

From Nepal with Love

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Preacher: Mark Glover

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 4th of June 2000. The preacher is Mark Glover and his sermon is entitled, From Nepal with Love.

Thanks for having me here. It's great to finally be here. This is the last of our link churches that we're visiting, but it's probably one of our closest in the sense that, as you probably know, Jenica was here in the Sunday school and taught Sunday school in her younger days, so it's one that's very close to our family.

Paul stole my thunder a bit there on his description of the psalm, so please forget what he said and I'll tell you again later. This psalm is one that we had at our wedding.

My parents had at their wedding. I would say if you had to rank the psalms, this would be, in terms of popularity, this would have to be in the top ten.

It doesn't quite rank with Psalm 23, but it's up there amongst them. And I guess it's popular for a number of reasons, but one of the obvious ones is it's such an assurance of God's watching over us.

[1 : 30] Look, for example, at even just that last verse, verse 8, The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

If you haven't found it, page 498 in the Bible is there. I want to just look at the first couple of verses though.

That opening verse, I lift my eyes to the hills. I pondered, what did that actually mean? I was wondering, you know, why is the psalmist looking to the hills, or the character who's saying this? Maybe, then the next half of the verse, where does my help come from? I thought, oh, maybe he's looking to the hills and the enemy is coming over the hills and he's concerned about that, so then he says, oh, where's my help coming from?

Or maybe he's surrounded by enemies and he's looking to the hills and saying, that's where my allies all come from, so Lord help me, send me some allies.

[2 : 44] Then, and I thought along those lines, so verse 1 is saying, I'm looking to the hills for my allies, where does my help come from? And then verse 2 says, no, your help isn't coming from your allies, it's coming from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Fortunately, you don't have to rely on my imagination to figure out what this psalm means. Scholars have spent their lives studying the culture and the history of the Bible, and based on that, we can get a better understanding.

And the big clue there is in the title, the subtitle there, A Song of Ascent. And you'll notice that all of them on that page are songs of ascent, and the one before it is.

There's a whole series of them, as Paul was saying. Ascending ascents, going up, and going up to Jerusalem to worship is what they were doing.

And it's widely believed that these psalms were sung by the pilgrims going to Jerusalem. And they would sing it, maybe even while they were walking, probably they were walking, maybe keeping time with the way they were walking, maybe as they stopped and sort of spent the evening at night.

[4 : 14] So, sorry, and then the hills that they're referring to here are the hills of Jerusalem, the hills around Jerusalem.

So they're looking to where they're going, and then talking about what they are going to. So, the second verse is not opposed to verse 1.

The second verse is not saying, no, your help isn't coming from the hills. It's saying, yes, the hills are where we are worshipping the God who provides your help.

Another interesting thing about this psalm is that there's a grammatical difference between verses 1 and 2 and the rest.

Who can tell me what it is? What's the difference between the way verses 1 and 2 are written and the way the rest of the psalm is written? Nothing?

[5 : 23] Yeah. The first two. First person. I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?

My help comes from the Lord. And then, from three onwards, he, that is the Lord, will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber.

It's been suggested that the first two verses may have been sung by the leader of the song. Sort of maybe at the lead of the group while they're walking or where they're sitting and singing the song. To start it off, maybe he had a good pitch and could get it right or whatever. But then it's nicely structured in that the chorus or everybody else joins in, perhaps, and sings the rest of the song, which, if you like, reaffirms or builds on verse 2.

Where he says, My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. And then 3, 4, 5 and so on is describing in more detail the qualities of the Lord and in what way the Lord will provide that help.

[6 : 35] I found that when I discovered that these hills are believed to have been the hills of Jerusalem, I was quite interested in that difference.

Pilgrimage is a strange thing for us, though. We don't do it in our tradition. Some of you, or you've probably heard of people, and maybe even some of you have been to the Holy Land, Palestine, but you probably wouldn't have called that a pilgrimage.

