

Psalm 121                    “A Song of Ascents: The LORD Guards You”  
Psalm 120-121, 123-125, 127  
Revelation 7

May 8, 2011

Psalm 121 begins by lifting up our eyes to the hills –  
we respond in Psalm 123 by lifting up our eyes to the LORD,  
the one enthroned in the heavens.

The point is the same.

When you lift up your eyes to the hills – to the mountains –  
you should see the visible reminder of God’s encircling presence.

That’s why we will then immediately go on to Psalm 125 –  
a Psalm that speaks of how the mountains around Jerusalem  
remind us of how the LORD surrounds his people.

And then we will sing Psalm 127.

Psalm 127 is often remembered for its reference to the blessed man  
whose quiver is full of children/arrows –  
but it should be remembered even more for its statement  
that unless the LORD builds the house,  
those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the LORD guards (the same word translated “keep” in Ps 121) the city  
the watchman (the keeper of Psalm 121:5) stays awake in vain.

Our guarding, building, watching –  
is utterly dependent on *his* guarding, building, watching.

So let us sing these three Psalms (123, 125, 127)

Read Revelation 7

Revelation 7 quotes Psalm 121 in verse 16 –  
“the sun shall not strike them”

but there is more than a minor quotation to connect Psalm 121 with Revelation 7.

The LORD is your keeper –  
the LORD will guard you –  
the presence of God to guard and guide and protect –  
these are the themes of Revelation 7.

John speaks to the church – in his day and ours –  
and says that the trials that you face  
must be seen in the light of the glory of Lamb!

You live in the tribulation

John says in chapter 1 of Revelation

“I, John, your brother and partner

in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus...”

In other words, tribulation and kingdom exist together in the Christian life –

too often we have divided these,

as though these are successive stages of future eschatology,

rather than fundamental characteristics of what it means to be in Christ.

But for John, the tribulation is not some future event.

The tribulation is where he lives – it is where we live.

But so is the kingdom!

That is the paradox of this age –

this time in between the times –

where Jesus sits on the throne (and the kingdom has come!)

but we do not yet see all things under his feet –

and instead we are often enough trampled underfoot.

Like John, we share in both the tribulation and the kingdom

We share in Christ’s sufferings –

even as we begin (by faith) to share in his glory.

But all this, for Revelation 7, is because “salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne,  
and to the Lamb” (v10)

a statement that echoes one of the refrains of the songs of Ascents:

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

There are two voices in Psalm 121:

the first voice in verses 1-2,

who speaks in the first person;

and the second voice in verses 3-8,

who speaks in the second person.

The first voice inquires about “my help.”

The second voice answers that the LORD is “your keeper.”

### **The Question: From Where Does My Help Come? (v1-2)**

Psalm 121 is undoubtedly song for pilgrims –

for those who live in between the already and the not yet –

for those who are looking for a city that is not yet what it should be.

In other words, Psalm 121 is for you.

You are urged to take up the “I” of Psalm 121.

<sup>1</sup>*I lift up my eyes to the hills.  
From where does my help come?*

What does this mean?

“I lift up my eyes to the hills” –  
does this mean that I look at the hills with confidence  
that my hope comes from the LORD?  
or does it mean that I look at the hills with fear!

I would suggest a generally positive connotation here,  
because in the Psalms – and especially in the songs of Ascents –  
all of this language is very positive.

In Psalm 123:1 “To you I lift up my eyes” –  
In Psalm 126:6 the sower “lifts up the seed for sowing”  
and the reaper “lifts up” the sheaves of harvest.

And then in Psalm 134:2 – “lift up your hands to the holy place”

So every time *this* word “lift” is used, it is a lifting up of the eyes or hands to the LORD.  
(in Psalm 131 – a different word is used,  
but with a similar meaning – my heart is *not* lifted up – my eyes are *not* raised too high.)

Also, the “hills” (or mountains) refer to the mountains of Zion.  
133:3 – the dew of Hermon falls on the mountains of Zion...  
125:1-2 – Mount Zion abides forever, and the mountains that surround Jerusalem  
remind me of how the LORD surrounds Jerusalem.  
So when I lift up my eyes to the hills,  
when I lift up my eyes to the mountains of Zion –  
(whether from a distance as I approach the city,  
or from the city as I prepare to return home)  
I remember my hope – I remember my confidence:

<sup>2</sup>*My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.*

This individual statement is placed in the mouth of Israel in 124:8  
“Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.”

And it comes back in the final benediction of the songs of Ascent,  
“May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth.” (134:3)

But it is not just the verbal parallels –  
you have to see also the conceptual parallels!

In Psalm 120 we saw that the Psalmist cried out, “In my distress I called to the LORD,  
and he answered me.”

That answer comes clearly in Psalm 124 –  
the Psalm that demonstrates *how* the LORD answers the one who calls upon him.

But here in Psalm 121 we have not yet heard *how* the LORD will answer.  
Psalm 121 is the song of the pilgrim –  
for the one who is coming or going to the house of the LORD –  
but one who is also still waiting for the LORD to answer!

Yet there is great confidence that my help comes from the LORD.

