

REFRESHING WATERS FROM A HIGH HILL

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"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,
from whence cometh my help" (Ps. 121:1).

It is interesting to note that although the arrangement of the Psalms may not be chronologically correct, Psalm 121 is the perfect continuation of Psalm 120. Evidently the organizer was supervised by the Holy Spirit. Between the two sonnets there is a journey from the depths of depression to heights of ecstasy, from the oppressive limitations of a dense fog to the clear vision of magnificent expectation. Within the framework of Psalm 120, the writer mentioned distress, lying lips, deceitful tongues, sharp arrows, burning coals, hateful people, and warmongers. His soul was overwhelmed with problems, his outlook bleak, and his future threatened. Then suddenly things changed. As a thrilling hope filled his soul, David said, I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help." A great resolve had gripped him, and he was determined to focus his vision upon the Lord who had been his refuge in trouble. He referred to God as his Keeper, Watchman, and the Guardian of his soul. Perhaps he was thinking about the city employees whose trained eyes watched for the approach of enemies. They were reliable men, implicitly trusted by the people. Their dedication to duty guaranteed the safety of the citizens. David compared that situation with his own soul where the Lord was a constant sentinel. The fear expressed in Psalm 120 was replaced by fellowship, and the lies of David's enemies were forgotten as he remembered the promises of God. The renewal of the king's trust in Jehovah revived his impoverished soul. Psalm 121 is one of the most reassuring of all David's sonnets.

How Safe The Lord is thy keeper' (Psalm 121:5)

Certain qualifications were necessary for all men who aspired to be the watchmen of any city; they were required to be vigilant, trustworthy, and courageous. If the men did not exhibit such attributes, they were not accepted by the elders. The cities were surrounded by high walls, and when danger threatened, everyone retired within their stronghold. When an alarm was heard, people prepared to defend their property. Any official who slept when on duty was considered unworthy of trust. The same facts applied to those who guarded the vineyards. Each parcel of land had its watchtower where

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men resided to safeguard the vines. Wild pigs were a menace and could destroy property overnight.

It was not a cause for amazement when David compared his soul with the vineyards. He was encouraged by the fact that Jehovah was his Keeper. God's ability was sufficient to protect everybody. David realized the Guardian of his vineyard was also the Good Shepherd, within whose fold he was perfectly safe.

How Sheltered The Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand"
(Psalm 121:5)

Throughout the vast expanse of Eastern deserts, shade was hard to locate. The limitless horizons of sandy wilderness often became a nightmare for desperate travelers. The sun shone mercilessly upon a barren landscape, and fresh water was impossible to find. Occasionally stony outcrops could be reached, and during devastating sandstorms these provided limited protection against nature's onslaught. Travelers accustomed to desert conditions knew where such shade could be found and hurriedly sought shelter when sandstorms were approaching.

David wrote in Psalm 91:1, "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."

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He compared the shady place with the secret place—within both the soul could find refuge. The shade from excessive heat and glare offered temporary relief; abiding in the secret place of the most High expressed a blessedness which could last forever.

There is a place of quiet rest,
Near to the heart of God,
A place where sin cannot molest,
Near to the heart of God.

O Jesus blest Redeemer,
Sent from the heart of God,
Hold us who wait before Thee,
Near to the heart of God.
Cleland B. McMee, 1866-1914.

How Secure The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil"
(Psalm 121:7)

Safety suggests protection; shelter offers peace; security promises prosperity. Whether the Christian goes out to battle or home to

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rest, the presence of God guarantees success. It was easy for the children of Israel to believe this fact, for the cloud above the tabernacle by day and the pillar of fire by night signified Jehovah was always with His people. He was a shield between them and the enemy. That explained their military success.

When the Hebrews left Egypt they had no military experience nor weapons; the people were a disorganized multitude. Moses received some training in the Egyptian Army, but without the help of Jehovah the nation would have perished in the wilderness. That the Lord promised protection from all evil revealed the magnitude of His capability. The significant superiority of other nations became meaningless when God displayed His irresistible might. Often when Israel was about to be overwhelmed, the prophet of God stood majestically before the enemy and seemed to hold the future in his hand. "And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do? And he answered, Fear not; for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. And when they came down to him, Elisha prayed unto the LORD, and said, Smite this people, I pray thee, with blindness. And he smote them with blindness according to the word of Elisha" (2 Kings 6:15-18).

