

[\(00:11\):](#)

[inaudible].

[\(00:12\):](#)

Hello and welcome to this episode of the St Andrew's Enfield podcast with me, Steve Griffiths. Well, we are in dark days indeed aren't we? As I record this, it's March 2020 and the impact of the coronavirus has been felt all around the world in a way which was simply unimaginable a few weeks ago. Hundreds of thousands of people contracting the illness, tens of thousands of people dying with Coronavirus. The world economy, uh, it seems, is on the verge of collapse, as airlines ground planes, the entertainment industry closes, cafes, restaurants, and pubs are emptying. And the stock market is going into shock. And by the time you listen to this podcast, the facts and the figures will no doubt be out of date, um, such is the speed at which things are developing. And of course, there's so much fear and anxiety in our communities and we're all struggling to know how to respond.

[\(01:18\):](#)

So please pray for your politicians, uh, pray for your faith leaders across all world religions, um, as they seek wisdom to know what to do. And pray for your health professionals and the emergency services and all those others who are under so much pressure. And of course do what you can to support the vulnerable in your community. None of us are left untouched by this pandemic. We're all in it together and it's going to take each one of us to play our part, to uh, hold things together. And in the midst of all this, as Christians, we are trying to hold onto our faith and work out where God is in all of this. And we're turning to the scriptures to find guidance and wisdom and no doubt over the coming weeks and sadly, probably months, we're going to be returning to this topic again in our podcasts.

[\(02:23\):](#)

Uh, but where do we start with an issue such as this? Where do we start reflecting on God and our faith in the midst of this crisis? Well, for me, um, as so often in life, the starting point is Psalm 121. Uh, Psalm 121 is for me one of the most beautiful passages of scripture. It's a passage that I return to again and again and again in various seasons of my life, in good times and in bad, because it speaks so profoundly of God's love and care and protection for us. It's a Psalm that we know was regularly used by the Israelites as they traveled to Jerusalem each year for the Passover. It's almost certainly the case that it's one of the Psalms that Jesus himself would have been singing as he went to Jerusalem that last time to face his crucifixion. And the Psalm, if you've got it in front of you, as you can see, is based around the idea of a journey.

[\(03:30\):](#)

The idea that life itself is a journey. The idea of the Psalm is that as we travel through life, the Lord will protect us always by day and by night. And that he is always, always looking out for us. Uh, six times in this Psalm we read the idea that the Lord is our keeper. Verse three, "he who keeps you will not slumber". Verse four, "he who keeps Israel". Verse five, "the Lord is your keeper". Verse seven, "the Lord will keep you from all evil". Verse seven again, "the Lord will keep your life". Verse eight, "the Lord will keep your going out and your coming in". So whatever else we take from this Psalm, we are left with the absolute confident truth that God is our constant protector in times of danger and he is with us as we face this Coronavirus together.

[\(04:39\):](#)

[inaudible]

[\(04:42\):](#)

But it's important to remember that in the Old Testament, God was speaking primarily to the community of Israel rather than specifically to individuals. And so we are reminded that when there are dangers to be faced in everyday life, and as we come to terms with the impact of the coronavirus, we need to come together and find support in the community. We must constantly be seeking to build one another up, to make sure that all our needs are being met, especially the vulnerable and the elderly amongst us, and to find support and encouragement from one another so that we can face times of trial together. So we come to the Psalm itself, which opens with these well known words in verse one, "I lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?" In the original Hebrew, uh, that verse is actually a lot more ambiguous because it's not clear whether that is a statement or a question.

[\(05:45\):](#)

It might say, "I lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?" Or it might say "I lift my eyes to the hills, from where comes my help". It might be a question, "where does my help come from?" Or it may be a statement of fact "where my help comes from". We can read this verse both ways and I think that we get two slightly different ideas out of it according to how we read it. So first let's read it as a question, "I lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?" Now here we have the people of Israel journeying from their homes towards Jerusalem. It was a dangerous journey, an arduous journey for many of them. If any of you have been to Israel, you'll know that the hills and mountain regions are not green rolling pastures. Uh, the mountain regions are desolate, rocky wildernesses, and they are perilous to walk through, dangerous to travel across. The mountains were the place, um, in the time of Jesus and the time of the early Israelites, the mountains were the place where bandits and terrorists lived.

[\(06:53\):](#)

Uh, you remember the story that Jesus told of the Good Samaritan who looked after the man who had suffered a physical attack as he journeyed from Jerusalem to Jericho through this mountainous and desert region. So the Psalmist is making a journey through an area where there is danger and physical threat, and he asks a legitimate question out of his fear and nervousness. "I lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?" But there's something else very discomfoting about these hills too that cause the frightened and nervous believer to ask the question. Because during the biblical period, uh, in the Old Testament period and the New Testament period, the hills of Palestine were thought to be the home of the gods. And when you stood in the valley and looked up to the hills, you could see yourself surrounded by pagan temples and idols to be worshiped. As the traveler looked to the hills, he would have seen glinting in the sunlight, the false gods and the idols and the temple roofs of pagan practice and false religion.

[\(07:59\):](#)

And he would have looked at all this and realized the inability of these gods to help. And so he asks the question, "I lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?" And as we live with heightened levels of fear and anxiety as a result of the impact of Coronavirus on every aspect of our lives, social, financial, relational and spiritual, perhaps we can identify with the Psalmist and we too quite legitimately see verse one as a question, "I lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?" Well the answer to that of course comes by no longer seeing verse one as a question but by using the

alternative Hebrew reading and seeing it as a statement of fact, "I lift my eyes to the hills where my help comes from". Because in the Bible, the mountains and the hills are not always negative imagery.

