

“Life Through and Beyond Very Long Days and Nights”

Psalm 121 & Psalm 130
First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

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If you followed the reading of Psalm 121 from your own or a pew Bible, or if you look later, you may notice the heading, “A Song (or Psalm) of Ascent.” That’s the heading on fifteen psalms, beginning with 120 and concluding with 134. This collection of fairly brief psalms / prayers / songs to God forms a booklet of sorts for worshipers walking toward the Temple in Jerusalem. We can say that the two we have read in worship this morning – Psalm 130 and Psalm 121 – are “cousins.” Both are from the “family” of the Psalms of Ascent, and both seriously consider tough, difficult, agonizing experiences and seasons in life.

In the 28 plus years I've been employed as an Associate Pastor or Pastor, I don't remember using both as a basis for the same worship service, but I have also never forgotten when I first noticed that they can be read together. At the memorial service following my father's death in 1979, Pastor Clem Sorley read both Psalm 130 and Psalm 121. It was his judgment back then, I suspect, that they can be heard together, and, when I think about it, I think he was correct.

You may remember in one of the latter scenes in the movie, “The Sound of Music,” the Von Trapp family flees to an Austrian convent in the hope of escaping their Nazi pursuers. When their pursuers arrive and suspense is building, Maria prayerfully invokes the first verse of Psalm 121: “I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help!” That’s from the English King James Version, first published in 1611. In that translation, verse one is a declaratory sentence, essentially stating, “My help comes from the hills (where the Lord is, or from where the Lord comes).” Later English translations have noted that verse one is actually a question, which is then answered in verse 2: “I lift my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

You may or may not have been pursued by Nazis, in your dreams or in real life; yet aren't we all somewhere between Maria with the Von Trapp family and Pastor Clem Sorley leading worship at a memorial service?

While Psalm 121 begins with the person who is praying looking either toward the Temple Mount in Jerusalem or toward hills in general, Psalm 130 begins, “Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord! Lord, hear my prayer!” The feeling then described in the psalm is one of perceived brokenness in life related both to sin and to the need for forgiveness and healing.

Psalm 121 speaks of God never sleeping, but being continually on watch, on call, and on duty. Psalm 130 refers to the one praying, whether an individual or a larger community, waiting upon the Lord like a worried, and perhaps a sleepy, watchman or sentry wishing he or she could coax the sun up sooner. Another way to think of this is that the daylight takes away the advantage of ambush through the darkness against which the sentry is guarding. Sunrise is welcome help.

There are also those times when sunrise brings the showdown moment you or I or someone else has dreaded.

Alan Paton, in 1948, wrote the novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. A story of the intersecting lives of South African families, white and black, the final chapter includes a conversation of reconciliation. Many miles away in Johannesburg and several months before, the son of the white rancher, Arthur Jarvis, was killed by the son of the black Anglican priest, Stephen Kumalo. It was an odd twist of events that one young man who grew up not far from another, with neither ever knowing the other, would cross paths in a large city with one taking the life of the other. We call that odd twist of events tragedy.

In the last chapter, Rancher Jarvis speaks with Pastor Kumalo, knowing at dawn that the priest's son will be hanged for the death of his own son. After the two somberly wish each other well, Stephen Kumalo goes to the hills to spend the hours alone in prayer, separated, as he is, by miles and prison walls from his son. He sleeps some and awakens at 4 a.m. to resume his praying, hoping some prison chaplain is present to give comfort to his son. Alan Paton writes: "And the east lightened and lightened, till Kumalo knew that the time was not far off. And when he expected it, he rose to his feet and took off his hat and laid it down on the earth, and clasped his hands before him. And while he stood there the sun arose in the east" (pg.277).

Whether the sunrise is welcome or brings, rather, the dreaded moment, in an effort better to sense how these psalms relate to you and me, we may remember the most agonizing nights and days of our lives. Was it for you actual sentry duty in the military? Or studying through the darkness for a major, major exam? Possibly you've known that kind of night when sitting at home, or in a nursing care facility, or hospital with a daughter or son, a parent or grandparent or dear friend who was seriously ill or in a battle between life and death. Perhaps you were sleepless from guilt, failure, grief, or heartbreak from one cause or another. Sometimes dawn brings relief, sometimes the showdown meeting, sometimes both. Either way, the psalmists are convinced, the Lord is present with you and me and others.

Lutheran Paul Tillich preached and wrote in the 1950s that experiences in the depths are essential for experiencing the essence of God healingly relating to God's people. (cf. "The Depth of Existence," pgs. 52-63, in *The Shaking of the Foundations*)

Agony is deeply felt in certain tasks, in certain threats, in certain losses, both in the lives of individuals and larger groups. And there's the temptation to dismiss the parts of life we hate for their pain.

Freddie Fender was born in San Benito, Texas in 1937. He died in Corpus Christi in 2006. Early in his musical career, he wrote and sang what became a "signature song" for him: "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights," in which he's addressing a lover who has betrayed him.

"Wasted days and wasted nights I have left for you behind; for you don't belong to me. Your heart belongs to someone else. Why should I keep loving you, when I know that you're not true? And why should I call your name, when you're to blame for making me blue?"

You and I can look at experiences like that and discount, with unrelenting anger or resentment or bitterness, all the events that led to heartbreak. It would certainly be unhealthy to dismiss or deny the agony we feel. Yet the thought that sections of life ought to be flushed, deleted, and forgotten due to their agonizing outcome also probably misses the point.

Each one of us has a life which is the sum of high joy and combinations of fear, distress, worry, and despair in agony. That's part of our humanity. A huge part of it.

This past Monday in the Weldon ("country") Cemetery in the heart of east Texas, Presbyterian pastor Jim Ainsworth pronounced a benediction at a graveside. After he spoke the words of committal facing the casket, he turned to gathered friends and family and said something like: "We've done here what we came to do. Now let us depart to live in the fullness of love and grace as the Lord intends and goes with us to do."

At first, I thought, "Well, he's pushing us out." And then I thought, "No, he's telling us: 'Our help is in the Lord of heaven and earth.' So, even with our grief, let's not be interminably held back; but let's get going (as he said) with 'the fullness of love and grace the Lord intends and goes with us to do.'"

"I cry to Lord from the depths," and "I look to the hills wondering from where my help comes. My help comes from the Lord . . . who neither slumbers nor sleeps." That's power for life through and beyond very long days and nights.

-- All honor and praise be to God.