

**“All You Need”**  
**Psalm 121**  
**Ninth Sunday in Pentecost—“Cowboy Sunday”**  
**July 29, 2007**

I am old enough to have grown up watching the classic TV westerns such as *Roy Rogers*, *The Lone Ranger*, *The Rifleman*, *Rawhide*, *Bonanza*, and *Gunsmoke*. I learned a whole lot of very important stuff from those shows. Under their guidance I learned that good guys always wear white hats, that bad guys always get their “come uppance,” and that the Cavalry always rides to the rescue. I also learned that it is never a good idea to drink downstream from the herd, to never kick a fresh cow pie on a hot day, and to never, ever approach a bull from the front, a horse from the back, or a fool from any direction. Most importantly, those westerns taught me that all a Cowboy ever really needs is a good horse, a good gun, and a good woman (if you are a Cowgirl, of course, feel free to change that to “a good man”). Later I learned that idea came from someone named Judge Charley Gullet. Author of *The Cowboy Way*, he said that every cowboy or cowgirl lives by a code that includes doing the right thing, using one’s common sense, and having those three needs fulfilled. Take Roy Rogers, for instance. He had Trigger, a Colt 45, and Dale Evans—and in that order, I might add. And that white hat he always wore is a pretty good indication that he always did the right thing and used good common sense. What more could he need? Or what about Marshall Matt Dillon? He had Miss Kitty (at least, everyone always assumed that he did), his faithful horse Buck, and his trusty Winchester revolver. With those three and a lot of good common sense, he rid Dodge City of many a bad guy. *The Cowboy Way* makes a lot of sense. Lots of folks even today believe if it wasn’t for those good horses, those good guns, and those good women, Cowboys would have never tamed the once wild West.

But now that I have grown just a wee bit older and, hopefully, just a little bit wiser, I have come to realize that a fourth item really needs to be added to the list. That is because over the years I have learned that you can’t always tell the good guys by the color of their hat, that rather than getting their “come uppance,” bad guys often get their reward, and that the Cavalry rarely ever comes to your rescue. You can’t count on any of those things Ben Cartwright taught us—except to never smack a fellow who is chewing

tobacco. Now for the sake of argument, I still give you a good horse, gun, and woman, although the pastor in me would like to talk to you about the gun part of that particular equation. But on this day when “Avalanche Ranch” kicks off, I will stick with those three items—as politically incorrect they may be—and then ask your permission to add a fourth. To Judge Charley’s list, I would like to add “a good God.” You probably saw that one coming, didn’t you? This is, after all, Sunday meeting, and I am a pastor. According to what I know about the Old West, I fail to see how “a good God” cannot be added to the list. And I can say that without even accounting for the fact that wherever cowboys went, Methodist Circuit Riders were usually already there. Methodists like William Stevenson in Texas and W. D. Gage in Nebraska were prowling the prairies long before any of the great cattle drives occurred. So if you let me bend your ear for a few minutes, Kemosabe, I’ll try to show you how God was an important part of The Cowboy Way.

Let me begin by reminding you that the life of a cowboy was not half as glamorous as folks like John Wayne made it out to be. The typical cowboy of the Old West had a whole lot in common with the typical shepherd in biblical Israel. Neither ranked very high on the social scale. The work of both was difficult and dangerous, and each was paid very low wages. Daily life consisted of long periods of monotony interspersed by brief moments of sheer terror. Predators, both of the animal and human variety, were always a threat. Each profession was at the mercy of the elements. Most of their time was spent far removed from centers of population. Whether a cowboy or a shepherd, it seemed that loneliness was always a major problem. And because they were so isolated, there was rarely a time for either of them to fulfill the requirements of their religion. Churches and synagogues did not dot the open range. But that is not to say that either the cowboy or the shepherd was non-religious. In situations as vulnerable as theirs, they knew they needed help. I think that is true of anyone who makes his or her living off the land. With so much of life out of their control, they know that help must come from somewhere beyond themselves. A good horse, gun, and woman are always a plus, but they do little to get you through a fierce winter storm. They do not help you cross a raging river. They do nothing when you are forced to spend all that time alone. In

situations like these, when you don't know how you will be able to do it what you need to do, it becomes very obvious that your help must come from God.

I think this is where the psalm you heard just a moment ago comes in to play. Commentators call Psalm 121 “A Song of Ascents.” They say it is a pilgrimage song, one that would be sung by travelers as they were journeying to Jerusalem. Those who sit deep in the stacks of theological libraries and have little contact with the real world have proposed that the “hill” to which this psalm refers is actually the hill of Zion, upon which Solomon's great temple was built. I guess that could be a possibility. But from what I know about the geography of biblical Israel, as well as the stories of the Old West, I doubt that Mt. Zion was focus of that psalm. Sometime before cowboys started roaming the plains, pioneers were traveling across them. I can remember hearing the stories about those who traveled the Oregon Trail. Starting out from Independence, Missouri, they caught up with the Platte River close to where Grand Island is today and then would head west. The Great Platte River Road, as it was known back then, took them through the heart of the Great Plains. They would journey past Court House Rock and Chimney Rock, and then continue their journey towards Scottsbluff. You can still see the ruts in the sandstone made by the wagons and pushcarts as they headed for new land. This was the easy part of their journey. Other than the occasional Prairie Dog hole, there were not many obstacles. But somewhere west of Scottsbluff, an ominous sight began to loom on the horizon. At first it seemed to be only clouds, but as they drew closer they noticed that those so-called “clouds” did not move. As it began to dawn on them that what they were seeing was the front range of the Rockies, I firmly believe that the question posed by the words of Psalm 121 quickly crossed their minds:

