

## Our Helper and Keeper Psalm 121

*<sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills.  
From where does my help come?  
<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.  
<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.  
<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.  
<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.*

Over the years I have read this psalm many times and have preached on this psalm more than once. But until recently, I'm not sure I have really understood what this psalm is all about and how it applies to the people of God.

In my younger days, with my American mindset, I interpreted this psalm as God's unqualified promise to protect his children even when they put themselves in harm's way. So the application was: Step out in faith and take big risks for the Lord. When the psalmist said, "*He will not let your foot be moved...<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.<sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all evil; he...will keep your going out and your coming in...*" I took that to mean that a child of God was nearly invincible. God doesn't let bad things happen to us. He protects us from pain and suffering. I pictured Him hovering over us like a parent of an infant learning to walk, quickly catching us when we stumble so we don't get hurt.

But that is obviously not true.

When I read Psalm 121 nowadays I cannot help but see faces. I see Geoff Wiegand, a Bible college student, whose foot slipped on a rock while climbing a waterfall in Maui. He did not survive the fall. I see the face of a friend who was horribly abused by her father as a little girl, who desperately wanted to put her past behind her, but didn't quite know how to trust her heavenly Father. I see my paraplegic friend, Shafkat, being hoisted carelessly off an airplane by two inexperienced workers and being scraped against the metal railing, which led to an infection that would take his life four weeks later. I see my mother lying at the base of our stairs with a broken neck, after hearing a tumble, a thud, and a helpless moan.

We *do* get hurt. We get in accidents and we get incurable diseases and we are victims of injustice, and sometimes the results of these things are catastrophic. Sometimes the results are fatal.

So just exactly what does it mean that the LORD is our Keeper? I want us to think critically about Psalm 121 this morning. I want us to understand it the way the people of Israel understood it when they sang it as part of their worship. And I want us to be able to know how to confidently trust God in our daily lives.

You'll notice in your Bibles that just underneath the number 121 is the phrase, "*a psalm of ascent*". Psalms of ascent were sung by pilgrims as they went up to Jerusalem to the great worship festivals held three times each year. In the spring they refreshed their memories of God's saving ways at the Feast of Passover; in early summer they renewed their commitment as God's covenant people at the Feast of Pentecost; and in the autumn they responded as a blessed community to the best that God had for them at the Feast of Tabernacles (Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, pp.14-15).

Psalms 120-134, the psalms of ascent, were, quite literally, "songs for the road" for Hebrew pilgrims as they journeyed to Jerusalem for these festivals. They are called Psalms of *ascent* because Jerusalem was the highest city geographically in Palestine, so all who traveled there spent much of their time ascending. "But the ascent was not only literal, it was also a metaphor: the trip to Jerusalem acted out a life lived upward toward God, an existence that advanced from one level to another in developing maturity" (Peterson, 14).

One major level of developing spiritual maturity, both then and now, is in the area of where, in what, or in whom we place our confidence; where, in what, or in whom we put our security; where, in what or in whom we trust for protection and safety.

The Psalmist, in **verse 1**, says, *<sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?*

This is a familiar verse. When I hear it I am reminded of the confident, soothing voice of the Mother Abbess who quoted this verse while counseling a confused Maria in *The Sound of Music*, and suggested that her help would literally be found in the hills.

But that's not what the Psalmist is saying—in fact, it's quite the opposite. When pilgrims on a journey to Jerusalem lifted their eyes to the hills and mountains in Palestine at the time this Psalm was written and sung, they would have seen an abundance of shrines that were set up for pagan worship. The hilltops were covered with altars and booths where one could offer sacrifices or perform rituals or recite prayers that would supposedly make their journey prosperous and protect them from evil.

The pagans of Palestine had thought of every conceivable peril that might befall a traveler, and were prepared with a host of remedies just in case help was needed. And so there were kiosks where you could buy security in the form of spells or charms. If you feared the sun's heat you could go to the sun priest and pay for protection against the sun god. If you feared the malevolent influences of moonlight you could go to the moon priestess and buy an amulet.

If you feared the malicious demons who were thought to torment travelers by loosening stones under their feet, you could learn a secret mantra that would ward them off and give you safe passage while traveling through their territory. If you feared the bandits who lurked in the clefts of the narrow and twisted passageways of the steep terrain, you could burn some incense to Asherah, who would supposedly shield you from their wicked plots.

As Hebrew pilgrims lifted their eyes and saw these shrines and alters and kiosks dotting the hills on the sides of the road, it would be reasonable for them to ask, "From where

does *my* help come?” From Baal? From Asherah? From the sun priest? From the moon priestess?

