

# ***Sermon***

***22 May 2016***

## ***West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood***

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***Text: Psalm 121 & Ephesians 3:14-21***

***(Saying goodbye to a family who are moving away)***

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There is perhaps no better feeling than knowing that someone "has your back."

This expression is an old military idea, referring to how the ancient Greeks or Romans would fight during war. A soldier would have his breast plates on and have a shield in his hand, while another soldier would do the same right behind him. They would lean back to back on each other while fighting the enemy to protect each other. And if one of them got hurt, the other would carry him on his back out of the battlefield to safety.

Today this expression still means exactly the same, even when applied in a non-military situation: When someone has your back, you don't have to worry about being hit from behind. When someone has your back you can concentrate on the struggle in front of you without worrying about dangers you cannot see. When someone has your back you feel protected, secure, safe.

Psalm 121 reminds us that God “has our back”. He is always there for us on our journey through life, keeping us company, making sure that we are protected from all the dangers lurking around us.

Psalm 121 is a song of ascents. Literally translated it means it was a song that was sung while someone was travelling upwards. There are a quite a few songs like these in the Bible, of which Psalm 120 through to Psalm 134 are all examples.

The Israelites sang these songs when they journeyed to the temple in Jerusalem, and then back home again.

Jerusalem is surrounded by mountains – a little like Aviemore, I guess, and the journey back home from the temple was always a scary one. Mountains were the ideal place for robbers to hide, mountains were home to wild animals, like lions, and in a time when there were no roads and walking (in sandals) was your only means of travelling, the fact that your foot could slip was a real possibility.

Try to imagine opening the church door, looking out at surrounding mountains, knowing that the only way home is *over* those mountains... A challenge, to say the least!

Especially if you keep in mind that the scorching sun in Palestine would make travelling by day really exhausting – in those days sunstroke was a very common cause of death; which meant that lots of these pilgrims chose to rather travel by night. But in those days they were very superstitious and just as scared of the moon (especially the full moon) as the sun, and all the big festivals at the temple would always be held

at full moon. Because they didn't have watches and calendars, they would keep an eye on the moon to know what time of year it was.

Luckily these pilgrims were travelling home from the *temple*, where they were just reminded that God had their back!

They needn't worry about the sun or the moon – because, literally it says that “the Lord is your shade at your right hand”. *And this is one of my favourite expressions in the Bible.*

In the blistering sun, God will be your shade, your comforter; and he will be at your side all the time – because no matter what you do, you will never be able to get rid of your shadow!

The reference to him being *at your right hand*, is another expression of protection – because in ancient Israel, during a court case, somebody's lawyer, their protector, would always stand at their right. In other words, God will be there for us where we need him most.

And with this knowledge, a pilgrim would set off to travel home, over the mountains, through the dangers, with a song in his heart and on his lips, because he knew – he wasn't travelling alone. God had his back.

Our world might have changed completely since the time this Psalm was written, but God hasn't. He still loves us and takes care of us in the exact same way he did all those many years ago. Actually, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, he has come even *closer* to us.

We walk out these doors, with clothes and shoes on that protect us against the weather, we get in a car, drive on a tarred road, and are home within minutes.

Our physical journeys through life might have become a whole lot easier than those of the people who lived in Biblical times, but on a spiritual and emotional level we still face all kinds of dangers and difficulties every single day.

The downside to our easier lifestyle is that we dash from one place to the next, that we are able to fit a million things into a single day, where the Israelites were forced to use all the time they had while travelling to reflect and think, to realize and remember that God is in control of their lives.

Let's never get caught up in this rat race so much that we forget where our help comes from.

The fact that the pilgrims knew that God would protect them, didn't all of a sudden flatten all the mountains, make the robbers disappear and tamed the wild animals. No, all the dangers were still there, but now they had the courage to face up to life's challenges, because they knew they were not alone.

If we believe in God it doesn't mean that we will never have to make difficult choices. It doesn't mean that everything we have to do will go smoothly and we won't ever have anything to worry about. Not so.

Life and death will continue to flow forward bringing everything with it. Earthquakes, fires, floods, wars, disasters and disease will not take a holiday because we trust in God.

What *will* evaporate, however, is the fear with which we confront life's challenges. What will come is a *confidence and sense of power* that emanates from the sure feeling that God's *got our back*. No matter what we have to go through in life – with God by our side, we will arrive safely at our destination – even if that destination is not where or what we expected at all. God will lead us where we have to be.

Our journey through life might take us to different places (something that you as a family are experiencing at the moment, .....), we might move house or travel to lots of different places, but God doesn't. Through his Spirit God lives in our hearts, and that is where he will stay, forever.

So no matter where we go and what we do, God will be there with us too. In our hearts, like our shade at our right hand.

Wherever you have to go in life, whether this be an exciting new chapter in your life – like moving to ..... – or just the same places you have been going to every single day for many years, take these words of the beautiful prayer in Ephesians 3 with you:

*<sup>16</sup> I pray that out of his glorious riches God may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of*

*Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

Let's travel through life with a song in our hearts like the pilgrims of old,  
because we know, - no matter what happens, God has our back!

AMEN