

Ascending the Delectable Mountains

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Les Alpilles" Mountain Landscape near South-Reme by Vincent van Gogh (1889)

Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God, by your Holy Spirit, we pray that you would illumine these sacred pages, that our minds may be open to receive your Word, our hearts taught to love it, and our wills strengthened to obey it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Story-Telling from Pilgrim's Progress

Well Kris did a great job last week sharing with us how Christian made it through Vanity Fair by the skin of his teeth. His dear friend Faithful, lived up to his name--staying faithful to God, even to death. But **Christian** sojourned on. Another pilgrim joined him, named **Hopeful**. The two entered into a brotherly covenant together agreeing to be traveling companions.

In this seventh stage of the journey, Christian's wisdom and experience gleaned from his travels serve him well. He was able to discern more clearly the mischievous motives of **Lord Turn-About**, **Mr. Two-Tongues**, **My Lady Feigning's daughter**, and **Mr. Money-Love**.

Christian was adamant, "We will stay along the King's Highway, in all seasons—when Religion is in rags and when it wears silver slippers. We will stand with Religion when it is bound in shackles and when it walks in the streets with applause."

Mr. Money-Love and his friends weren't willing to make that commitment, so they bypassed the King's Highway. They ended up turning aside to the little hill called Lucre that had a silver mine in it. Christian and Hopeful never saw them again.



The River of the Water of Life

The two pilgrims continued and came upon a pleasant river, which was called **The River of the Water of Life**. After refilling their canteens, they continued to follow along the bank of the river. Lush green trees bearing all kinds of fruit were on both sides of the river—and they ate of them, giving them sustenance and remedy for body and soul.

Now we don't have time to recount their harrowing escape from the giant Despair and his wife Diffidence when they mistakenly trespassed the grounds of Doubting Castle, but needless to say, the two were able to carry on and found themselves at the Delectable Mountains. As they ascended, they gazed upon the gardens, orchards, and springs. They drank, washed up, and freely ate of the fruit of the fields.

Soon four shepherds approached, whose names were **Knowledge, Experience, Watchful, and Sincere**. After they listened to Christian and Hopeful's story, they led them to their place of rest, where a feast awaited them. In the morning, they'd be given a tour through the select peaks of the Delectable Mountains.

"These mountains are Immanuel's Land," the shepherds answered with pride and reverence, "and they are within site of the Celestial City. All these sheep here are the Great Shepherd's."

First, they gazed upon the valley atop the **Hill of Error**.

"Humbly learn and observe from this hill, Christian and Hopeful. Take note of what not to do, and what to avoid on your pilgrimage."

Don't climb too high here or come too close to the brink of the mountain—it will not go well for you.

From there, the shepherds led them to the brow of **Caution Peak**. From a distance, the shepherds pointed to travelers who were lost and wandering, walking up and down among the tombs, never leaving.

“Be cautious and aware of this leg of your journey ahead.”

The pilgrims were led to yet another hill that had a door on the side of it. The shepherds warned the pilgrims not to go through that half-opened door. Inside it was a path—but it was not a good path. It was the **Road to Perdition**.



Perspective Glass view of the Celestial City

To cap off their tour of the Delectable Mountains, the shepherds took our pilgrims to the pinnacle called **Clear**. There they were handed a **perspective glass**.

“If you look carefully with steady hand, you will be able to see the very gates of the **Celestial City**.”

Christian and Hopeful were rattled by the previous sights they saw along the Delectable Mountains. With trembling hands they grasped the perspective glass and dimly saw what looked like bright and shining gates ahead. Though their view was a bit fuzzy, they knew they were gazing upon deep and hidden things that were mysterious and holy.

Soon, the two would arrive at the Celestial City and gaze upon it with their own two eyes. Their earthly pilgrimage wasn't over— but they knew they were in the final stages.

The Shepherds said their goodbyes and gave gifts to Christian and Hopeful. One gave **written directions** for the remainder of the journey. Another cautioned the pilgrims to be aware of a notorious traveler named **Flatterer**. A third warned them not to sleep upon the **Enchanted Ground**. And the fourth bid them **Godspeed**.

Christian and Hopeful forged ahead towards their final destination—the Celestial City.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 121 (TANAKH)

- ¹ I turn my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come?
- ² My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth.
- ³ He will not let your foot give way; your guardian will not slumber;
- ⁴ See, the guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps!
- ⁵ The Lord is your guardian, the Lord is your protection at your right hand.
- ⁶ By day the sun will not strike you, nor the moon by night.
- ⁷ The Lord will guard you from all harm; He will guard your life.
- ⁸ The Lord will guard your going and coming now and forever.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Ascending the Delectable Mountains

Mountains.

Some mountains are awesome and awe-inspiring. Others are awful—symbolizing insurmountable obstacles and peril.

Mountains can be places of worship. The pilgrimages for the Hebrew people led to Mt. Zion, the city of Jerusalem upon a hill. But mountains can also be places for misdirected worship. Think of the high places in the Old Testament where shrines were erected and idols were worshipped.