It is worthy of consideration that God's protecting forces were present even before the young man's eyes were opened. Their presence guaranteed the safety of God's believing servant.

How Special The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night" (Psalm 121:6)

The Psalmist said, "Ye that love the LORD, hate evil; he preserveth the souls of his saints; he delivereth them out of the hand of the wicked" (Ps. 97:10). The ancient songwriter evidently believed divine protection was conditional. God did not preserve all people irrespective of their spirituality. The injunction to "hate evil" placed a moral obligation upon all who desired His assistance. The grace of God could be seen by all people, but His glory was shared only with saints. The psalmist emphasized that God "preserveth the souls

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of his saints." The Savior expressed similar truth when He said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows" (Matt. 10:29-31).

After a prairie fire in Australia a farmer went to survey the damage done to his property. As he walked through a yard, he disturbed a charred mass on the ground and was astonished when a family of small chicks emerged from the burnt feathers. He realized that a hen had given her life for her family and was reminded of that greater sacrifice when Christ died for those He loved. Moses was correct when in addressing Israel he said, "For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: The LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth" (Deut. 7:6). That Israel occupied such a place in the affections of the Almighty indicated His continued watchfulness over them. That kind of love deserved to be reciprocated.

How Splendid The Lord shall preserve thy going out and
thy coming in, from this time forth, and even for evermore"
(Psalm 121:8)

David knew that some professions of friendship failed to stand the test of time; they seldom endured through continuing hardship. Even members of the royal family had been rebellious. Absalom had been guilty of insurrection, yet other people had remained loyal to the king even amid the most distressing episodes of his life (see 2 Sam. 17:27-29). True friends were more desirable than gold. Yet David realized that even his most loyal comrades could not be compared with the Lord. Human assistance could only continue until death, but the favor of the Lord was for "evermore." It lasted through time and into eternity. When David reminisced, it was easy to remember occasions when God enabled him to overcome very difficult circumstances. The triumph over Goliath was only one example of how strength had been made perfect in David's weakness. Oftentimes when death appeared to be imminent, the king relied upon the unfailing promises of God and exclaimed: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (Ps. 23:4). David looked back with gratitude and onward with confidence; his heavenly Father was reliable.

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ESTHER, THE GIRL WHO WON THE BEAUTY PAGEANT

"And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace, to the house of the women, unto the custody of Hege the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their things for purification be given them. And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing pleased the king; and he did so" (Esther 2:3-4).

The book of Esther has become famous for two reasons. Although the record is included in the canon of Holy Scripture, God was never mentioned by Mordecai, the author. Reasons for the omission are debatable, for there were many occasions when the writer could easily have referred to the Almighty. Throughout the history of the Hebrew nation God's protecting hand was never more evident than in the deliverance wrought through the ingenuity and courage of a Hebrew girl.

Secondly, the book is unique in that, as far as is known, it de-

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scribes the first beauty pageant in history. The modern world has become accustomed to occasions when young ladies from many nations compete for the honor of becoming Miss Universe, and the amazing spectacle is televised around the world. The drama and excitement deepen when, by a process of elimination, the competitors decrease in number until only a few stand before the international audience. Ultimately the winner is named, and the new queen is crowned. Every year the spectacle is watched by millions of people who do not know the first and greatest pageant was arranged in Susa or Shushan, the ancient capital of the Elamite empire which was situated in the country now called Iran. The winner of that contest was destined to reign—not for twelve months, but for the rest of her life over an empire which reached ". . . from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces" (Esther 1:1). The girl who won that beauty competition could not have known that her name was to become famous throughout the world. She was destined to become the instrument of Jehovah, the unseen God, who planned and directed her every movement.

The Royal Refusal... Unprecedented

"The king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace; Where were white, green

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and blue hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black marble. And they gave them drink in vessels of gold (the vessels being diverse one from another), and royal wine in abundance. . . On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded... To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to shew the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on . . . But the queen Vashti refused to come (Esther 1:5-12).

