

RETURN TO JOY

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Incorporated non-profit in New Jersey, USA

The Bewildered Returns to Joy – Psalm 121

By Peter Eng



The Bewildered Returns to Joy (Psalm 121, NASB)

*¹ I will lift up my eyes to the mountains;
From whence shall my help come?*

“What’s next?” That is a question you would ask from time to time. Perhaps you are asking that question now. Sometimes, we are uncertain what to do next, sometimes we are completely bewildered.

When a loved one passes away, it leaves us bewildered. Suddenly, there is a hole in our heart. If that loved one is a breadwinner, fear strikes us as we struggle with the pain of loss. We are filled with guilt for not having done enough for the departed. We are anxious about what this death will mean to us.

If we lose our job, and we are unable to find a new job, we become bewildered. “What is God’s will for

me now?” we ask. Most people do not realize how important their job is to them till they lose it.

In an instant your income and security is gone. You stay at home stressed out doing nothing. You avoid social situations where you have to answer what you are doing. As your severance money runs out, your anxiety increases. Soon, you just want a job, any job. “What happened? What’s next?”

You work hard in school. You prayed even harder, and pleaded with God or promised all kinds of sacrifices if God will give you the grades you need. When the grades arrive, your world falls apart. Your hopes and dreams are dashed. What do you do now? It looks like you are condemned to the left-over options.

If your spouse comes to you and say, “I have found somebody else, I want out of this marriage,” you feel numb, then searing pain, then bitterness. You blame the other person, then yourself, then people, then God. Your feelings and thoughts are so crushed and mangled you know there is no way this wreck can be restored.

“Where do I go from here?”

The Pilgrim heading for Jerusalem realizes that his journey mimics his life. As he journeys towards Jerusalem, he uses the mountains to guide him. So he lifts up his eyes to the mountains. Roads are built on the plains, and there may even be times when the trails are not distinct. As he walks or rides his camel through the wilderness, a turn in the wrong direction can mean death in the desert.

There are many stories of those who have died because they failed to navigate properly. Pilgrim listens to directions carefully and notes when a mountain should be ahead of him or behind him, and when it should be on his right or left. He is using the mountains to navigate. At times, he has to cross mountain passes. Mountains are everything as he makes his way across the barren land.

And why does he navigate using the mountains? Because they do not move! They are fixed points and these fixed points are true. As long as he moves correctly using these fixed points, he will get to his destination.

Up to our point of bewilderment, we were navigating by certain mountains. When we turn a corner, we may suddenly realize that the mountain we used was a mirage. Or that we had wrongly identified a mountain and used it incorrectly. We are lost.

When we are bewildered, we do exactly the same thing. We look for fixed points all over again. We look for mountains that we know to help us navigate.

The Pilgrim lifts up his eyes to the mountains to look for direction—again. He is uncertain or even bewildered where to go next. The mountains help him know where to go next—ordinarily, theoretically. The mountains are the sure landmarks for the pilgrim, as the unchanging principles of life guide us onward.

But what happens when our journey does not seem to add up? What do we do when the mountains that guide us also conceal the highway robbers who maraud and murder? What alternative route can we take?

That is when the Pilgrim questions, “From where shall my help come?” When your fixed stars move, disappear, or fail you in some way, where do you go from there? You are lost and joy has fled.

Psalm 121 starts with bewilderment but spends the rest of the song explaining the deliverance. Let us enjoy it together

² *My help comes from the LORD,
Who made heaven and earth.*

Up to this point, the mountains are his help. But when the mountains fail him, the Pilgrim looks to the LORD (Y-HW-H). He is a faithful, covenant-keeping God. Even when all else fails, the LORD does not fail. He made the mountains, no, more than that, he made heaven and earth. What security can these mute mountains provide compared to the creator God?

The Pilgrim turns his gaze from the mountains to the LORD. He is not denying or rejecting the mountains. The Lord has placed them there to help him. But there are times in life when our mountains, our best guiding principles, fail us. And when these fail, the child of God looks to the LORD. That is where he will receive help.

When our best wisdom fails us, when our best friends desert us, when our best securities collapse, when our health betrays us, we still have the LORD who made heaven and earth.

³ He will not allow your foot to slip;

The help the mountains provide is passive. They are just there. They do not care if you read them correctly or not. They are there whether you use them or not. And if you read them wrongly, they do not correct you. That is the character of our best life principles. They are just there.

