

Psalm 121

Introducing The Series

Well, today, I am excited because we are starting a new series called “Songs of Ascents.” We’re going to look at a few songs from the book of Psalms. Each week as we approach Easter (or Resurrection Sunday), we’ll unpack one of these beautiful songs. These songs will lead us to Christ and the hope of the good news about Jesus. The hope is that each week as we “ascend” towards the empty tomb of Christ, these songs will be an encouraging reminder of the faithfulness of God.

So, what are the “The Songs of Ascents”? Well, they are a group of songs in the Old Testament, apparently written by various authors. It’s not entirely clear how they were used, but it seems that the Jews would sing these songs as they made their way to the yearly feasts in Jerusalem. They would come from all corners of Israel (and possibly beyond) to the feasts and festivals that God started when he gave the Mosaic covenant on Mount Sinai.

Jews journeyed to Jerusalem, where the temple was located and where God’s presence dwelled in the Holy of Holies (the most sacred and inner part of the Temple). Jerusalem was perched on top of the hills and mountains that run through Israel, about 2,700 ft above sea level. For some perspective, where we sit here in Springboro, Ohio, we’re only about 200 ft above sea level. And I recently took our family skiing and the “mountain” here in Ohio was only 1,400 ft in elevation. So, the journey from Israel’s coast up to Jerusalem would be like hiking up hills and mountains to arrive at Jerusalem. It was literally an ascent for many people.

One thing to consider is that these are songs. They would have been set to music and sung like we just did this morning. They are poetry set to music. They are full of imagery and pictures meant to cause us to slow down and meditate. While we are reading them this morning, imagine voices and instruments together to bring these Psalms to life through music.

Psalm 121: God’s Preserving Presence

So that brings us to our Song of Ascents for today: Psalm 121. As we approach this first song, I wanted to highlight a few things for us to consider. This is not a song about us. It’s a song about our almighty God, Yahweh (or “LORD”). He is mentioned 5 times in these 8 short verses.

If you have any doubt about what this song is saying about Yahweh, as we read, you’ll hear the word “keeper” or “keep” mentioned six times over these 8 verses. The idea of a “keeper” is one who watches over and protects, much like a shepherd would have kept his sheep. As we approach this Psalm, it’s no mystery that Yahweh is the one who watches over and keeps us.

Psalm 121: A Song of Ascents.

1 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.*

A Question of Reflection

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

— Psalm 121:1

The Smallness of Man

The psalm opens with the gaze of a person. The author is lifting their eyes up to the hills. The hill where they are journeying to. Mount Zion, the city of Jerusalem, the place where the Temple is. This is the place where God dwells.

The eyes being lifted up shows the smallness and the insignificance of the person traveling and highlight the highness or the greatness of the one who dwells on top of that mountain. It's a point to recognize how big and powerful God is. It's a point to recognize our need for someone like that.

Reflection of the Human Condition

The meditation continues by asking a question. As I look to the hills, the place where God dwells, where does my help come from? Who or what is it that works in my life? How do I continue on in this life? Is there anyone who will protect me, watch over me, or preserve me?

These travelers looking upwards, hiking up these hills, begin to feel their weakness. They are just humans trying to conquer a relatively small mountain. Their weakness sets in, panting for breath, thirsty for water, and tired from the journey. Who or what will they depend on for help? Who or what do they believe can spare them from perishing on this journey? And, is there a more significant kind of help they need?

Some commentators and historians suggest that the journey could have been dangerous at points because of robbers, or treacherous terrain. And, this kind of protection a legitimate need. Day to day help is definitely something we all need. That's probably included here. But, the Psalm has a much grander sense. It has the sense of an eternal kind of help. The kind of help that unrighteous, rebellious humans needs. The kind of help that only a divine being, with infinite power, wisdom and grace can provide. The kind of help that preserves a soul from eternal punishment.

I want to pause here because this is an important point in the Psalm. There are two things worth thinking about before we tackle the rest of this Psalm.

Do we ask this question?

First, I want to ask if we ever stop to ask a question like this? We are constantly and regularly sustained by the hand of God. Are we humble enough to recognize it week in and week out? Do we beg of God's help day by day or even hour by hour? Or are we too caught up in our own selves, our own strength, and our own righteousness to see our desperate need for God to help us. Or, perhaps we waiver back and forth recognizing our need for God, and forgetting him.