So you would have gone to Jerusalem, but it wasn't quite in the same way. They were going to Jerusalem to worship God.

It was widely believed that the only true place to worship God was in the temple at Jerusalem, and therefore people would often go there to worship God.

We don't go on pilgrimages like that because we don't believe that God can only be worshipped in certain places. We believe that God lives in our hearts, and we don't have to travel anywhere to find God.

[7 : 54] I wonder if we could have the first overhead now, please. This is a Hindu pilgrim. There are probably about 10,000 of these, or perhaps more, who spend their lives travelling between the sacred sites of South Asia.

They cross borders even to Tibet, which is now part of China, Pakistan, which is opposed or in war with India, for example.

So they are crossing that border down to Sri Lanka, the Maldives, where there are sacred sites around the subcontinent. They are sustained incidentally through donations from devout Hindus.

So this is one standing in front of our house, seeking a donation to assist him in his pilgrimage. But again, this pilgrimage is different, still different from the pilgrimage that the Hebrews were doing.

He is on that pilgrimage to gain merit for his next life. He expects to be reincarnated after he dies, and through the visiting of all these sacred sites, he will gain merit and will come back at a higher level.

[9 : 28] Almost certainly not nirvana or escaping the cycle, but certainly at a higher level. I wonder if we can have the next one, please.

Nepal is a country between India to the south, east and west, and, as I said, China now, which was Tibet. It's characterised by hills, in fact, historically defined by hills.

It was a place where people ran to when the Mughals invaded the subcontinent from Persia, and it was one of those groups that fled to Nepal that actually created the modern-day country of Nepal.

Those mountains were a refuge, and there is certainly a natural border or boundary to the north.

That northern border is the highest points of the Himalayan range along there.

Eight of the ten highest peaks in the world are along that line. It's pretty tough to send your army over that border.

[10 : 42] As a result, the predominant influence culturally and religiously in Nepal is from the south, a much easier border to cross. I wonder if we can have the next one, please.

Nepal is predominantly a Hindu kingdom. In fact, constitutionally, it is still a Hindu kingdom. It is then the only Hindu kingdom in the world, at least in terms of constitution.

India, which has many more Hindus, is constitutionally a secular state, and no religion has preeminent legal right over any other.

Like the ancient Greeks, and similar to the Hebrews, the Hindus associate mountaintops with the places of the gods. The Hindus have many gods, and they've got plenty of mountaintops to house them in.

But unlike Mount Zion, these places are inaccessible. Very few Nepalis climb the high mountains of the Himalayas. Those that do are generally supporting foreigners on mountaineering expeditions. [11:52] They're not going there for any religious purpose. In fact, there are a number of mountains in Nepal that have not been climbed at all yet, and probably won't for a long time, because the people living around in the vicinity of the mountain regard it as a sacred place where the gods live.

And if the gods are disturbed through mountaineers climbing the mountain, those gods will be angry and will cause all form of natural disaster for the people in the vicinity as a punishment for being disturbed.

So that's the status that those mountains have. I wonder if we can have another one, please. This inaccessibility of the gods is reflected in the relationship between those gods and the people. The gods are very distant beings, right up at the top of the mountains. They never go there. That's similar, actually, to the Greek concept of the gods. They sort of lived up in the mountains. Though I think in Greece you could climb the mountains, it probably wasn't done all that often. They are not omniscient, that is all-knowing. They are not omnipotent or powerful. Here you see, actually, a Buddhist stupa.

[13:15] Buddhism and Hinduism in Nepal are very mutually influencing, quite mixed up in many ways. But the concept here, if you can see the eyes painted at the top, those eyes represent where you can be seen by God.

Now, strict Buddhism would say that God doesn't really exist. So this is perhaps a bit more of a Hindu influence has come into that. But wherever these eyes can see you, then God can see you. And whatever you do is counted in the karma, the merit ranking. So if you're going to cheat somebody or do something wrong, you need to hide behind a house or a hill or something from these eyes.

