the ground for a few minutes. Then I got up tried to play a few snaps, but was so disoriented I had to go sit down in the stands where I waited out the rest of the game. One student told me that I was very talkative, but something seemed amiss. I don’t remember any of it—the conversations, the score, or going to get checked out at the Student Life Center. Thankfully, a student drove me home later that evening. It was about that time that my cognitive faculties were returning. What happened? I received a minor concussion. In football, it is called getting one’s “bell” rung. If it is bad enough it can make you very confused.

Right now, as we stand between the years 2008 and 2009, it feels for many of us like our “bells-have-been-rung”. After 2008 and with 2009 looming we find ourselves laid out and confused. How do we go forward? How do we understand the past? The questions come without answers—economic uncertainty, war growing around the world, unease in eastern Europe, the mortgage crisis, job security, shrinking wages, etc. All of these difficulties put even greater strain on challenges already ongoing—future plans to be decided, temptations we’re battling, depression being fought, marriages struggling and children straying.

**It is into this world of confusion that Psalm 121 speaks clarity.** Psalm 121 is one of the *Psalms of Ascents*. These Psalms were sung by Jewish pilgrims as they made their way back to Jerusalem to worship at God’s temple. As pilgrims they had left people, places and things behind, but importantly, they had not yet arrived at their destination. Like us, they were in between places. **Psalm 121 is about learning to walk this pilgrim’s path—the life lived between the place we have left and the place for which we long.**

For this reason, Psalm 121 is ideally suited for our instruction. Psalm 121 does not promise Christians the absence of difficulty in our pilgrimage. Rather, it offers us the presence of our God, who is our Guardian along the way. So often we forget: **God is the reason for the journey, God is the end of the journey and God is the keeper along the way.**

Psalm 121 teaches us to lean against a culture of instant gratification and against the idea that if we just follow the instruction manual (be it a secular or Christian one) life will be free of difficulty. **Instead, it reminds us that the Christian life will be lived with struggle ever-present and that heaven comes only after the process of sanctification.** Therefore, as pilgrims in 2009, pilgrims who feel a little dazed and confused from our circumstances I might add, it will do us some good to reflect on the wisdom found here.

#### 1) Remembering we are not where we were—from whence we came

First of all, Psalm 121 is the second of the 15 Songs of Ascents. It follows the 120<sup>th</sup> Psalm, which is a Psalm about **God's deliverance of the distressed pilgrim**. The Psalmist has left the land of Meshech and Kedar, which were pagan places known for their unrighteous practices and godless worship. As we find ourselves on the pilgrim's path, it is always important to remember that God has delivered us out of a spiritually destitute place.

**No matter where, in terms of our physical location and circumstances, we always begin our spiritual journey with the Lord in a "place" of spiritual darkness.** The Psalmist there laments that he has made his dwelling to be among those who hate peace (120:6). In the words made famous by John Newton, "I was blind, but now I see." Our sinful nature prefers the places of "Meshech and Kedar" because they represent places and circumstances that are "away" from the Lord. **How important then is it to realize that by God's grace, we have left these places!** While we had formerly been in darkness, we no longer desire to live there.

**Illustration:** Nevertheless, as we grow older we begin to realize how far we have to go in the life of Christian sanctification. Discouragement can come easily, can't it? We think we ought to have grown so much more than we obviously have. We think, "Why do I still struggle so?" **Over the holidays I shared with a woman expressing this very thought. She was lamenting this very thing how much she felt she had wasted her Christian life with the mistakes made along the way.** I had the privilege of reminding her of one very important truth she had overlooked; **God was continuing to give her the desire to go forward?**

We should not fail to realize that this is itself a mark of God's divine favor. **God is the reason for the journey!** Therefore, no matter how deep our struggle at least we are no longer comfortable in "Meshech and Kedar". We have given up on the darkness we had formerly loved. Only a pilgrim can say that. Only a pilgrim can say, "I don't want to go back to my former life."

## **2) Reflecting on where we're headed—the temple of the Lord**

Psalm 121 begins with anticipation though, anticipation about where the pilgrim journey ends. In beautiful, metaphorical language the Psalmist sings, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD..." (121:1-2) Of course, the answer to that question is the Lord. The pilgrim is headed to the temple, which contained the very presence of the Lord. This is the focus of the next Song of Ascents, Psalm 122. There, at the dwelling place of the Lord, is their peace amidst conflict. There, at the dwelling of the Lord, is their certainty amidst confusion. There, at the dwelling of the Lord, is there mercy amidst a harsh world. There, at the dwelling of the Lord, is there justice amidst a world that takes advantage of the weak. There, with the Lord, is there hope.

If it is important for us to remember from where we have come, it is also important for us to remember where we're headed. We're headed for a world made right because God's presence fills the earth. In the time of the Psalmist, Jerusalem, and the Temple especially, represented that reality of God dwelling with humanity. However, today that Temple reality is made known in and through the resurrected Jesus Christ. The book of Revelation gives us a glimpse of what salvation awaits the pilgrims who make the journey:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." <sup>5</sup> And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." <sup>6</sup> And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning*

*and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.*  
**Revelation 21:1-6**

This is where the pilgrims of Psalm 121 are headed. This is where we're headed. Who does not long for this place to come, and to come quickly? In Christ Jesus, we can be assured that this is where we're headed. **God is the end of the journey!**

### **3) Resting in who keeps us along the way—God keeps the pilgrim on the journey**

Okay, we now arrive at the “now” of our lives—the place lived between the times, the place of the journey. Contrary to what many teach about the Christian life, the Bible does not promise us a free, uncomplicated and comfortable pilgrimage. Blessings of wealth, relational bliss and health do not accrue to the faithful, no matter what the people say on TV. Christians do face temptations and do succumb to those temptations. Christians do lose their jobs and encounter financial turmoil. Christians do face the challenges of war. Christians do battle disease. Christians do face injustice. They are robbed and taken advantage of just like other people in the world.

