

“Where Do You Look for Security?”

Psalm 121

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A Song of Ascents.

121 I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

² My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴ Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵ The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

⁸ The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.

Intro: The Pilgrim's Climb

“*I lift my eyes to the hills.*” So begins the second psalm in the Songs of Ascents. If Psalm 120 reveals the motivation for setting out on pilgrimage in deep distress and dissatisfaction with the fallen world of lies and conflict, Psalm 121 begins to look ahead on the journey, lifting up eyes toward Jerusalem, which sits among the mountains of Judah.

I envision these words on the lips of pilgrims as they stand in Jericho heading out for the climb to Jerusalem. On pilgrimage, the pilgrims would cross the over Jordan at Jericho, following in the footsteps of their ancestors who, under Joshua’s leadership, crossed the Jordan on dry land before encircling Jericho and winning that great victory by the hand of the Lord.

Jericho was re-built hundreds of years after its fall, and it stands today as one of the oldest cities in the world. It also has the lowest elevation of any city in the world, sitting 846 feet below sea level. Jerusalem, by contrast, sits 2,474 feet above sea level. The two cities sit just 15 miles apart, but in that 15-mile walk, pilgrims climb over 3,300 feet, about 800 feet more than the elevation gain when hiking Old Rag Mountain in Virginia.

Jesus Himself made this journey from Jericho up to Jerusalem dozens of times in His earthly life. Remember the time when Jesus was 12 years old and he stayed behind in the Temple? His parents had to walk back up that incline to find him. That might explain part of the reason why they were so upset when they finally found Him!

In our pilgrim journey through life, we are also on an uphill climb. At times, the path is smooth and seems almost level and wide. At other times, we may be going downhill gently, but overall it is an uphill climb. The challenges we face at 40 are harder than the ones we faced at 30, which are harder than the ones we faced at 20. It's difficult for older people to explain this to younger people without being condescending, for each part of the journey seems difficult enough in itself.

We face questions and struggles at every stage along the way – What will I believe? Who will I trust? Where will I go to college? Will I go to college? Who will I marry? Will the person I want to marry want to marry me? When will we have children? Will we be good parents? How do we get our baby to sleep at night so we can regain some sanity? How do we raise our children in the Lord? How do we get our three-year-old to obey? What will we do for our children's education? Are we doing the right thing for our children's education? Where will our children go to college? Will they go to college? Who will our children marry? Will our children be good parents? Did we prepare them to be good parents? Do we have enough money to retire? Do we want to retire? When do we want to retire? How will we face the final years of our lives and the decline of our health with dignity and wisdom? What will I believe? Who will I trust?

I. Reliable Help, vv. 1-2
The Lord Alone is My Help

Psalm 121 opens with a question and answer, almost in a catechism format –

*I lift up my eyes to the hills.
 From where does my help come?
² My help comes from the LORD,
 who made heaven and earth.*

Scholars disagree as to what the significance of the question is. Why would the traveler be looking to the hills?

- Is he looking to the hills in desire and expectation, looking ahead to being in Jerusalem?
- If he looking to the hills in fear, knowing the danger that could await in the form of robbers hiding in the hills? Remember the story of the Good Samaritan, who came to the rescue of a pilgrim who had been attacked by bandits and left for dead? That was

apparently a familiar scene and a not-uncommon event along this road from Jericho to Jerusalem.

- If he looking to the hills in temptation, tempted to trust in something other than the Lord? After all, the hills surrounding Jerusalem had been the “high places” of pagan worship for hundreds of years, and even Solomon himself was led astray to worship idols in those hills.

Which is it? Well, why do we have to pick one? I think the pilgrim is lifting up his eyes to the hills because that’s what you do when you’re setting out on a 3,300-foot climb: you look up! As he looked up, I imagine the pilgrim would feel a mix of all of those emotions – longing and desire, fear and concern, and perhaps a bit of temptation, too.

Isn’t this what we feel on our journey? We look ahead of us as best we can, because that’s where we’re going, right? And we feel a mixture of desire and longing, fear and anxiety and temptation.

But what is significant in this opening section is not the feelings the pilgrim was experiencing when he asked the question but rather the strong and confident answer he gives: “*My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*” In Psalm 120, we had “*In my distress, I called to the LORD*” and now we have the confident assertion “*My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*”

“*The LORD*” is God’s covenant name, YaHWeH. It speaks of His covenant with His people and of His unchanging faithfulness in keeping His covenant in love for His people. YaHWeH is a variation of the Hebrew for “I AM,” as God told Moses at the burning bush, “*I AM WHO I AM.*” And he said, “*Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’*” (Ex. 3:14, ESV)

As we’ve been in the Gospel of John, we’ve seen that Jesus loves referring to Himself using “I am” which is echoing the Divine Name, YaHWeH. And as we think about the meaning of YaHWeH/I AM, we remember the words of Hebrews 13:8, that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.”