We need to pause for a moment to look at this word “help”  
that dominates verses 1-2.

In Genesis 2 God declared that among all the animals there was no *helper*  
suitable for man,  
and so he created Eve from Adam.

Most of the usages of this word in the OT  
have to do with Yahweh as the helper of Israel  
(for instance, the famous story of “eben-ezer” the stone of helping,  
at which Samuel declared “hitherto the LORD has helped us!” 1 Sam 7:12)

or Israel seeking the “help” of foreign nations.

In other words, the idea of “help” in scripture is *not* that someone comes alongside  
and rolls up their sleeves and “helps” you get it done!

(If you recall, when we looked at Genesis 2,  
we saw that what Eve does to *help* is bear children –  
something that Adam is utterly incompetent to do!  
[And you didn’t think that Psalm 121 was a Mother’s Day text!])

A helper is not someone who helps *you* do it –  
a helper is someone who does that which you cannot do.

I lift up my eyes to the hills.  
As I look to the mountains – the encircling hills around the city of God –  
the tone is not: “I need a little help here”!  
but rather  
“when other helpers fail, and comforts flee,  
help of the helpless, O abide with me!”

You face a world filled with unexpected dangers, toils, and snares.

I don't know that we appreciate how perilous the world can be.

Some of you have been seriously affected by the tornadoes in Alabama –  
but for others – that was far away.

But we have started to think that death and tragedy is just an occasional thing.  
I think of the ancient city of Antioch in Syria.  
During the Roman era, Antioch faced a major catastrophe, on average,  
every fifteen years.

Either a siege, murderous rioting,  
or a catastrophic famine, plague, or earthquake  
happened (on average) every fifteen years.

(And that's only counting events that saw *major* death and destruction!  
Not including the everyday sorts of disease, crime, etc.)

If you think about our own congregation,  
we have only encountered death a couple of times –  
Karen Deavel and Piper Kloosterman.

In fourteen years of ministry I have baptized 68, but only buried four.  
But as one friend said once,  
“Give it time!”

Psalms 121 speaks to those who face peril, toil, and death  
and calls you to take upon your lips the confession:

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

### **The Answer: The Keeper of Israel (v3-8)**

And even as the first two verses show us that the LORD is my helper,  
so also verses 3-8 show us that the LORD is your keeper – and your guard.

#### **1. While the Pilgrim Walks on the Earth – the LORD Will Guard You (v3-4)**

In verses 3-8 a second voice enters in reply to the first voice –  
you can see this in the shift from first person “I lift up my eyes”  
to the second person, “He will not let your foot be moved”

I like how Bryan Estelle says this:

“Like a stone thrown into a pool of water with ever-expanding ripples,  
this second voice resounds with ever-expanding circles of promise.”

He covers various aspects of the experience of the pilgrim on the road,  
from the LORD's protection on the path (v3-4)  
to the LORD's protection from the heavenly bodies (v5-6)  
to the LORD's protection from all evil in all of life (v7-8).

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

<sup>4</sup>*Behold, he who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

As you go forth from this building today –  
as you walk down the path of life –  
you may have confidence that the LORD will not let your foot be moved.

How often have I been driving down the road,  
and seen some driver swerve or some truck suddenly brake,  
and I've thanked God that I was not 500 feet further forward –  
otherwise I'd be dead!

My sister spent a semester in Israel –  
one day she decided not to take her regular bus,  
and that happened to be the day that the bus was bombed!

Everyone has these stories!

The One who keeps you – the one who keeps Israel  
neither slumbers nor sleeps.

God never takes a time out –  
his attention to detail never wavers.  
Nothing will ever happen to you where God will say,  
“Oops, sorry! Didn't see that coming!”

## **2. While the Pilgrim Walks under the Sun – the LORD Will Guard You (v5-6)**

Verses 5-6 then escalate the promise:

<sup>5</sup>*The LORD is your keeper;  
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.*

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

Why not just say “the LORD is your shade”?  
Why “your shade on your right hand”?

The right hand is the hand of power.

Isaiah 41:13 says of “my servant Israel”

“For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand.

it is I who say to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.’”

Psalms 110 speaks of the LORD being at the king's “right hand”

to overthrow his enemies.

But why is it called a “shade on your right hand”?

The word for shade (shadow, shelter) is powerfully described in Isaiah 4:  
After God brings judgment on the land, he will restore “the branch of the LORD”  
and then “the LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion  
and over her assemblies a cloud by day,  
and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night;  
for over all the glory there will be a canopy.  
There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat,  
and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.” (Isaiah 4:5-6)

Likewise, Isaiah 25 speaks again of how (after judgment has fallen on Israel)  
the LORD will again be a shelter for his people – on the mountain of the LORD.

And so here, in a Psalm that begins with lifting up my eyes to the mountains of the LORD,  
I am reminded that the LORD is my helper –  
the LORD is the shade on my right hand.

There are echoes here of Israel in the wilderness –  
led by the pillar of cloud by day – and fire by night.

There is the obvious benefit:  
in the scorching heat of the day, the LORD provides shade!

There is a reason why many cultures developed the “siesta” in the middle of the day,  
when it is simply too hot to work!