Israel was the people who sang this song as they went along their journey. They had much help from God throughout their history. One of the greatest helps was their freedom from slavery in Egypt when God worked through Moses to break them free from Pharaoh's tyranny over them. God brought them out and freed them through his miraculous work. So, Israel was no stranger to help from God. Yet, they continually forgot him, and even completely rejected him. Aren't we like this too sometimes?

What choice will you make? Where will you put your trust?

The second point of reflection in the opening of this Psalm is to ask, where will we choose to seek help? We ask the question, and choose to respond with the kind of heart that thinks it knows better than God. We can respond with the kind of heart that thinks, "I am god". Do we follow the world's advice and look inside ourselves for help? It's no wonder the world is full of stress, anxiety, and turmoil.

Will you trust God in the midst of your life? Or will you rely on yourself to constantly work and control your surroundings? Or worse yet, do you rely on yourself to please God and keep you from the destruction in hell? Scripture has clear warnings about this, and it's dangerous for us to ignore them.

This is a pivotal moment in this song. The question is asked, where does our help come from? Fortunately, there's a wonderful answer. Verse two continues...

A Sure Answer (v2)

*My help comes from [Yahweh],
who made heaven and earth.
— Psalm 121:2*

What a wonderful and personal answer: "*My help...*" comes from Yahweh. Not your help. Not our help. *My help.* This is a personal choice the author has made, and the singer makes as they shout it out: "*My help comes from the almighty one.*" Though their eyes are fixed on the hills ahead of them that are terrifying and great, Yahweh is my helper and he is greater. Why? Because of the next phrase: "*...who made heaven and earth.*"

He made the very hills they are traveling on. He made the entire earth! (Genesis 1:1) What a powerful God we have, who created all the earth and all that exists up in the heavens. This includes all the forms of life: plants, animals, fish, bugs, and yes, even humans who were formed from the dust of the ground. We have a powerful God, who is the creator of all of this.

So, when we stop to consider our needs, we must recognize where we will look for help. Ultimately our help comes from outside of ourselves, from God. Not from ourselves: our own wisdom, grit, or personal genius. We must recognize and rest in this truth as we continue on our journey.

This is the kind of heart we should cultivate. One humbled by our need for God's power in our lives. This is the song of God's people.

Our Need for Protector

Something subtle happens here at this point in the Psalm. Verses 1 and 2 talk about personal, "my help". But, starting in verse 3, it becomes "your" help. It's a corporate song. A song that God's people sing together to point each other to him.

This is what we wish from our heavenly Father. No one wants to slip and stumble along the way. No one wants to fall on a mountainous journey and fail to make it safely to God's dwelling place, Mount Zion.

We know that God is powerful from the previous verse. He is the one who created everything! We *can* trust him to be our protector. But what if he has some kind of weakness? What if he needs to rest or sleep from all of the powerful work that only he can do? What if he stops looking at us for just a moment, or his attention drifts just long enough to forget us in our situation, and something terrible happens? What if...

We might be tempted to think this way. We may think God has forgotten us, or worse, that he abandoned us. We may think that God has some weakness. Or, for some reason, God's power isn't sufficient for us day by day or in our time of need. But, brothers and sisters, these statements are untrue. The song continues and brings us hope.

Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
— Psalm 121:4

The psalmist leaves no room for question. With triumph and joy, the song declares, "BEHOLD!" This should wake us up. It's meant to! The psalmist grabs our attention and says, "pay attention to this". Yahweh keeps us! Yahweh has no weakness. He is Yahweh, the one who "is."

We tend to think of God from our own perspective and experience as humans. And, though we are made in the image of God, we are not God. He is not limited like we are. He does not have our same weaknesses. God is never lying down on the job. He is the perfect protector.

Yes, verse 4 refers to Israel. And, Israel refers to the people of God. These are the people he chose as his own. The psalmist wrote this before the mystery of Christ was revealed. But, now because of obedient death of Christ and his glorious resurrection, those who trust him for forgiveness of sins are God's people. So, God is not only the protector of the nation of Israel thousands of years ago. He is the protector of us, God's people, today.

What a comfort! What a relief! We are his, and he is our shepherd protector. There is nothing that catches God by surprise. There is nothing that makes him need a nap. What a contrast to our weakness and frailty as humans! Because there is nothing we can do to protect ourselves from the awful and eternal punishment for sin. There is nothing we can do to earn salvation or keep to ourselves. It is *only* because of the work of God that we can be saved. It's not of our own works but the gift of God. (Romans 3:23-24; Ephesians 2:1-10)

Commented [JD1]: The greatest help and hope come from Christ, through the Gospel to bring us to him. But also the Gospel to help us every day to remain faithful to him.

