



A Song of Degrees

I WILL lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. * ² My help cometh from the LORD, which 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 shall neither slumber nor sleep. ⁵ The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand. ⁶ The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night. ⁷ The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. ⁸ The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore. (Psalm 121)

For many years, I have written about the importance of reverence, dignity, and formality in hymn-singing. There is no better example of that principle than that which we find in the songs, or Psalms, inspired by God and not man. If an act of worship is worth doing at all, it is worth doing right; and God has given us wonderful examples of the kind of hymns that are worthy of worship and adulation of the Most High God! The Book of Psalms is the most quoted Old Testament book of the New Testament.

The lyrics of this hymn today come from the very breathed Word of God to His servant, the Psalmist. The tune for the original is lost in antiquity; however, we do have reverent tunes that are appropriate for this beautiful hymn of truth and love. In the ancient church, the only hymns sung were Psalms. Later, this practice was restored and encouraged by the Reformers. The Book of Common Prayer of the Reformation Church of England provides Psalms in meter to be sung or orally recited antiphonally. Here is a note taken from Encyclopedia Britannica regarding Psalms-singing:

Psalmody, singing of psalms in worship. In biblical times professional singers chanted psalms during Jewish religious services. Occasionally, the congregation interpolated a short refrain between the chanted verses. The alternation of soloist and chorus was called responsorial psalmody. Another method, antiphonal psalmody, was the alternation by two half choirs in the singing of psalm lines or half lines. (Editor's note: these are designated in the Prayer Book Psalter by an asterisk at which point the congregants respond). Psalms were also sung without either refrain or alternating singers (direct psalmody). These methods of psalmody were adopted by the early Christian Church in the East and West. Early Christian psalmody was the germ from

which evolved both the classical Gregorian chant and also the Byzantine, Ambrosian, and other Christian chants.

These words for the Psalm were rearranged to provide a meter whereby the singing could smoothly progress in rhyme. This version is taken from the Scottish Psalter of 1650 and is generally sung to the tune, *FRENCH*:

Psalm 121

I to the hills will lift mine eyes,
from whence doth come mine aid.
My safety cometh from the Lord,
who heav'n and earth hath made.

Thy foot he'll not let slide,
nor will he slumber that thee keeps.
Behold, he that keeps Israel,
he slumbers not, nor sleeps.

The Lord thee keeps, the Lord thy shade
on thy right hand doth stay:
The moon by night thee shall not smite,
nor yet the sun by day.

The Lord shall keep thy soul; he shall
preserve thee from all ill.
Henceforth thy going out and in
God keep for ever will.

1 I to the hills will lift mine eyes, from whence doth come mine aid. 2 My safety cometh from the Lord, who heav'n and earth hath made. There are lonely moments in the heart of man when there seems to be no other to whom we might turn but God. These lonely moments may be those during which we have taken a stand for righteousness when all others condone sin and its practice; or it may be at the loss of family and friends which have departed; or it may be during moments of grave danger when all hope seems forlorn; or, finally, it may be the moment at which death is very near and one must pass through that dark door all alone – all who die, die ALONE (except for those who die in Christ and are escorted by the angels at the time of death). But our Lord God is ever on High to observe our plight and to intercede on our behalf. The greatest and most joyful victories have occurred at times of least expectation. The Creator who made you and all of the universal heavens is able to save from every threat. We may even have been brought to a woeful experience for the purpose of focusing our attention on God. When my son was very young, I often had to withdraw his toys and distractions from his sight in order to get his full and unadulterated attention during counseling – so it is with God.

3 Thy foot he'll not let slide, nor will he slumber that thee keeps. 4 Behold, he that keeps Israel, he slumbers not, nor sleeps. This verse is a repetition of God's assurance given in many other parts of Holy Writ (including the 91st Psalm): "9 Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; 10 There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. 11 For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. 12 They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone." Psalm 91:9-12 God cannot sleep, because all Creation is upheld by His divine Hand moment by moment. Moreover, there is no night of darkness in Heaven.

5 The Lord thee keeps, the Lord thy shade on thy right hand doth stay: 6 The moon by night thee shall not smite, nor yet the sun by day. The shade symbolizes defense. As a great Rock in a weary and wilderness land casts a shade of relief from the intense heat of the day, so does our Lord provide a Shade for His people during Wilderness journeys. Neither the blistering rays of the sun by day nor the cold nights over which the moon can generate no heat can vanquish the spirit of the people of God.

7 The Lord shall keep thy soul; he shall preserve thee from all ill. 8 Henceforth thy going out and in God keep for ever will. How much greater is the blessing of having one's soul secure in Christ as opposed to being reserved for the fires of Hell! Those events of sorrow and hurt we experience in this life are transitory but they can even be less than that if our faith is sufficient to keep our heart stayed on God. If you have faith to trust and believe in the Word of God, you will fear no evil for even evil is turned into gain for the believer: *"²⁸ And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.* (Romans 8:28) The epic question here is: Do you believe this truth of God's Word? He preserves the bodies of his people, oftentimes from diseases and disasters, and from death, till the appointed time comes; and then he preserves their dust in the grave, and raises it up at the last day; but more especially their souls, the redemption and salvation of which he undertook, and has effected; and which are preserved by him safe to his coming, kingdom, and glory.