The LORD is not only unchangingly and unfailingly faithful and constant to His covenant people, but He is also the Maker of Heaven and Earth. Our help is in the One who never changes whose words formed the worlds, forming light and organizing space and filling the earth with life and beauty. The all-powerful Creator of Heaven and Earth is our Covenant Lord and He is our help. His help is as powerful as it is faithful, for He is as strong as he is unchanging.

II. **Unsleeping Providence, vv. 3-4**

The Lord Keeps & Never Sleeps

Verses 3-4 begin to describe what kind of help we receive from the LORD, maker of heaven and earth. Above all, in Psalm 121, the LORD is our keeper, our security –

³ *He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.*

⁴ *Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

“He who keeps you” and “He who keeps Israel” – these are the first 2 of 6 times in these 6 verses, verses 3-8, that we are told of the LORD’s keeping of us personally and of all of His people. Considering we’re told 6 times of how the Lord helps us by keeping us, perhaps it is fear and anxiety which predominate in the mind of the pilgrim in this psalm.

“*He will not let your foot be moved*” – Keeping your footing while going up a mountain is essential. When we were in Uganda, the path to Oku goes down a steep valley and the path has lots of loose rock. You need to watch your feet going down and coming back up or you could easily slip badly and hurt yourself.

Life’s journey through this world is full of treacherous places where we can easily lose our footing and slip badly. If we are to keep moving and keep on the path, we need the Lord to guard our feet and keep us from slipping.

“*he who keeps you will not slumber.*

⁴ *Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.”*

Notice two things here:

1. the personal and the corporate nature of God’s keeping of His people and
2. the strong emphasis on the fact that God never slumbers (nods off) or sleeps.

God’s keeping of His people is both deeply personal and corporate. He keeps you personally – Jesus said that even the hairs on your head are numbered. He said you are of more value than many sparrows, and not even a single sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of the Heavenly Father. Yet while God keeps you personally, and His love is personal, it is not individualistic. God loves His people. According to John 10, Christ the Good Shepherd laid down His life for His sheep. According to Ephesians 5, Jesus loved the church and gave Himself up for her to cleanse her. God keeps you personally but not individually, not separately from His keeping of His people, Israel.

God never nods off or goes to sleep. This reminds me of the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. The prophets of Baal wailed and cried for hours to get the attention of their so-called god. Then, “*at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.”* (1 Kings 18:27) God is never too busy, too preoccupied, too distracted or too tired to watch over and keep you.

III. Unfailing Presence, vv. 5-6

The Lord Keeps Day & Night

Just as God’s providence never sleeps, so His presence never fails to protect:

⁵ *The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.*

⁶ *The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.*

The emphasis in these verses is on the closeness of the Lord’s presence and the absoluteness of His protection. “Your shade on your right hand” is a very close and constant protecting presence. God has said, “Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.” (Heb. 13:5)

The imagery of being struck by sun and moon is compelling and somewhat confusing. We all know what sun stroke is. Hiking up a mountain under the hot Judean sun is no joke, and being overcome by heat exhaustion or heat stroke is a real danger. Moon stroke is less familiar to us. People used to believe that over-exposure to the moon could cause you to go crazy, which is why the word “lunatic” has “lunar” as its root.

“Sun and moon” are here symbolic and meant to be encompassing of all kinds of dangers. Sun represents open and known dangers, physical dangers. Moon represents more hidden and mysterious dangers, spiritual dangers or psychological dangers, perhaps.

IV. Persevering Protection, vv. 7-8

The Lord Keeps from Beginning to End

God’s keeping of us is not only unsleeping, close and comprehensive, but it also perseveres from beginning to end:

⁷ *The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.*

⁸ *The LORD will keep*

*your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.*

Verse 7 summarizes and clarifies everything that has been said so far in metaphor and imagery. The LORD keeps you from all evil and He keeps your life.

Perhaps here at verse 7 is a good time to stop and ask some harder questions:

1. Does Psalm 121 really mean what it seems to mean? Does God protect His people from all kinds of trouble and harm? Does He, in fact, guard our feet from stumbling, keep us from getting sun stroke, protect us from everything all the time without fail?