When they fail us, and our hearts find the way back to God, a new dimension takes over. God is not passive, like the mountains. God loves, God cares. He does not allow your foot to slip. This is figurative, of course; otherwise all of God’s children will be exempted from sprained ankles!

One picture we can have in mind is when the traveler moves along a narrow mountain path that is at times washed away; on one side the mountain and the other the plunge. The Lord does not allow your foot to slip. He is watching over you in your dire moments. Your foot will not slip when you are on a treacherous path. Your current predicament is but a mountain

pass. The nature of the mountain pass is that it will pass. Let your heart repose in the LORD.

*He who keeps you will not slumber.
⁴ Behold, He who keeps Israel
 Will neither slumber nor sleep.*

He is a Keeper not a Sleeper!

If you travel in a caravan group and have the benefit of people taking turns to keep the watch at night, you are relatively safe, unless the keeper turns out to be a sleeper. Those who spy on the camp to attack under the cover of night will strike when the keeper sleeps.

The uninitiated may easily decry the sleeper. Those who have served in combat duty know the temptation to sleep is powerful. I recall the details to keep watch at the camp perimeter. Here I am, away from the main camp, all alone, lying prone in my shallow shell-scape. For the next two hours, I will stare into the dark and alert my buddies if there is danger. Tiredness, silence, boredom, darkness—they all conspire with the unseemly hour to place these heavy weights on my eyelids.

Do guards fall asleep? You can count on it! If the keeper turns out to be a sleeper what security is there? If those who watch over your safety will fail you from time to time, who will watch over you? In contrast to the sleeper, the LORD is the Keeper who neither slumbers nor sleeps. He is like the electronic motion sensor that does not tire and does not sleep. Darkness or light makes no difference to him. He does not lose a moment's attention. God is our fail-safe keeper!

God the keeper who does not slumber is given to us against the backdrop of moral evil. This is in contrast to physical evil. In the Hebrew worldview, the term "evil" is used for both moral evil done by others to hurt us, and physical evil or calamities that befall us without a moral cause. For instance, if a branch breaks on its own accord and smashes your car, it is a physical evil. But if your enemy waits for you and sends a branch crashing on your car deliberately, that is a moral evil.

There are people who mean us harm. False friends betray us. Faithful friends can only do so much. Enemies seize opportunities to bring us down. But God is our Keeper!

There are times in life when evil people seem to triumph over God's children. There are times when sin seems to rule and righteousness beats a retreat. This is one of the times when the mountains on which we depend fail us. How can God allow the wicked to triumph over the righteous?

"No," the psalmist tells us, "The Lord does not slumber or sleep." When we are attacked by evil people, God is not mocked. We may think he failed us, but he has not.

In many instances, we need to ask if our predicament is our own doing despite warnings from God. Think of some great evil, like the holocaust in World War 2. Why did the Jews in Europe ignore all the warnings they receive? Should we blame God when we ignore his warnings? Think of the Word of God given to guide us, and when we feel lost, do we blame God for not leading us?

Too many of us are willful in what we do, and then ask why God did not stop us. He simply does not. He has given us the right to choose, even when the choice is wrong. He has given us the right to ignore his warnings even as he sounds them. What we need to notice is that despite our negligence, God still keeps watch over us. In that we marvel.

The Lord as our Keeper is truly emphasized in this psalm. This psalm is traditionally called the "Traveler's Psalm." That is a good name and a good use for the psalm. But the NASB has titled it, "The LORD the Keeper of Israel." This is also a good name because the word "keep" (Heb: SMR) occurs six times in these eight verses! If you use the NASB, you will count four times the word is used, and two more times given to you in the footnote of verse 7 and 8.

⁷ *The LORD will [keep] you from all evil;
 He will keep your soul.*

⁸ *The LORD will [keep] your going out and your coming in From this time forth and forever.*

Not only does the Lord (Y-hw-h) keep watch over us against the backdrop of evil people, but he also keeps watch over us to keep us from evil events. This is found in the words that follow:

⁵ *The LORD is your keeper;
The LORD is your shade on your right hand.*

⁶ *The sun will not smite you by day,
Nor the moon by night.*

We know this is about natural or physical calamities because of the reference to the sun and moon. The traveler's nemesis by day is the unrelenting heat from the scorching sun. And by night, the pale moon turns the desert into a deadly freeze.

The LORD is your Keeper from natural disasters. When they do not overcome you, it is because the LORD is keeping watch over you. Hallelujah!