They would say, “Absolutely not!” As they passed by these shrines they would adamantly reject their offers for help, confidently proclaiming instead, **verse 2.** *<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD (YAHWEH), who made heaven and earth.*

And this is the first clue as to the central meaning of this psalm. Remember, this psalm that was intended to be sung by the people of Israel on their way to their national assembly, begins by declaring the most fundamental aspect of their identity. The God of Israel is the one, true God and His name is Yahweh, the Creator of heaven and earth. “We don’t have a sun god, or a moon goddess, or a rain god or a fertility goddess or a god who protects us from this and another god who protects us from that. There is only *one* God, and He is *our* God. Our most foundational doctrine and most oft-repeated declaration is ‘Hear O Israel: The LORD our God, The LORD is one’ (Deut. 6:4).”

“We, the Hebrew community, are monotheists. So we look at these shrines and altars as nothing more than litter on the landscape. We hear the names of these so called gods and have nothing but disdain for them, for they are imposters, false gods, no gods, and they detract from the glory of Yahweh, the one, true God.”

Indeed, the message proclaimed in verse 2 is intended to be decisive, definitive, and absolute. *<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD (YAHWEH), who made heaven and earth.* There is only one Source of help and salvation, and it is found in the God of Scripture.

I saw a piece on CBS evening news one night (6/30/05) in which a woman, a professor at an interfaith seminary, was featured. They filmed her in her home, which was full of relics and altars and icons from thirteen different world religions, all of which she incorporates into her own spiritual experience. When the correspondent asked her why she couldn’t just pick one religion she responded, “My goodness, that’s too narrow, that’s too restricting.”

The piece went on to reveal that, according to a recent poll, 36% of Americans incorporate more than one religion into their spiritual experience. In the words of one man, “Faith is like cafeteria food in America: you just go down the aisle and pick and choose what you want that suits your particular tastes and preferences”.

When I was in Bolivia several years ago, I was surprised that, in a country that is 95% Roman Catholic, everywhere we went in the city of La Paz we saw kiosks that sold items for performing witchcraft—potions, powders, llama fetuses, etc. They were not even ashamed to *call* it witchcraft. These things are part of the ancient religious rituals of the ancient Incan civilization. But what was most astonishing to us is that so many professing Christians participated in it. They went to church, they prayed to the God of the Bible, they sang songs of praise to Jesus, and then they went to a witch and had her do her thing so they could be protected from evil spirits or be blessed in some way.

One pastor confessed to us that he went on a prayer retreat, had a marvelous time in communion with God, was energized and renewed and inspired in his service to God and the church, and on the way home from the retreat stopped at a roadside kiosk, where he consulted with a witch to try and find out when God’s blessing would come upon his church. And he didn’t think twice about it!

All of this to say that the answer to the question in verse 1, “Where does my help come from?” may not be as obvious as we think. Because it is entirely possible to confess with our mouths, “My help comes from the LORD, maker of heaven and earth”, and yet live as though

our help comes from other sources. In our culture, it's not witchcraft, but maybe we live as though our help comes from our money, our intelligence, our insurance company, our technology, our ability to get good medical care, our instant access to information on the Internet. These are not bad things. But they can be the things we turn to and rely on when we need help, without ever looking to the Lord.

But, as I said before, one major level of developing spiritual maturity, is in *this* area of where, in what, or in whom we place our confidence; where, in what, or in whom we put our security; where, in what or in whom we trust for protection and safety. Mature spiritual pilgrims put their trust in the Lord. They are aware that their lives are in His hands, and that their rest, their hope, and their confidence are in Him.

**Verse 3a.** <sup>3</sup> *He will not let your foot be moved;* Remember, this is a song for the road, sung by people traveling on foot to Jerusalem. One of the perils of traveling on foot is that one can step on a loose stone and sprain one's ankle. Pagans at the time believed that evil spirits would try and sabotage pilgrims by loosening stones, or perhaps make a stone protrude in order to intentionally trip the traveler. This verse reminds *Hebrew* pilgrims that they need not stop at one of these hilltop shrines to prevent those spirits from proceeding with their malicious plans. God is their Helper and Keeper. They can put their trust in the LORD, who will not let their foot be moved.

**Verses 3b-4.** *"...He who keeps you will not slumber. <sup>4</sup> Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."*

It was widely believed that Baal, one of the Palestinian gods, took long naps, and that one of the jobs of his priests was to wake him up when someone needed his attention. The legends of Baal are full of tales of his orgies and the difficulty of rousing him out of a drunken sleep. You may well remember Elijah taunting the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel when they were trying, to no avail, to get him to consume the altar with fire. "Perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened" (1 Kings 18:27).

But Yahweh, the Creator, the one, true God, is always awake. He neither slumbers nor sleeps. Pilgrims can be assured that He is with them when they set out on their way, and He is still with them when they arrive at their destination. And all along the way He will have been attentive to everything that is going on, ever alert, always ready to respond to their needs. Nothing takes Him by surprise; and nothing happens to one of His children without His knowledge or permission.