Yes, He does. He does exactly what Psalm 121 says He does. He keeps us from all evil. He keeps our lives. But this doesn't mean what many people say it means. So . . .

2. What does Psalm 121 mean by keeping us from all evil? Well, it's connected to what it means by "keep your life"? What is your life? Or, rather, who is your life?

Here's where we begin to really wrestle with how our worldview and values system lines up with Scripture? If you think your life is found in your health and wealth, you will define good as having more health and more wealth and you will define evil as losing wealth or having your health threatened or taken away. If this is your view, Psalm 121 will make no sense, and you will doubt whether God actually keeps His promises.

But the problem is not with Psalm 121. The problem is with us. Compare our petty, selfish, superficial attitudes with the Apostle Paul's perspective in 2 Corinthians 4 –

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (5-11, ESV)

And consider this from Colossians 3 –

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your¹ life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (1-4, ESV)

If we agree with the Apostle Paul and with Scripture, we will see Christ is our life. We will set our minds on things above. We will gladly carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus so the life of Jesus may also be manifested in us.

For believers, when seemingly bad things happen to us, God always ordains them for our good. God always sends adversity to test us, teach us, refine us, glorify Himself in us, deepen our dependency on Him. Through all of this, He is keeping us, for He is keeping us in our real life, which is Christ alone.

- 3. So, do we believe this?** Do we think it's just religious platitudes and excuse-making to say that cancer or unemployment or persecution is really intended by God for our good and God is still keeping us from all evil? This is the essence of what it means to live by faith. This is not to be flippant or trite. It is not to deny the real pain, confusion or sorrow troubles and trials bring. But it is to actually believe what Jesus said in Matthew 16:25-26 –

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? (ESV)

Do we see that if we have the whole world but we don't have Jesus, we have absolutely nothing of real value, but if we have nothing this world values but we have Jesus, we have everything - eternal life and an imperishable inheritance full of glory, kept in heaven for us?

The Lord keeps His word. He never fails. If we belong to Him, He will indeed keep us from all evil. He will keep our life.

Then, verse 8 emphasizes that the Lord will persevere in keeping us. He will keep your going out and coming in probably refers to leaving on the pilgrimage and returning home again from the pilgrimage. How long? From this time forth and forevermore – even beyond the grave and into eternity.

Conclusion: Security

So, where do we look for security? Are we fighting hard to keep what we value safe? Or are we trusting in God and resting in His care? Obviously, we know we need to look to the Lord for our security and we need to rest in His care. But how do we do this and what does it look like in our daily lives?

Part of the answer is that our vision of the good life and our deepest desires need to be shaped, so our imagination is biblical and God-centered and not worldly and self-centered. To do this, we need to seek by God grace to shape our deep desires and longings by prayer and worship.

We have embedded within these Songs of Ascents a powerful clue as to how this happens. Where are these pilgrims going, as they lift up their eyes to the hills? What is their heart's desire as they look to God to keep them on their journey? They are going to Jerusalem, of course. But more specifically, they are going to the Temple for festive worship with the gathered people of God. Even more specifically, they are going to the Temple for festive worship with the gathered people of God to receive the blessing of God.

You see, embedded throughout the Songs of Ascents, we find the language of the Aaronic Blessing, which God gave Aaron and his sons to speak over God's people. We find the language of this blessing in Numbers 6 –

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²³“Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

²⁷ “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” (vv. 22-27, ESV)

- Psalm 120 focused on the longing for peace.
- Psalm 121 focuses on the Lord keeping His people.
- Psalm 122 focuses again on the peace of God's people, as we'll see in two weeks.
- Psalm 123 speaks of looking to the Lord and longing for mercy, which echoes the idea of “the LORD make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you”
- Psalm 124 speaks of the Lord's help and deliverance and favor.

- Psalm 125 speaks again of the peace and security of Jerusalem and God's people, ending with "Peace be upon Israel."

Again and again, we see the themes and language of the Aaronic blessing in the Songs of Ascents. Also, again and again, we see the divine covenant name of the LORD, YaHWeH, distinctly prominent in these Psalms. For the pilgrim, security and peace are found specifically in the presence and blessing of the Lord. It is not just the city or the people, but the Lord, whose presence is represented by the Temple and whose favor and grace is sought through the blessing of the priest.

The pilgrims memorized, prayed and sang these songs and shaped their longings and their imaginations to deeply desire the blessing of God's favor and presence. Will we do the same?