

Psalm 121 – Funeral of Graham Spencer, 31/12/2020

The Lord watches over you ... both now and for evermore

I consider it a great privilege to be asked to speak at Graham's funeral. We have known and come to love dear Ruth since her first husband, Eddy, died nearly 24 years ago, and through Ruth we got to know and love Graham before they were married. As has been said, Graham was a character and was a wonderful storyteller and his stories often left us in tears of laughter. I was able to visit Graham a number of times in the nursing home in Frenchay until the Covid-19 restrictions made that impossible. Whenever I visited I would always read the Scriptures with him and pray with him.

Graham loved the Scriptures, as does Ruth. He loved them as God's word, and loved them particularly for the promises God has given us in that word, promises which centre in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ruth has chosen Psalm 121 to read at Graham's funeral. This psalm was read at their wedding. Ruth read this psalm to Graham in the last days before he died. It meant a lot to them both and I want this psalm to speak to each of us this morning.

Imagine for a minute that you are on a journey. You are travelling on foot with your entire family. You are going on a journey that will take you several days and you are travelling through what is sometimes inhospitable country. This is the setting for this Psalm which was recited or sung by those travelling to worship God at the temple in Jerusalem. As you begin to get nearer the city you are walking through desolate and mountainous or hilly country. You look up to the mountains and hills around you. Who might be hiding in those hills? Are there wild animals or robbers who might threaten you or your family? Is it safe to go on?

So as you look at the mountains and imagine the fearful prospect of what lies before you, you ask, "Where does my help come from? Who can get me through this?" And immediately the answer comes, "My help comes from the Lord, [from Yahweh, the living God,] the Maker of heaven and earth.

To know the living God is an immense and incalculable blessing. He is the God who created heaven and earth simply by the power of his word. He is the God who revealed his grace as well as his power to his ancient people by rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, leading them safely through their 40 years of wandering in the desert and bringing them at last to the land he had promised to them. Above all, he is the God who has demonstrated the depths of his love for us in the Lord Jesus Christ:

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

And this psalm reminds us that it is this powerful and loving God who watches over his people. He never sleeps; his attention never strays. His eye is always upon those whom he loves – like a parent who keeps a loving eye on their young child and is always ready to come to their aid. The psalmist reminds himself that God is watching over him and his family – watching over their lives – and that God's loving, watchful care continues through each day of his life and then continues for evermore.

Graham was a man who knew God. He knew God as a gracious and loving Father who had revealed the extent of his love for him in the Lord Jesus Christ. He knew that God was watching over him – over his comings and goings day by day. He knew that the Lord Jesus who had defeated death by his glorious resurrection, and who had gone to glory, had gone to prepare a place for him. He knew that according to God's promise, nothing could ever separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus – nothing in life and nothing in death.

God's protection of his people does not mean that they will sail through life free of all trials. It means rather that God will bring them safely *through* trials, including the final trial of death, safely into his presence and glory. As we have been reminded by Joe, singing that lovely Hymn based on Psalm 23:

In death's dark vale I fear no ill
With thee, dear Lord, beside me;
Thy rod and staff my comfort still,
Thy cross before to guide me....

And so through all the length of days
Thy goodness faileth never;
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise
Within thy house for ever.

In many ways, the last months of Graham's life were distressing; distressing both for him and for those who loved him. He had been a strong, intelligent, confident and capable man; a man who loved to preach God's word and to tell others about the Saviour. But in those final months he became weak and needed others to do everything for him. That's what death does; it robs us of all we value – even our dignity. But the promises of God sustained him, promises that those of us who saw him, particularly Ruth, reminded him of again and again. He knew that the Lord who had loved him and redeemed him would never let him go. He knew that God's care for him would lead him safely home into God's presence and into the presence of the Lord Jesus who had loved him and given himself for him. And even that is not the end of the story, for one day, at Christ's return, Graham will have a resurrection body: no longer weak and failing but strong and capable; a glorious resurrection body like that of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the wonderful promise of our God and Saviour and the glorious hope of all who have placed their trust in him. What a glorious day that will be.

We are each one of us on a journey. None of us knows what tomorrow will bring for us. Perhaps in these uncertain days, we, like those Israelite travellers of old, may feel that we are passing through a desolate landscape, surrounded by all manner of unseen threats. To whom do you look for help and for hope? If Graham could speak to you today I know that he would urge each one of us to echo the words of the psalmist, "My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." Those who trust themselves to the loving care of the living God, our creator and our redeemer, are safe in his care for all eternity.

Funerals are sad occasions as we say goodbye to one we have known and loved. But a Christian funeral is also a joyful occasion as we rejoice in the sure and certain knowledge that Graham is now in the presence of the living God and of the Saviour whom he loved and served. He is rejoicing in glory. Are you looking forward to the end of the current restrictions, looking forward to meeting with and embracing those you love? Trusting in Christ we can look forward to being reunited with those whom we have loved and embracing them once again. Will you not rejoice with Graham this day as you gladly place all your hope and trust in this God and look forward to the day when we will all be reunited in the presence of our beloved Saviour?

Peter Misselbrook