But there is a less obvious meaning as well.

After all, while it makes perfect sense why you would be glad that  
“the sun shall not strike you by day”  
why should anyone care about  
“the moon by night”!

While moonlight can be beautiful –  
in certain contexts it can be frightful.  
Particularly the way that moonlight deepens shadows.  
Moonlight sharpens contrasts,  
and so if you are walking in a moonlit glade,  
you are very visible to anyone hiding, invisible in the shade.

While there are some references in antiquity to the moon as a spiritual power,  
the OT does not seem to embrace that way of thinking.

The moon is only referred to 27 times in the OT –

usually in reference to how the pagan nations worship the sun and the moon,  
and the hosts of heaven,  
or occasionally in how the sun and moon will react to the judgment of the world.

Isaiah 60, for instance, speaks of how the sun and moon  
will no longer be necessary in the new creation.

Ezekiel 32 speaks of how the sun and moon  
will be covered, and not give their light, in the coming of the LORD.

Joel 2 says the sun and moon will be darkened in the great day of the LORD.

Every other passage refers to the stability of the sun and the moon –  
how they will continue forever – and how the constancy of the sun and moon  
are signs of this age.

Perhaps Ecclesiastes 12:1-2 helps us understand the role of the moon here:

“Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth,  
before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say,  
‘I have no pleasure in them;’  
before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened  
and the clouds return after the rain...”

In short, before “the dust returns to the earth as it was,  
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.” (12:7)

The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night,  
is another way of speaking about the eschatological presence of God!

So the LORD is not only my helper – the one who does what I could not do for myself –  
but he is also my guard and keeper –  
the one who protects me from the powers of world and air.

### **3. While the Pilgrim Goes Out and Comes In – the LORD Will Guard You (v7-8)**

And this is fleshed out in verses 7-8:

<sup>7</sup>*The LORD will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.*

<sup>8</sup>*The LORD will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time forth and forevermore.*

Verses 7-8 speak of this eschatological protection as a feature of the present.  
Even in this age, while the sun and moon rule the day and the night,  
the maker of heaven and earth will keep you from all evil.  
He will keep (guard) your life.

He will keep (guard) your going out and your coming in.



The language of going out and coming in is especially used of warfare,  
but it can also be used of pilgrimage.

In the Christian life, warfare and pilgrimage are knit together  
as our life is described as a continual pilgrimage,  
but also as spiritual warfare against the principalities and powers.

In Psalm 121 the Psalmist seems to use the idea of going out and coming in  
in an all-encompassing way –  
in all that you do, and everywhere that you go,  
the LORD will keep your life;  
he will guard you.

But it's precisely at this point –  
at the point where the Psalmist applies the eschatological promises to the present –  
that we balk!

The LORD will keep you from all evil!  
Seriously?  
Absolutely!

In the same way that God kept our Lord Jesus from all evil –  
so also he will keep you from all evil!

That may not sound very comforting!  
After all, “evil” managed to betray, condemn, and crucify the Lord of Glory!

But all true comfort is found here –  
because while we *will* share in the sufferings of Christ,  
in him we also pass through suffering to glory.

I want you to think about how we get there from this language of “keeping” or “guarding”  
in Psalm 121.

This word “shamar” – to keep or to guard –  
is the word used in Genesis 2:15 to speak of Adam's task in the Garden –  
“to keep” or guard the Garden of Eden;  
After Adam was driven out of the garden,  
it is the word used of the task of the cherubim –  
to guard (or keep) the entrance to the Garden,  
so that Adam might not return;  
it is the word used of the priests in the temple  
both in Moses as also in Ezekiel.

We saw in Genesis (and again in Ezekiel) that the Garden of Eden

was the original sanctuary – the holy place where God met with his people.  
And Adam was the original priest – the one who was to serve and guard the sanctuary.  
But the first time an intruder arrived,  
Adam failed – and permitted the serpent to beguile his wife.

The priests in the temple, then,  
were charged with protecting – guarding – the holy place.  
As such, they were called to succeed where Adam failed!  
You probably still remember what Ezekiel said about the priests of his day!  
They had profaned the sanctuary – like Adam.

So Israel's priests have failed to guard/protect the sanctuary.  
But Psalm 121 insists that Israel's hope is *not* that the priests will guard you –  
nor that the king will protect you!  
Psalm 121 says that the LORD himself is your guard.

But Jesus is the great priest who is not only the one who guards and protects us,  
but also is the one who *helps* us.

Listen to Hebrews 2:17-18

“Therefore he had to be made a like his brothers in every respect,  
so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God,  
to make propitiation for the sins of the people.  
For because he himself has suffered when tempted,  
he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

“Consequently [Hebrews 7:25], he is able to save to the uttermost  
those who draw near to God through him,  
since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

And Hebrews 9:28:

“So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many,  
will appear a second time,  
not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”

Psalm 121 is a song about how God alone does what we could not do.  
He is our helper. He is our guard and protector.

You might say, well, but what do we do?  
I'm glad you asked that question!  
What we do is lift up our eyes,  
lift up our hearts,  
and lift up our *voices* and sing praise to him who has done this!