Mountains can be places of growth—like the **Delectable Mountains** in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Or places of imposing danger like the Spirit of the Age in C. S. Lewis' allegory *The Pilgrim's Regress*.

Mountains have a special place in all the world's religions, including Christianity. Many characters in the Bible had defining moments on mountains—Abraham and Isaac, Moses, Elijah, Jesus, and many others.

Mountains are places of remoteness and solitude—getaways from the hustle and bustle. We escape the heat in the mountains. There we can spiritually, emotionally, and literally decompress and detox on the mountain.

Mountains are ideal locations for retreat and respite—where we have “mountaintop experiences.” We encounter God's presence and promise on the mountains—we feel closer to the heavens.

Mountains are places of revelation and clarity—where we get a bird's eye view of things while still having our feet grounded.

Mountains give us some healthy distance from our regular lives in the valley. They provide a change of pace and perspective.

Mountains convey stability, and the reliability of God.

¹ *I turn my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come?*

² *My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth.*

There is no hesitation to the question the psalmist raises in the first verse. We worship the God who made the mountains. He is our helper, our guardian, and our protector.

Psalm 121 is the second of fifteen consecutive Songs of Ascent in the Book of Psalms, Psalms 120-134. They are pilgrimage songs, orientation songs, written in the voice of a pilgrim. These are road songs, for ramblin' men and women. The Jewish pilgrim would sing these songs along their pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover or other festivals. They would sing them going back home.

But really all of us are pilgrims on a pilgrimage. Sometimes literal paths of journeying on foot. Other times metaphorical ones along the path of life. Our life paths are often more a winding trail than a paved road. We can easily lose our footing with stones and scree strewn along the way. Psalm 121 teaches us to look to God for firm footing. And it is from this Psalm that we have a line from the Apostle's Creed:

"I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

In the eight verses of this Psalm, the word "guard" is repeated six times, repeatedly reminding us that God is not only watching us, but he's actively guiding, guarding, and protecting us along this journey we find ourselves on.

God also gives us good shade, shielding us from the sun. Being from Arizona we know all about this. In fact, we try to follow God's example by making the outdoor service as shady an experience as possible! God gives us shade from the sweltering heat by day, and shields us from being moonstruck by night. In fact, in Greek, the word for epilepsy and being demon-possessed is literally "moonstruck." Day and night, God is right by our side—and God's presence is a caring and constant presence.

In the Delectable Mountains, we are reminded that God is not only alive, but God is awake. God holds vigil over us. He doesn't sleep on the job or suffer narcolepsy. God is alert and attuned to each and every one of us. This gives us confidence for whatever comes our way. We can take courage in the midst of our fears, whether they're real or imagined. We can take heart in the midst of the known and the unknown, in certainties and uncertainties. In fact, in the Jewish tradition, this Psalm, Psalm 121, is quoted in times of trial. Just as Christians often quote Psalm 23 in challenging times, Jews will often recite Psalm 121. We are reminded in it that God is our true source of help.

Our Maker is ever vigilant of our condition and situation. We can trust God's steady attention through all of life's situations—rain or shine, hell or highwater. You are the apple of God's eye. He can't take his eyes off of you. God won't drift or doze off to sleep on his night watch over you. With our guardian God, we can keep calm and carry on because surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives.

Psalm 121 is a Psalm of Orientation. It inspires us to remain forward thinking, filled with hope about our future and the journey that's still unfolding. We are challenged to look up and lift up our downcast eyes. Take in not only the earth, but the mountains, and the heavenlies. Take it all in, remembering God is the Maker of it all. In doing this, we realize how blessed we are because God is our Guardian who guards our lives. God ushers us and escorts us through life. But sometimes, our foot does slip during the journey. Sometimes we do get heat stroke. Accidents happen. One day, even the strongest among us, will fall ill and die.

For those times we read additional Psalms—not only **Psalms of Orientation** like this one, but **Psalms of Disorientation** and **Psalms of Lament** when tragedy strikes.

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

"How long God, how long?"

These Psalms help us vent and process our grief.

But this we know—God is always with us, no matter the weather or our stage of the journey. Through it all, in blessing and promise and in worry and doubt—God is there. In every going out and in every coming in, from dawn to dusk, in the sunrise and sunset of your life, in your ventures and in your sheltering, in all your comings and goings, in your zigs and your zags, your ups and your downs, your trials and your errors, your victories and defeats. In everything, we're under the protection and watchful eye of the one who made the heavens and the earth.

And as the Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 8:

Neither death nor life, or angels or demons, neither present nor future, nor any powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

Sermon Art:

"Les Alpilles" Mountain Landscape near South-Reme by Vincent van Gogh (1889)

"The Pilgrim's Progress" images (public domain)

TANAKH — an acronym derived from the first letter of each of the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible:

- Torah (Teachings) *the first five books of the Bible*
- Nevi'im (Prophets)
- Ketuvim (Writings)

TANAKH: The Jewish Study Bible, Copyright © 1985, 1999, Jewish Publication Society. Published by Oxford University Press USA. All rights reserved.