

Where our help comes from

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During college, I taped a religious poster on my dorm room wall. Under a photo of a white country church against a green, timbered hill were the words, "I lift up my eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help."

I liked the Bible verse, the scene was pretty, and I enjoyed the peaceful reminder of rural home places. But a friend who was knowledgeable in scripture said the poster was theologically incorrect. The caption lacked the question mark after "help," so that the help seemed to come from the hills—from the peace and beauty of nature—rather than from God.

It was a fine distinction, since the poster did include a church, and a landscape is not a far-fetched way of symbolizing, if not God, then our longing for God or a location where we feel close to God. We are also often nostalgic for country churches: we tend to think that when times were simpler, people felt closer to God.

But I'm being too sentimental. Any location may provide a sense of peace. The important thing is the peace of knowing God, which is a gift of the Spirit and includes but transcends beloved places.

Someone once reminded me that the first verse of "The Star Spangled Banner" ends with a question mark: the poet does not yet know if the battle is over and the American flag is safe! We stop singing before we get (from the poem's standpoint) the important news. It is the same with "A Mighty Fortress is Our God": if we only sing verse one, the devil wins. And if we read only the first verse of Psalm 121, we're still helpless. But the next line (partially quoted in the Apostle's Creed) answers: "My

help comes from God, who made heaven and earth."

The psalm affirms God's help: God guides our steps, morally and spiritually, but also through power and attention. God never sleeps or slumbers. God shelters us. God's constant vigilance is proved by his protection of his people, Israel.

Psalm 121 reflects a journey to Jerusalem, but its lack of geographic specificity makes the psalm a classic for "the journey," whether the life-journey or the spiritual journey or both. The psalmist promises that the Lord protects us from hazards associated with both the day and the night and with all our comings and goings. A good connection-verse is Colossians 3:3: "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." We may have problems and terrible situations, but God's power surrounds us so that God rescues us from the ultimate power of sin and death.

Compare that promise to the lovely repetition in the psalm: *keep, keep, keep, keep*. Because God keeps us, we know from where our help comes.