So God certainly doesn't know everything, only what can be seen from these eyes. But most importantly, the biggest difference, I believe, between our understanding of God and the Hindu understanding of God is that the Hindu gods are not loving, not loving in any way, really. There is a certain strand of Hinduism that where nirvana or at least the improvement in your next reincarnation can be attained through demonstration of devotion to God, love of God.

[14:56] So people who follow that strand, they may spend large amounts of their life worshipping the gods, saying the name of Krishna 10,000 times or something as a sign of devotion.

But the gods don't reciprocate that necessarily at all. So it's a very one-sided thing. Contrast that with what we see in Psalm 121.

I won't go into details. The Psalm 121 then has a special significance for Nepal. Firstly, it's hard in Nepal not to look at hills.

They're all around you. Though an interesting note, most Nepali houses are built opposite to Australian houses. They're built sort of facing the sun.

And in Nepal, the sun is in the south, towards the south. In Nepal, you like to have your house. In Australia, you like to have a nice sort of northerly facing lounge room or whatever.

[16:07] So in Nepal, if there are any lower mountains, they tend to be towards the south. And so people have their houses facing the south. And foreigners come and they see these magnificent Himalayas and they say, oh, I'd like to have a house where I can get a good view of the Himalayas.

And then the people selling the house say, well, or renting the house say, well, if you stand on the toilet seat at the back of the house, you can look through the small window and then you can see the Himalayas. Hindus are not really interested in seeing the Himalayas.

They want the sun to the south. So firstly, there's the hills, but secondly, the assurance that the psalmist finds here in God stands in complete contrast to the way the Hindu understands God.

There is a fear that the gods will be offended quite unjustly, you might say. There's not a clear set of rules and regulations.

If you do this, the gods will be angry. If you do that, they won't. Often, there is a tragedy and the person is left trying to work out what it was that they did wrong.

[17:22] What it was they did that caused the gods to be angry. It is due to the anger of one of these gods that your crops have failed or that you have been cheated by an unscrupulous landlord or that a family member has died.

One in ten children in Nepal died below the age of, before getting to the age of one. So the reason for that is because God is angry.

Can we have an excellent piece? For the last four years, my wife, Jenica, our children and myself have been in Nepal with the Church Missionary Society or CMS for short.

CMS's motto is making Christ known through word and deed. This is our family. on one of those treks which foreigners in Nepal are so fond of going on.

Here we are sitting at an elevation of 3,100 metres above sea level. That is about one and a half times the height of Mount Kosciuszko. It took our family two days of climbing to get to this place.

[18:44] And, yeah, it was tough, believe me, particularly for the kids. The mountain behind us, though, is called Doligiri. It is over 8,000 metres high.

It is one of those ten highest peaks in the world. But it's on a mountain such as that that the Hindus believe the gods live. Very inaccessible.

Next. My job in Nepal was to work as a civil engineer. I worked in a design office in a number of roles on a range of projects including hydropower, water supply, irrigation, waste management and cableways.

Cableways are sort of like flying fox type arrangements. A very nice alternative to climbing those mountains. On one of the projects we had it travelling on the cableway took eight minutes versus four hours for me to climb the same altitude.

A major component of that or the major rationale behind that work is to train Nepali individuals and organisations in doing that same work.

[19:59] It's through this work that we are making known the love of Christ to the people of Nepal. But it's important to remember that this work is not just us.

We're not doing this by ourselves. It's people like you in churches like this that are also doing that work. It's very much a partnership which CMS is organising or channeling the support.

I'd like to thank you now for the support that this church has provided over the last four years for us to be in Nepal working there again through CMS.

We've also had a lot of direct communication from many of you in Nepal ranging from simple little email once every two years is fine to a number of you who actually regularly contribute to a small package that is very much appreciated.

Without that support this work would not be done and the people of Nepal would continue to look at those mountains with fear.

[21:16] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.