

I Lift Up My Eyes



For almost a year now, we have all been living with varying degrees of fear, anxiety, despair, and uncertainty as the covid-19 pandemic continues to spread without any signs of slowing down. These have been stressful months for millions all over the world, never knowing when another wave of the disease will emerge and where it will strike, which city, which community, which household. For many of us, it has never come close to home or gotten up close and personal. And then one day it did for me. About a month ago, I found out that I had been exposed to someone who had been infected with the covid-19 virus. Suddenly the reality of the whole covid-19 crisis shifted for me. Where before the pandemic had just been about a situation or people to pray for, now it had taken on a face and become startlingly real and personal.

Even though I thought the chances of my contracting the virus were slim, my mind was still flooded with many what-ifs and concerns. What if I was infected? If so, would I have passed it on to the friend I met up with a few days ago? That was a scary thought. From the high-risk group, she had since unknowingly been in close contact with her family members including her young grandchildren. I was not overly anxious about myself but I could not help being worried about how it would affect my family and community, and especially this older lady and her family should I be infected.

In the midst of trying to work through these can't-be-answered questions and worries clouding my mind, I received Psalm 121 from one of my friends. When I read it, I realized that God was reaching out to me in His Word – His ever unchanging Word that has always spoken His truth, grace and comfort down through the ages to His people. At that moment in time, God's Word became to me like "the mountains that surround

Jerusalem . . . which cannot be shaken". And "as the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people both now and for evermore." (Psalm 12:1-2). His Word became His presence to me, surrounding me with His love and compassion.

What initially started as a struggle with uncertainty and anxiety became God's teaching and shaping moments for me. He had caught my attention. So as I opened up my heart to try to listen to Him, He taught me again how I needed to grow to be more aware of His daily presence in my life.

Lift Up Your Eyes

I was reminded to lift up my eyes to look to Him. The psalmist lifted his eyes to look at the hills in front of him, to look for the Creator of all that he saw before him. God's beautiful creation – the mountains, the seas, nature in all its beauty – is where we often look at when we need a clearer reminder of God's presence. But we often do not just take a brief look. Most of the time we will gaze for a while to take in the beauty of what stands before us. I realized then that it takes more than a few cursory looks to God to hear Him. Even though I had prayed and entrusted my situation to Him, I was still preoccupied and unsettled. I was still looking around at what others might be feeling, and looking within at my own questions and uncertainties. I needed to hold my look, to hold my gaze on God. I needed to be more aware of His abiding presence with me all the time and not only when I needed Him.

How does one stay always aware of God in the busyness of one's daily routines? A group of us in our local church had been doing a study called *The Apprentice Series*. In the last chapter of the second book of the series called *The Good and Beautiful Life*, the author talked about the spiritual discipline of finding ways to pause at various points during the day in order to reconnect to God. This is to bring to the forefront of our awareness that God is there present with us not as a spectator but as one deeply involved even in the trivial details of our daily lives. Brother Lawrence, well-known for the book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, wrote about how he continually conversed with God while doing his daily chores in the monastery kitchen where he worked as a cook.

We might not be able to be in continual conversation with God throughout the whole day like Brother Lawrence. But we can still make it a practice to connect and relate to God at different times throughout the day. It can take as simple a form as a quick prayer, a short or continuous conversation, a moment of quietening the heart, or a reading of His Word. The national call to pause and pray the Lord's Prayer at noon each day has become for many now a space in their daily rhythm to connect with God during their day.

To lift up my eyes to Him meant going beyond the regular set times I had with Him each day. It meant reaching out to be in communion with Him throughout the day whenever I could. I tried to make that a daily discipline and it made me more attentive to what He was doing in and around me during this period of time.

Hold in Your Heart

As I read through the rest of the psalm, I was overwhelmed to be reminded again of how unimaginably loving and intimate God is – the Creator God who can roll back the foaming waters of the sea and shake mountains and yet, who lovingly watches over me personally and not let my foot slip each day. His Word spoke deeply to my anxieties and exposed for me things that I needed to work on. I recognized that I needed these were words to fill not just my mind but to seep into my whole being – my heart, soul and body.

His second reminder was thus to hold His Word in my heart, to shift from my normal posture of reading the verses and just engaging with them in my mind. I found myself at many points during each day just reciting Ps 121 or certain verses from it, reflecting over them or just holding them as a prayer in my heart. It became an exercise of reminding myself of God's presence and allowing His Spirit to move His Word from the head to the heart, and to shape and transform me from deep within bit by bit. Holding the words of the psalm in my heart gave me a certain inward calmness and strength throughout this unsettling period because the knowledge that He watches over my life, past, present and future came, not from just the head but from deep within.

Over the 14-days of quarantine, the stress and anxieties that I had at the beginning slowly diminished. God had turned an unsettling soul-shaking time where my soul had been thrown off its normal bearing and rhythm, into a soul-shaping one where He taught me to grow in deepening awareness of His loving, abiding presence with me. I felt that it had given me a nudge forward in my faith journey, regardless of what may come. But as always, God is infinitely gracious. By the end of the fourteenth day of quarantine, I had not experienced any symptoms at all. I was covid-19 free.



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