Commented [JD2]: TODO – Decide: Talk about Christ's weakness and taking on human limitations. After he resurrected, we see those limitations gone.

And this is *our* song. This is the song we sing together, to remind ourselves *and* each other that our help comes from God. We point each other to him.

He is Always With Us

The song continues, anchoring our help in God...

*[Yahweh] is your keeper;
[Yahweh] is your shade on your right hand.
— Psalm 121:5*

God, our Great Keeper

Two more times, we are reminded who our keeper and protector is, the almighty Yahweh. The same God who revealed himself to Moses on the mountain, brought his people out of slavery in Egypt, split the Red Sea in two, made food rain down from heaven, and did not destroy them when they rejected him just a few days after he saved them. At that moment, this is what God says about himself:

...“[Yahweh], [Yahweh], a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...” — Exodus 34:6 (ESV)

Even after his chosen people rejected him, he continued to patiently keep them in the wilderness for 40 years and bringing them into the promised land. Because, he keeps his promises. This is kind of keeper that God’s people have. This is why you can trust that your foot will not slip and you will not stumble, falling away into destruction.

Is this what we believe? Do we think this is true for God? Do you believe that God keeps you as his child? It doesn’t mean that we won’t experience hardship, pain or difficulties. But, it does mean that God is actively working to preserve your soul under his merciful care. It means that he graciously offers forgiveness and eternal life as a gift (Romans 3:23). It means that he provides your every need, not in the sense of our desire for comfort, but our true needs, our spiritual needs, our eternal needs (Matthew 6:25-34).

Do we walk each day knowing that he is the one watching over us? Or do we work hard to protect ourselves, working for our salvation, choosing sin to get what we *think* we need?

God Stays with You

If this is something you struggle with, then be encouraged! The second half of this verse adds more reassurance for us. Some of us may be tempted to say that God is great, but he has left me, he has abandoned me, he is against me. For believers, this is not true. God is there with you at your right hand.

Not only is he not sleeping, but he is spread out over you, like a canopy. This picture of shade is like sitting under a mighty tree, on a hot day. The tree’s branches are strong and full of leaves. The sun is beating down the earth, yet we abide in the shade provided by this great tree. Have you ever been outside on a hot day needing a moment of rest? Finally, you find some shade under a tree, and you can feel the difference. The coolness of that shade provides relief. That’s the idea here. God is that tree providing shade. And it’s not far, it’s always with you, it’s always on you. Whether you realize it or not, he is there providing that protection. We are kept under the shade of a great and mighty tree.

A Complete Protection

But how strong is the protection that God provides? Is there anything that can break through? Verse 6 and 7 tell us...

*The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
[Yahweh] will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
— Psalm 121:6-7*

Through Day and Night

The sun and moon are pretty powerful. More powerful than most of us can even comprehend. Even though the sun is an estimated 92 million miles away from earth, it will still burn you. It's so massive that its gravitational force holds the earth in orbit even though it's swinging around it over 16 miles per second. The sun provides us with the light for plants to grow and sustains life on the earth. Make no mistake; the sun is powerful.

And the moon, even though it's only a fourth of the size of the earth, is incredibly powerful. It grabs our oceans and shifts them around the earth to create tides. It reflects an incredible amount of sunlight at night to light our way.

Yet, even as powerful as both of these, they are nothing compared to God. In fact, he's the one who spoke them into existence. They are under his complete and utter control. In fact, all of creation is under the control of God, even the things that seem to big to control. Even the spiritual forces and beings that others worship as false gods. Yes, even spiritual forces are under God's control.

Daytime and nighttime are both covered by God, the one who doesn't sleep. His protection will never fail you. In fact, this monotony of day and night is his creation and a reminder that he cares for you every day. Every time you see the sun or the moon, it's a reminder that he cares for you. You are always in the hands of God, under his care and protection. There is no time of day when God is not watching over you. When we want to cry out and say, "God do you realize what's going on?" The answer is always yes, he does.

Through Any Evil

How can we say that God will protect us from being harmed when we are hurt all the time? Bumps, bruises, scrapes, even serious trauma and difficulty, and yes, even death. Is this a lie, or was the Psalmist delusional? Can we trust God's word? Can we even trust *God*?

