

Israel's Place in the Plan of God
 The Songs of Ascent, Psalms 120—134
 by Dr. David L. Cooper

Psalm 121

Israel's Turning To God

1. I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains:
 From whence shall my help come?
2. My help cometh from Jehovah,
 Who made heaven and earth.
3. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved:
 He that keepeth thee will not slumber.
4. Behold, he that keepeth Israel
 Will neither slumber nor sleep.
5. Jehovah is thy keeper:
 Jehovah is thy shade upon thy right hand.
6. The sun shall not smite thee by day,
 Nor the moon by night.
7. Jehovah will keep thee from all evil;
 He will keep thy soul.
8. Jehovah will keep thy going out and thy coming in
 From this time forth and for evermore.

In the first article in this series (last issue) we saw that Psalms 120-134 constitute a cycle of fifteen psalms that focus attention to Israel's final return to God and restoration to His favor. As we saw last time, Psalm 120 deals with the poor Russian Jews who have, for the last three decades, been unmercifully treated by the Russian Communists. It is true that, under the Czaristic regime there were sporadic outbursts of pogroms, which brought sorrow and distress to God's harassed people in that unfortunate land. In our present passage (Psalm 121) we see a prediction of Israel's turning her face toward God and seeking Him personally and looking to Him for help. This second psalm of the series strikes the keynote of practically all of these fifteen hymns.

Preliminary Considerations

There are certain basic facts that must be gotten clearly in mind if one is to comprehend the marvelous message of this series of hymns. In the first place, may I call attention to the fact that this psalm is cast in the form of a dialogue, which was to be sung in the services of the Temple as an antiphonal hymn, that is, responsive singing. Verses 1 and 2 constitute the first part of the psalm, whereas verses 3-8 comprise the second part.

Essential to the understanding of this psalm is the realization that it is dealing with the end time. That this statement is correct may be seen from the last two verses:

Here assurance is given to the individual, as well as to the nation, that Jehovah will deliver the distressed ones from all evil, "... From this time forth and for evermore." Thus this language is spoken from the standpoint of the last generation of Israel scattered among the nations, who is on the very verge of being delivered from all troubles and brought back into fellowship and favor with God. In other words, the psalmist was carried in vision by the Spirit of God forward across the centuries to the very end of the Tribulation. Being let down, figuratively speaking, into the midst of the civilization of that future time, the psalmist, having identified himself with this future generation of Hebrews, voices their sentiments in their determination to look to God alone for deliverance. Thus, after he had expressed himself as determined to seek God and God alone, he is given perfect assurance that the Lord will, from that time forth and for evermore keep him from all danger and harm.

It has already been noted by the reader that the psalmist speaks of himself in the first person, I and my. Hence the individual note is expressed by the writer. Though he does have this point of view, it is clear from verse 4 that he is voicing the sentiments of the entire nation:

4. "Behold, he that keepeth Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."

Hence the individual note blends into that of the national conviction regarding God's intention of keeping Israel. With these fundamental basic principles in mind, let us now turn to Psalm 121 to learn its message.

Israel Looking to Jehovah

1. I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains; From whence shall my help come?

Some interpreters have stated the first verse in the form of a question, and rendered it, "Shall I lift up mine eyes unto the mountains?" Those taking this position understand that the mountains here referred to were the high places where idolatrous worship was carried on throughout Canaan prior to Israel's entering it. When Israel entered the land, he was commanded to destroy all of the high places and not to allow any to remain. The psalmist therefore is, by these interpreters, made to imply that they will not look toward those high places for help. On the contrary, they will look to Jehovah for deliverance.

The great objection to this interpretation is that this sentence is not a question in the original. There is nothing in the context that demands our understanding this as an interrogation. On the other hand, the positive evidence favors our understanding it as a declarative statement: that the writer intended to look to the mountains for help and strength. When the Temple was dedicated, as we see in I Kings 8:29-30, Solomon—speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—prayed that, if an Israelite should be in a foreign land, he should pray with his face toward Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem is in the mountains of Palestine. When Daniel was in captivity in Persia, he looked toward Jerusalem and lifted up his eyes toward the mountains. Mount Zion, where God promised to place His name forever (Ps. 132:13,14; Dan. 6:10,11). Thus to affirm that one intends to look up to the mountains was equal to an affirmation that he intended to look to Jehovah, from whom his help would come.

In looking to Jehovah a person is looking to the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the one in whom we live, and move, and have our being.