The queen's refusal to obey her husband's command was unprecedented; it was suicidal! Even men hastened to grant the king's requests, but for a woman to insult her royal master was unpardonable. She shamed him before an international assembly of very important guests. Why she was rebellious was never revealed. Perhaps she knew her husband was drunk and refused to be made a spectacle at the royal party. On the other hand, since she had convened her own banquet, she may have disliked the idea of ruining her plans to please a selfish husband. Nevertheless, it was unthinkable to offend the king in whose hand was the power of life and death. No woman for any reason would have acted as she did. Therefore, the conclusion is inescapable; she was influenced by an irresistible force which came from God.

The Remarkable Reception... Unexpected

"Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai. . . Who had been carried away from Jerusalem... whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away. And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful; whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter" (Esther 2:5-7). When all the consternation at the royal banquet had subsided, plans were made to choose a new queen and search was made throughout the land for the most attractive maidens. To that first beauty pageant the adopted daughter of Mordecai was brought, and her indescribable charm captivated everybody. Even the keeper of the women was impressed. "And the maiden pleased him,

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and she obtained kindness of him" (Esther 2:9). Actually, there was no contest. The competition was over before it commenced. That was phenomenal, for Esther was a Jewish slave. Beauty is a great asset,

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but it seldom overcomes prejudice. What influenced the mind of the official and paved the way for an orphan to become queen of a vast empire? The sun shines even when clouds fill the sky!

The Reported Rebellion... Unrewarded

"In those days, while Mordecai sat in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains... sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus. And the thing was known to Mordecai, who told it unto Esther the queen; and Esther certified the king thereof in Mordecai's name. And when inquisition was made of the matter, it was found out; therefore they were both hanged on a tree; and it was written in the book of the chronicles before the king" (Esther 2:21-23).

It is difficult to understand how any monarch should remain ungrateful to a man who had just prevented his assassination. It is hard to believe that Esther the queen did not suggest a reward for her uncle. Neither did Mordecai complain of the royal indifference. At a later date he was not reluctant to express his opinions, and Esther was active in making her husband acknowledge his responsibility. How could such an important event be ignored or forgotten unless God was directing the proceedings!

The Remembered Record... Unusual

The subsequent villainy of Haman, who detested all Jews, is known throughout the world. Both Mordecai and his adopted daughter must have wondered why God, who had done so much to help them, now seemed to have forgotten His people. During the night before what might have become the most tragic day in Hebrew history, the king could not sleep, "and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king. And it was found written, that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's chamberlains . . . who sought to lay hands on the king Ahasuerus. And the king said, What honor and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this? Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, There is nothing done for him" (Esther 6:1-3). The marginal reading suggests that "the king's sleep fled away," and curious readers wonder how this was accomplished. Even if the poor man possessed all the sleeping pills in the world, sleep would have been impossible, for God was determined to keep him awake. It seems extraordinary that, in the middle of the night, the frustrated monarch should seek consolation from his ar-

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chives! How could historical records produce slumber? Probably there were many entries in those scrolls, but in some strange way the unknown reader found the place where Mordecai's act was mentioned and revealed the man had never been rewarded for his deed. Were all these details produced by coincidence, or were they evidence that God's wisdom is astonishing? Mordecai would have appreciated the words of William Cowper:

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessing on your head.

The Rich Rewarded... Unequaled

"And Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with

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a garment of fine linen and purple: and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad" (Esther 8:15). "For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces: for this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater" (Esther 9:4).

Adversity has always been a testing ground for oppressed saints. Recurring problems suggest that God sometimes forgets those who trust Him. Daniel might have questioned the wisdom of his being allowed to be thrown into the lions' den, and the disciples when their boat was about to capsize, asked, "Master, carest thou not that we perish?" Throughout his life David became despondent and asked, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me?" (Ps. 42:5). Shells found in the depth of the sea are much more valuable than specimens washed up on a beach. Truths learned in human grief and suffering outshine anything discovered elsewhere. Esther and Mordecai would have appreciated the words of Solomon, who wrote, "But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Prov. 4:18).

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