If this is true, how the Psalmist teach the following:

*<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. <sup>4</sup> Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. <sup>5</sup> The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. <sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. <sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. <sup>8</sup> The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. **Psalm 121:3-8***

Certainly the point cannot be that Christians never encounter obstacles in the world. That contradicts other clear teaching in the Bible about suffering. It also contradicts our own experience.

Therefore, what can be the point of the Psalmist? Well, remember the Psalm is all about the journey from Meshech and Kedar to Jerusalem. This journey, like any journey, has certain challenges and vulnerabilities. The point is not that we should expect an easy journey, but that the Lord is our keeper along the way. Consider that the covenant name of the Lord, Yahweh, is invoked five times in the Psalm. The Psalmist calls God his keeper or guardian no less than six times. The emphasis, then, is not on the absence of temptation, strife and uncertainty, but on the presence of God in all of his compassion and strength.

In fact, if we careful in our reading we can discern how the Psalm leads us to deal with the struggles the pilgrim encounters: temptations of the human heart, difficulty from an uncertain world and the presence of evil itself. Psalm 121 neatly takes up each of these struggles in order and shows us how we can face them with God as our Guardian.

#### **a) Temptations of the human heart**

Being a pilgrim does not shield you from temptations. Most likely, though you have left the old place the old ways still linger. However, what has changed is that we can face them with a new power.

Verses 1 and 2 introduce an interesting question:

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

Eugene Peterson's rightly remarks, “During the time this psalm was written and sung, Palestine was overrun with popular pagan worship. Much of this religion was practiced

on hilltops. Shrines were set up, grove trees planted, sacred prostitution both male and female were provided; persons were lured to the shrines to engage in acts of worship that would enhance the fertility of the land, would make you feel good, would protect you from evil.” (Peterson, p. 40) Sound familiar? The human heart looks for answers in “hills”. Our human hearts are tempted that power, relationships, sex, acceptance, etc. will “keep” us. John Calvin said that our hearts are our “idol factories.” In other words, there is no limit to the ways in which we will dream up seeking our life apart from God. The people of Israel were no different and nor are we. We all deal with the temptation of our flesh. Essentially, all temptation is about seeking to find life in the things of this world, the stuff God made.

As we begin 2009, what temptations are knocking at your door? What “answers” do you think provide hope amidst your challenges? How is your sinful flesh leading you to places that hold no hope?

Of course, there is only one answer—the Pilgrim’s focus

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

The logic is simple. Our hope is not in this stuff, but in the one who made all of this stuff.

#### **b) Difficulties of an uncertain world**

But, even if you take sin, temptation and the flesh out of the equation of the pilgrim’s journey there are still obstacles, aren’t there? Our feet do move, the sun does burn and things go “bump” in the night. Consider the challenges of our economy, the war in Iraq, Afghanistan and Israel, disease, etc.?

What are those challenges you are facing this year as we go into 2009?

Nevertheless, the point is not that God promises to never let us fall into dangerous circumstances in this world. Rather, God is our keeper in the midst of every difficulty. The point is God never allows us to ultimately slip beyond his providential care. In every difficulty, we are securely in his hand.

Therefore, we can have confidence as we encounter adversity because we know that the Lord is going to work through these circumstances to bring what is best for our lives. The world’s power to undue us is only as much as the Lord has allowed it to tug at you for the purposes of his sanctification process in your life.

#### **c) Presence of Evil:**

Lastly, there is one last obstacle that we all face; it is the unseen enemy of evil and the evil one.

*The Lord will protect you from all evil. He will keep your soul. The Lord will guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever.*

We should not imagine that our struggle as Christians is merely against “flesh and blood”. The truth is that each of us faces a spiritual battle against evil and the Evil One.

How are we to think about this evil?

- i. Evil is real; we live in a moral universe. What is wrong is ultimately a moral problem.

- ii. Evil has a personal character. Its leadership is under Satan's authority. Though He is unseen, his ways are not. We can know him because he masquerades as an "angel of light" deceiving people's hearts. How can you tell?
- Satan always twists the Scripture away from its true meaning, either increasing its demand or relaxing its standard, and taking Christ and the Gospel out of the message.
  - Satan always breeds division, setting the heart on fire with fiery darts of suspicion, worry, restlessness and discontent moving us away from the Lord and from our fellow Christian.
  - Satan always moves us away from fellowship with the sufferings of Christ. Like a bad parent, he always gives as much candy as you want.

adapted from S. Ferguson's, *The Christian Life*

But again, the promise is not that we will not encounter evil, but that the Lord will keep us in the midst of it. Of course, the greatest expression of God's divine protection is found in Jesus Christ. He is the one who has promised to be "with us" in this world of "devils filled."

**Conclusion:**

Okay, so where does all of this leave us? Hopefully, Psalm 121 is a reminder to all of us as we enter 2009. Perhaps you feel like I felt that day at Baylor when I received a concussion. You've been knocked out. Your thinking is cloudy. You're not sure what's up or down. Well, the message from Psalm 121 is that you're okay. Adversity is to be expected. Even so, we can have confidence as we encounter this adversity because we know that the Lord is going to work through these circumstances to bring what is best for our lives. Consider from where we have come, where we're going and who is with us along the way.

Therefore, 2009 may not turn out to be a great year in every sense of the word. The year ahead looks to be a challenging one. However, when we take a long-term view of the journey we are on, 2009 looks okay. Not because we're up to the challenge, but because the one is with us will keep us along the way!