[\(08:57\)](#):

The mountains and the hills don't always speak to us of danger and physical threat and false religion. The mountains and the hills are also used as a metaphor for the strength of God, the immovable, unchanging love of God for us, hemming us in and protecting us on every side. So we ask the question in times of heightened fear and danger, "I lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?" And we answer that question by removing the question mark. "I lift my eyes to the hills where my help comes from". God himself is our mountain, our hill, our rock, and he is the source of comfort and security and the rest of the Psalm goes on to develop that idea for us. In verse two the Psalmist makes a bold and confident claim, "My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth."

[\(09:57\)](#):

That is the answer to the question. The truth is that in times of fear and heightened anxiety like we're experiencing today, our only help can come from the Lord who made heaven and earth and we must learn to put our trust in him. So what does that mean for us today? Does it mean that because we're Christians, nothing bad will ever happen to us? Does it mean that we won't catch the virus? Does it mean that we won't lose loved ones or lose our job because we have faith? Well, no, of course it doesn't mean that. That can never be God's promise to us. And it has certainly not been the experience of Christians through the centuries that we somehow become immune to the tragedies of life as if God somehow puts an invisible force of protection field around us the moment we believe in him. And actually that's not what Psalm 121 says to us anyway. You'll notice that the remaining verses are all general statements.

[\(11:02\)](#):

They're not specific and no point does the Psalmist say "as you journey to Jerusalem for the Passover, you're not going to be attacked by robbers". He doesn't say "as you journey through life, you're not gonna face stressful situations". Instead, the Psalmist is saying something different altogether. He's telling us that no matter what we do face in life, good or bad, God will protect us and hold us. Verse three, "he will not let your foot be moved". Verse five, "the Lord is your shade". Verse seven, "the Lord will keep you from all evil" and so on. So we've thought about how often this word 'keep' is used in this Psalm. What does the word 'keep' actually mean for us? Well, I think it means that whatever we are confronted with in life, that does not have the power to determine our eternal destiny. Whatever happens to us, God is our ultimate destiny and our ultimate future.

[\(12:10\)](#):

And so no harm that we face can rob us of that. Now isn't that the testimony of Christians throughout the ages? Um, as each disciple except for John was martyred for the faith. As the apostle Paul was beheaded for the faith. As thousands upon thousands of martyrs and saints through the centuries have been crucified and shot and burned at the stake and eaten by lions and so forth. Each one of them has testified with their dying breath to the fact that evil can claim their bodies, but evil can never claim their souls and their eternal destiny as a child of God. The Lord will keep us. The Lord is our keeper. As we read in verse seven "the Lord will keep your life". God can never promise that nothing will harm our bodies, but God does promise that this will not harm our eternal destiny and that we are safe and secure with the Lord, our keeper.

[\(13:17\)](#):

And of course the greatest example of that is the witness of Jesus Christ upon the cross; the ultimate act of harm carried out in the name of false politics and false religion against a truly innocent man resulting in his torture and tragic death. And yet with his dying breath, Jesus Christ was able to say, "Lord, into your hands I commend my spirit". No amount of harm that was thrown at Jesus could separate him from the love of God. And that was proven three days later for the whole world to see through his glorious resurrection, his being raised by God from the dead. And no matter what life throws at us, the destiny of Jesus has become our destiny. As Paul tells us in Romans six verse five, "for if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

[\(14:33\)](#):

[inaudible].

[\(14:35\)](#):

So how are we then to respond to the coronavirus pandemic in the world today, uh, that creeps ever closer into our communities and our lives? Well, just three brief points. I think firstly, we must stand together as a community, as one family. And that means that we must listen to one another with kindness and compassion when any one of us expresses emotions of fear and nervousness. Um, our churches must increasingly become a safe place to express who we are and what we're feeling without any fear that we will be judged or rejected or laughed at. We've got to stand together as a community and in our local communities as one family that listens kindly to one another. And as we listen to one another, so we need to pray for one another. We may not know what words to say to ease the fears that people have around us, but prayer is powerful and we can offer deep support to each other as we pray.

[\(15:53\)](#):

And secondly, we've got to do what we can to alleviate the suffering of others. Uh, this may be through, uh, phoning them regularly to check up on them. It may be, uh, getting their food and their medicines if they're self isolating, it may be by alerting them to support networks that could be helpful and so on. Uh, let Christian love be shown in practical ways more than ever before. And finally, I say that we must increasingly put our trust in God who is our strength and our Redeemer, who is our rock and stronghold, who is our keeper. Each one of us needs to grow in the knowledge and spiritual insight that no matter what befalls our bodies, our eternal security is assured in him. God is a good shepherd who calls us and leads us out and keeps us safe and secure in the fields and the pastures.

[\(16:57\)](#):

You are a child of God, a beloved, wonderful, beautiful child of God. And as the Psalmist says, "the Lord will keep your life", whatever that means to you. And I just want to finish with these ultimate words of comfort that Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans in chapter eight he wrote this: "If God is for us, who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No. In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord". So today we lift our eyes to the hills. Where is our help? Our help is God who is our strength, security and protector. Our help is God who shepherds us into intimacy with him. Our help is God, who today is

leading us into life in all its fullness. And as world events unfold, as community events unfold, uh, may we know the keeping power of God in our lives and may our lives be truly lived in all their fullness.

[\(18:49\)](#):

[inaudible]

[\(18:51\)](#):

So I hope that you've found this podcast useful today. Uh, please stay safe. Wash your hands regularly, and wherever you are today, whatever you're doing, my prayer is that you will know God as your strength and your rock, and that you will know his calming and healing presence in your life. And I look forward to being with you again in the next podcast. Bye.

[\(19:27\)](#):

[inaudible] [inaudible].