Yes. We can, and we must. Because our God is trustworthy and so is his word. Our king will preserve us even through the most powerful evil. Whether evil people or spiritual evil this song reminds us that Yahweh is strong. And in the New Testament Jesus reminds us through the author John:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. — John 10:27–29 (ESV)

Our God is faithful to preserve us. No one can steal us away from the power and hand of our savior Jesus. We may suffer physical hardship, but God will soon wipe all tears away from our eyes. We may be wronged by the injustice of this world, but God will soon bring complete justice on all. We have to endure this foreign land of this broken earth, but our future home is so much greater with Jesus. This is who we lift our eyes up to, to give us hope and sustain us on our journey. *(You can read more in Colossians 2 and Philippians 2)*

Our Eternal Protector (v8)

But, this journey is long. We often feel weary. We can forget our Heavenly Father and get wrapped up in ourselves. Praise God that he is not that way. This song comes to a close with a beautifully satisfying reminder. In case you didn't catch it in the first 7 stanzas, God is watching over us at every moment forever.

*[Yahweh] will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.
— Psalm 121:8*

How many of you have gone out, and come into your home this week? How many times will you exist in the monotony (or tyranny) of our busy lives, simply moving from one urgent demand to another?

Fortunately, our God will watch over us with his infinite power at every moment. Even when he is not on our mind, we are still on his mind. And this isn't just for this moment right here and right now while you're listening. It's not just in the good times. It's not just in the bad times. It's all the time. And, it's forever.

There is no corner or area of your life where God is absent. He is always working for you, to preserve your soul to be with him. Completing the ascending journey to the Mt Zion in heaven doesn't depend on us, but on him. Yes, we are called to be faithful, to believe and trust, but somehow at a larger, spiritual scale, God is the one who gives us the strength and ability. He has worked through Christ who died a gruesome death. And now, he continues watching over us...mediating for us.

Reflect & Respond

So, what do we do with a song like this? Why is this ancient song important? How does it help us?

The Reality of A Broken World

It helps us in the reality of this broken world. This song doesn't say that we'll have a cushy, comfortable life. It doesn't mean we won't experience hardship or attack. It doesn't mean that life will be a story book fairy tale. But, it does mean that God preserves his people no matter what. And that dear brothers and sisters is glorious. Because that's what we need the most.

On Our Pilgrimage

This Psalm was sung on a pilgrimage to "Go worship God in the temple and be in his presence". We (as believers) are on a similar pilgrimage. In this new covenant that Christ established by his death and resurrection, we have no need for a temple, because the temple with the spirit dwelling within us. (2 Corinthians 6:16). But we are still on a journey, a pilgrimage. We are exiles in this land, broken by sin.

We suffer. We suffer greatly. The journey is not easy, but we are on it because we trust in Christ's death to save us. So we look forward with hope.

Looking Forward with Confidence

As we continue on this pilgrimage with hope, can we sing this kind of song? Is this what we sound like on our way to see King Jesus in the New Heavens and New Earth? Or, do we fall prey to setting our minds on the things around us, and failing to recognize our Good Shepherd and where he waits for us, preparing a place.

Recently, I've even begun to wonder, what if part of the way God protects us and preserves us is by allowing us to go through suffering and difficulties. Eugene Peterson says this, *"Providence that is God's goodness and blessing that keeps us alive, is often confused as God providing us what we think we want or need."* I want to ask, what if what we need to sustain us and preserve us on this journey is suffering or difficulty. Because, as Paul reminds us, it's *"...light and momentary affliction that produces and eternal weight of glory..."*.

But, God's preserving hand will not fail us as we journey. Whether we are going through times of joy, or times of sorrow, or times of great suffering. We are *going* home. We are *going* to be in the presence of God. Where all our suffering, and tears, and difficulties will be gone. The sun and moon that are fearsome and great will be gone! And we'll see Jesus face to face (Revelation 21). All evil is destroyed and God will dwell with his people. This is fact. It's future, but it's fact. It's more sure than anything we think we know. This is what believers have to look forward to.

We recently celebrated the life of a dear brother. He was faithful to and loved Jesus very much. He loved showing people the kind of love that Jesus showed. And now, as we mourn the loss of his presence with us today, we can stand confident with joy that the almighty Jesus Christ has preserved his soul to the end. He is no longer 'going', he *is* home. Praise God.

This Rest is for You

We've talked a lot about the protection of God for this people. Maybe you're here and you don't know if you're one of God's people. You don't know if any of this is for you. I want to tell you that God says, *"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28 NLT) God offers eternal rest and protection if you repent and believe in him for forgiveness of sins and submit to him as king of our life.

If you would like to remind yourself of this wonderful Psalm this week, I recommend you listen to "Psalm 121" by *The Corner Room*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vow_pW0ra8

¹ The Pastor: A Memoir by Eugene Peterson