

Devotion: Tuesday, May 5, 2020

Psalm 121

Assurance of God's Protection

A Song of Ascents.

¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?

² My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴ He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵ The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

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

⁷ The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

⁸ The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore

The pictures we have in our heads about the scenes from the Bible can be turned around quickly if you visit the Holy Land. Before I traveled to Israel, I had imagined it would be a bleak country of deserts and rocks and locusts. But, what I found, was a topography of beautiful landscapes and tall desert mountains that I had never seen in my imaginational tour

The text today suggests that ancient Israel's story can't be told without mountains. Israel's homeland is a hilly and mountainous place. And so, in Psalm 121, when the psalmist says, "I lift up my eyes to the hills," he's seeing what every resident of that land sees and by which they are affected.

While hills were a constant factor of geography in ancient Israel, they weren't always welcome topographical features. In addition to being difficult to farm and requiring hard labor to move

goods through, the hills were sometimes hideouts for bandits or sanctuaries for those running from justice.

It could be that at least for some Israelites, lifting their eyes to the hills sent shivers down their spines!

So perhaps the opening line of Psalm 121 could be paraphrased this way: *I'm surrounded by dangers from the hills. Where will I find help? My help is from the Lord.*

For us today, even if the sight of actual hills and mountains inspires rather than scares us, there is a figurative height that may chill us: *the slippery slope.*

That term is shorthand for the idea that *a small action will trigger a chain of events that will lead to a negative outcome.* There was a tongue-in-cheek example of the slippery slope idea that aired in a DIRECTV commercial a few years ago. The narration went like this:

When your cable company keeps you on hold, you get angry.

When you get angry, you go blow off steam.

When you go blow off steam, accidents happen.

When accidents happen, you get an eye patch.

When you get an eye patch, people think you're tough.

When people think you're tough, people want to see how tough.

And when people want to see how tough, you wake up in a roadside ditch.

Don't wake up in a roadside ditch.

Get rid of cable, and upgrade to DIRECTV.

Slippery slope thinking can often lead to conclusions that are unlikely to come to pass.

The slippery slopes that worry us, however, are more often tied to things closer to home, and are not always fallacies — stuff like:

- If I smoke, my kids will see it and are more likely to start smoking themselves.
- If I let my temper get out of hand, I will end up hurting people I love.
- Regarding temptation, if I play with fire, I will get burned, and those around me will be damaged.
- If I follow *every* dream, I won't be able to make a living.

Some of our slippery slope worries may be in matters we care about because of our religious faith, such as these:

- If I question one thing about the Bible, I'll end up questioning everything, and then where will I be?
- If I don't do enough good deeds, I won't get into heaven.

And here's the truth about slippery slopes: *We need to bring our fear-free thinking to them.* Many of them are fallacies, and often we can spot that when we apply clear thinking to them. Some of them are not fallacies and suggest possible real outcomes. Again, clear thinking, free from fear, is needed. And some slopes are indeed slippery, but the incline is *upward*, toward higher ground.

As an example let's imagine Jesus' opponents saying things like this to him:

- You can't forgive a cripple's *sins* ... who knows where that will lead?
- You can't heal on the Sabbath ... who knows where that will lead?
- You can't decline to condemn a woman with an adulterous past ... who knows where that will lead?
- You can't heal a Gentile ... who knows where that will lead?

When we find ourselves on slippery slopes, we should not fear, but instead, look for God's leading. Ask his help to see whether there really is an incline — and whether it's heading down or up.

Stay safe my friends

Pastor Jack