Since the individual note, as we have already observed, blends into that of the national intention (vss. 3,4), we are to understand by verses 1 and 2 that the entire nation of Israel is here represented as turning

from everything else and all others to the one true and living God, who alone can bring the longed-for deliverance. Unfortunately, the people of Israel, being one of the smallest nations on the face of the globe, has from time to time looked to various nations for assistance and protection. Even when Israel did enjoy independence in the Land, during the days of the monarchy, he cast his eyes in different directions—sometimes toward Egypt, and at other times toward Assyria—wistfully desiring assistance in periods of international unrest. In modern times Israel looked to Great Britain and the defunct League of Nations for help and deliverance. England failed him and the old League of Nations died a natural death. Thus nothing came to the people of Israel from these sources. Since the formation of the United Nations, Israel has, more or less, looked to this organization for deliverance. While he has gotten some assistance from this source, we know from the prophetic word that this organization will be of little benefit to the people of Israel. Again, we know from the prophetic Scriptures, that in the very end of this dispensation the apostate remnant of Israel will turn to the Antichrist, expecting deliverance and will enter into a treaty for seven years. Regarding the contents of this treaty we know nothing. How much Israel will benefit from it, no one can tell. But after this treaty has run three and a half years, the Antichrist will wantonly and ruthlessly break it and plunge the nation of Israel into the deepest sorrow through which it has ever passed. Only in the very end of the Tribulation Period will the people of Israel learn the lesson that they will have to lift up their eyes unto Him, who chose Zion as His dwelling place in the mountains of the State of Israel.

In view, therefore, of certain definite predictions found in the Prophets, and in view of the development of the thought of Psalm 121, a person can only come to the conclusion that Israel's turning to God and looking to Him alone for deliverance—which prophecy will be fulfilled at the very end of the Tribulation, when Israel will be convicted of his national sin of rejecting the Messiah—will lead him to repudiate this national crime and plead for the long-rejected Messiah to return for the purpose of delivering him. When he does that, Messiah will appear and bring the longed-for deliverance.

Inspired Reply of Assurance to Penitent Israel

In verses 3-8 we have the inspired answer which God gives to the nation when the people of Israel really turn to God in deep contrition and in sincerity. The second speaker in this dialogue answers the first one, or ones, with an assuring message that God will not suffer "... thy foot to be moved; He that keepeth thee will not slumber." These statements are indeed reassuring—producing the conviction of perfect confidence and trust in God who alone can deliver and save.

As has already been noticed, the assurance is first to the individual that the one who keeps the individual never slumbers nor sleeps. This consoling note of hope develops into the statement that He that keepeth Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. We see from this that these verses are national in their scope. With personality we always associate the idea of rest in sleep. For all mortals sleep is necessary. During such experiences one loses consciousness and is oblivious of his surroundings. Under these conditions he cannot perform his normal functions. Since the Eternal God is a personality, those who have not studied the subject of divine and spiritual things sufficiently might conclude that there are some things that escape the attention of God, and that there are times when He does not pay attention to everything. In fact, the problem of evil and the presence of sin in the world are questions that have engaged the profoundest thoughts of the philosophers of all nations. Disaster and calamity seem to come to the faithful people of God as they do to the wicked and the unsaved. Is this due to the fact that God is asleep, or that He is oblivious to the conditions of His people? Can He not hear their petitions? The psalmist assures us that

the Keeper of the Individual that is trusting God, who likewise keeps watch over the entire nation of Israel, never slumbers nor sleeps. He realizes everything that transpires. There is nothing—nothing so very minute and insignificant—that it can escape the notice and the knowledge of God.

Why God permits certain calamities to come upon His dearest people, we often do not know. Job was a perfect man, one who feared God and who was very pious, living up to all the light that he had. Nevertheless, disaster struck him down. Job's would-be friends tried to explain the reason for his calamities, but failed. His trials could not be explained upon any theory which his friends advanced. But in the sequel to the story we understand why it was that Job was subjected to such grueling testings. Job was more or less self-righteous, a condition which is abominable in the sight of God. The Lord wanted to purge that out of him by the judgments which He permitted to come upon him. Job was thoroughly purged and was a different man in the outcome. In a manner similar to this, we may believe that God permits various calamities and evils to overtake even His very best and most consecrated people. But He always has a good and a sufficient reason for permitting any such calamity. Thus we can trust Him at all times, regardless of what comes or goes.

Verses 5 and 6 are more specific. The writer declares that Jehovah is the Keeper of His people, that He is a shade upon their right hand. He furthermore avers that the sun shall not smite Israel by day or by night. The intense rays of the bright Syrian sun are very dangerous. Often people suffer sunstroke when their heads are not properly protected by a covering. The moonlight is likewise very injurious to the eyes, being so very bright. Thus the Lord promised that He would keep and protect Israel from all dangers.

In the concluding verses of this psalm, the inspired writer assures the penitent remnant of Israel that God will deliver them from all evil; that is, every type of injury and disaster. Moreover, He will meet the demands of their souls. They who thus turn to God can be sure that the Lord will garrison their hearts and their souls in Christ Jesus, the Hebrew Messiah.

Moreover, He will especially guide them, directing their going out and their coming in, an expression indicating special protection and guidance in the small matters of life.

This protection is to be "From this time forth and for evermore." That language, as has been noted, refers to the end time, when Israel is at the point of repudiating the national sin, accepting the Messiah as King and Savior, and pleading for Him to return.

Thus Psalm 121 is a little preview given to us, showing Israel's turning to God and pleading for Him to return.