The Lord as our shade on our "right hand," means he provides us shelter from harm for the things that are the most important to us. Our right hand means our best interest. We may become distracted with many non-essentials in life, and expect God to attend to our fancies. He may not. But God is always there for the things that count.

⁷ *The LORD will protect [keep] you from all evil;
He will keep your soul.*

Thus the Psalmist assures us: the LORD will protect us from all evil: moral or physical. "He will keep your soul" means he will keep you alive. You will not die from these challenges unless he is calling you home. No human enemy and no physical calamity will claim your life. Your life belongs to God.

How does God keep your life?

OT believers focused on God's goodness mainly in this life. They had a vague notion that there will be a resurrection. But Christians are very clear (or ought to be very clear) that there is a resurrection waiting

for us. This is taught by Jesus our Lord and his resurrection opened the way for us.

Life's ultimate defeat is death. Death takes all. Death is the winner. All life gives way to death. The greatest harm that can come to us, whether by evil men or evil moments, is death. When we die, we lose. "Better a live dog than a dead lion" we are reminded. Death is the ultimate loss. And there had not been a way around it. We all die. We all lose.

If our soul goes to heaven, is death defeated? No! Our body is still dead and worms claim us for food.

It is only in Christ that we have the resurrection. Too many Christians today present a Gospel that is half-good news. They explain that when we receive Christ, we have eternal life. And they explain that means we go to heaven and live with God ever after. That is half-good news.

The Bible tells us that when the immaterial part of our body goes to God, we are in a temporary state. We await a resurrection of our body; and that is the restored whole and imperishable body. We do not exist as disembodied spirits for all eternity. The disembodied person is incomplete and exists only until our bodies are restored. Our victory over death is in the resurrection, not in going to heaven.

The Apostles creed explains clearly, "I believe ... in the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting." The everlasting life is after the resurrection and refers to the resurrected person not the intermediate state, as seen in the sequence of the Apostle's Creed.

"The LORD will protect [keep] you from all evil." This is true in this life, but all the good we receive are mere tokens. "He will keep your soul (i.e. keep you from dying)" is also true as a token. God keeps watch over our life and spares us from many disasters even when we have acted unwisely. But the ultimate fulfillment of this promise is found in Jesus Christ our Lord. In the resurrection!

We will have the victory in Christ. Death will be swallowed up by the resurrection of our body. All our

imperfections, our diseases, our maimness, our injuries will be raised incorruptible.

God in Christ is saving our entire person, body and soul. He is not just saving our soul and leaving our body to rot. God is restoring and refining his creation as in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve were living persons with body and soul.

Hallelujah! What a Savior is Jesus my Lord!

⁸ *The LORD will guard [keep] your going out and your coming in
From this time forth and forever.*

The traveler may be going or coming. Either way, the Lord is keeping watch over him. This is a promise good for now and the future.

In the world of the Psalmist, travel was not the lot of the common person. But in our world today, men and women, young and old, all travel. We travel for work, for leisure, and perhaps a few, will travel on pilgrimage.

To the traveler belongs this psalm. The LORD is your Keeper from all evil, moral or physical, from this time forth and forever.

But this psalm is much more than a psalm for one who travels. It is for all of us who travel the road of life. We are fellow travelers, fellow pilgrims kept from disaster, kept for fellowship with God and one another, kept from this time forth and forever. Our great and final victory is when we rise from the dead, victorious over death.

The bewildered in life can return to joy because the LORD keeps watch over him now, and forevermore.



Links for your viewing pleasure:

They are annotated with ratings (1-5) on music (based on my arbitrary taste) and Lyrics.

Traditional:

- Psalm 121 “My Help” by the Brooklyn Tabernacle. English, Traditional. Music (4), Lyrics (NA, direct from KJV). [CLICK](#)
- [CLICK](#)

Contemporary:

- “I lift up my eyes” by Brian Doerksen from Vineyard Album. English, Contemporary. (Music (4), Lyrics (3)). [CLICK](#)
- “I lift up my eyes” by Paul Wilber, a Messianic Jew. English, Contemporary. Music (5), Lyrics (2). [CLICK](#)

Hebrew:

- “Shir Lama’a lot” by Yosef Karduner from Album Simanim BaDerech. Hebrew, Contemporary. Music (4), Lyrics (NA, direct from Hebrew). [CLICK](#)
- Ancient Hebrew pronunciation / English. Music (3), Lyrics (NA, rare paleo Hebrew pronunciation). [CLICK](#)



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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.