*“I lift my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?”*

That verse came to my mind in a very similar way. A few weeks ago, as many of you know, I went with my youngest son and some very good friends on a backpacking trip out west—the same west through which many cowpokes once wandered. We hiked the Grand Canyon. It is not the prairie, of course, but still part of the west. Our trip was

an uplifting but very humbling experience. The scenery was just magnificent. It is one thing to stand on the rim and look down into the canyon, it is another thing altogether to stand at the bottom and look up. We hiked down the Kaibab Trail, a winding, switchback laden path that descends about 4500 feet to the canyon floor and that took us about six hours to travel. It was a rather strenuous trek, constantly stepping down the trail, but we made it. The trail back up, however, was something completely different. After a day on the bottom during which we took a hike to a beautiful waterfall, we started out on the Bright Angel trail, a 9.5-mile trip to the rim, at exactly 6:30 in the morning. It was necessary to start out that early to avoid the heat of the day. We arrived at the first water stop, a place 4.5 miles into our hike and known as Indian Gardens, two and a half hours later. “This is going to be a snap,” we thought. But then we realized that we had spent the majority of the time hiking along the river. We had only climbed about 700 feet. There were still 5 more hours and another 3500 feet to climb. As the muscles in our legs and chest started to burn as we climbed, we raised our eyes and looked toward that distant rim. As we did that first verse of Psalm 121 came immediately to my mind, and I began to realize just how far off the mark all those commentators had been.

*“I lift my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?”*

I now understand those words better than ever, and if that is the case for me, then others must have understood them as well. Whether a pilgrim traveling the Jerusalem road or a pioneer traversing the Oregon Trail, it doesn’t take a whole lot of imagination to see how important this psalm might have been. Nor does it take a whole lot of imagination to see how it might also have been very important for those cowboys traveling along the Chisholm Trail. As they would gather somewhere near Waco, those hired to drive those large herds of cattle to Abilene or Ogallala knew that a long, hard ride lay before them. They knew that over the next 500 or so miles they were going to need a whole lot more help than what a good horse, a good gun, and a good woman—even one as good as my own—could provide. I am convinced that they knew that their help had to “*come from the Lord.*” Pushing northward, their first great obstacle was the Red River. Many cattle were drowned there, as well as many cowboys, as footing was

often lost in those murky, rushing waters. As they entered the river, I can almost hear them whispering the psalmist's words, "*He will not let your foot be moved.*" Entering the open spaces of Oklahoma Territory, they found plenty of bones along the trail, bones of cattle that had gotten trapped in gullies, trampled in stampedes, or run off and killed by reservation Indians. This was the point of the journey that the cowboy needed to keep an especially watchful eye on the herd, but who would watch the cowboy? The verse "*he who keeps you will not slumber*" had to have become their watchword. Then there was the heat. It could easily reach a stifling 100 degrees during the afternoon. The Great Plains offered little shade. So "*the Lord will be the shade at your right hand*" was a prayer they must have had to repeat over and over again. And the same could be said of the ever expanding promise with which this particular psalm concludes, the promise that says that the Lord would "*would keep you from all evil, would keep your life, and would keep your going out and coming in from this time forth and for evermore.*" On a journey like that, the Lord had to be trusted. There was no other way. I have got to imagine that Psalm 121 had to be very familiar to cowboys. It seems to me that it spoke a language that they could understand very well.

I wonder if that psalm speaks in a language that you understand? When you face your mountains, from where does your help come? As I read about cowboys this past week, the thing that struck me most about them was their sheer ordinariness. As I mentioned before, they were not the mythic figures that Hollywood so often portrays. They were called *cowboys* for a reason. Some of them were as young as 12. Many of them were former slaves or Indians trying to find a better life than what was found on the reservation. Others were those who simply sought to get a fresh start in life. Few had families. The majority of them did not have much more than what could be carried in their saddlebags. Cowboys were simply people who worked the land. And as I already said, I think most people who work the land may have a better understanding of God than those of us who don't. They sense the rhythm of the seasons. They hear the thunder rolling across the plains. They know that they are often at the mercy of the elements. The whole myth of the "rugged individual" finds its roots in the popular image we have of the cowboy. But if the truth be told, I would be willing to bet that most cowboys knew

nothing of a “rugged individual.” Yes, they were tough. Yes, many times life depended upon their skill and cunning. But based on what they knew, based on how they lived, I have to believe that the majority of them understood that real help came from the Lord. They knew that the world is a whole lot bigger than one lone cowboy. They knew that the only way they or anyone else would ever be able to make it in the west, in the east, in the north, or in the south was to depend upon the one to whom they must lift up their eyes. What about you? Do you lift up your eyes? Do you understand what the psalmist meant when he wrote:

*“I lift my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.”*

He may not have matched the height of poetry or depth of theology as that of Psalm 121, but Roy Rogers—the King of the Cowboys—once offered a prayer that contains many of the same thoughts. On this Cowboy Sunday, as we prepare to teach our children some of the basics of the faith, I offer it to you as a way to focus all of our minds and hearts on the one to which we should lift up our eyes.

*“Lord, I reckon I’m not much just by myself,  
I fail to do a lot of things I ought to do.  
But Lord, when the trails are steep and the passes high,  
Help me ride it straight the whole way through.*

*And when in the falling dusk I get that final call,  
I do not care how many flowers they send.  
Above all else, the happiest trail would be  
For you to say to me, ‘Let’s ride, My Friend.’ Amen.”*