Look at **verses 5-6.** <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.*

Not only could a traveler on a journey by foot trip and sprain his ankle, but under prolonged exposure to the hot sun, he could become faint with sunstroke. Jericho was below sea level, the land between Jericho and Jerusalem is extremely arid, and it is hot most of the year. Furthermore, a person traveling for long distances on foot, under the pressures of fatigue and anxiety, could become emotionally ill, which was described by ancient writers as moonstroke (or by us as *lunacy*) (Peterson, p.35).

The pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem were reminding themselves, in verses 5-6, that their security and sufficiency were in the LORD their God. They did not need to fear the sun or the moon. They did not need supplemental help from the sun priest or the moon priestess who had set up shop and were soliciting consultations from their shrines on the hilltops. Yahweh is the Creator of the sun and moon and all things, and as such He is the Lord over

all natural and supernatural forces. Created things don't have spiritual power, and, therefore, we need not fear them.

A few years ago, Mindy and I went body surfing at a place called *Big Beach* on the island of Maui. We were having a marvelous time—the waves were big enough that when we caught one just right we could ride it all the way onto the shore. We had been in the water for about twenty minutes when we looked out and saw a wave coming that scared the living daylights out of us. It was at least ten or twelve feet high, and it came on so suddenly that we could not do anything other than just let it crash right on top of us. And when it did, we were flailing around like rag dolls, helpless, totally at the mercy of the wave, and conscious that one of us may not come through it without some kind of injury.

I heard later, from a native Hawaiian man, that such waves are called “freak waves,” and that they are indeed dangerous. He said that Big Beach is a favorite hangout for locals who like to sit on the beach and be entertained by watching freak waves terrorize unsuspecting tourists.

But here's the point of the story: How should we interpret that freak wave? Was it a spiritual, malevolent force that was out to get us? Was the ocean trying to inflict evil upon us because we had somehow offended it?

Of course not! The LORD is the Maker of heaven and earth, verse 2. He's the Creator of that ocean and that beach, and He's the Lord of the waves—even freak waves.

So what does *that* mean? This psalm says, “*He will not let your foot be moved,*” verse 3, and “*the sun will not strike you by day nor the moon by night,*” verse 6. And then **verse 7**, <sup>7</sup> *The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.*

This suggests that the God who created the world is also sovereign over His creation, and that He regulates it in order to protect His loved ones. So let's apply that to our time at Big Beach. If He is the Lord of the sun and the moon and the waves, was God involved in that situation when we encountered that potentially dangerous freak wave?

Was God watching over us saying, “Oh boy, look at my children in the ocean having such a wonderful time. Think I'll turn up the wave machine so they can have a little more...woops that's a little too big. Boy that one got away from me.”

Did He send the wave in order to teach us a lesson? “Those guys are getting a little too comfortable out there—they need to be a little more careful. I think I'll send them a wave that'll put a little fear in them.”

I learned a lesson from that experience, alright, but I'm not sure God was sending that message, although you can be sure I was thanking Him profusely when we weren't harmed.

Was God proving to us that He is our Protector, since none of us were seriously hurt? After all, verse 7 says He will keep you from all evil. Again, I doubt it. I have a cousin who dislocated his shoulder at Big Beach when he was ambushed by a freak wave. What about him? What about a friend of mine, a youth pastor in Southern California, who was hit by such a wave on a youth outing and became a quadriplegic as a result? What about John and Nikki's co-worker with *Food for the Hungry* who was killed by the 2004 Tsunami in Indonesia, along with lots of others who put their trust in God?

We all know plenty of instances where Christians—godly Christians—sprain their ankles, get sunstroke, have emotional problems and mental illnesses, get paralyzed, and even get killed. There are plenty of examples even in Scripture where godly people experienced the worst kind of pain and suffering, and no literature is more realistic and honest

in facing these harsh facts of life than the Bible. At no time is there the faintest suggestion that the life of faith exempts us from difficulties.

And this is where we make an important distinction between preservation from harm and preservation from evil. The promise in verse 7 is that the LORD will keep us from all *evil*. And that's where He gets very personal.

Psalms 121 is not stating an absolute principle that no harm will ever befall us, but that God is *in* every circumstance of our lives, watching over us, inviting us to trust Him, even when we encounter obstacles and accidents and tragedies. And I would be remiss if I didn't say that many of you who have experienced serious tragedy have encountered God in a very profound and personal way in the midst of that tragedy.

I love what Eugene Peterson said: "The Christian life is not a quiet escape to a garden where we can walk and talk uninterruptedly with our Lord; not a fantasy trip to a heavenly city where we can compare our blue ribbons and gold medals with others who have made it to the winner's circle...The Christian life is going to God. In going to God Christians travel the same ground that everyone else walks on, breathe the same air, drink the same water, shop in the same stores, read the same newspapers, are citizens under the same governments, pay the same prices for groceries and gasoline, fear the same dangers, are subject to the same pressures, get the same distresses, are buried in the same ground.

"The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God, we know we are accompanied by God, we know we are ruled by God; and therefore no matter what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will preserve us from evil, He will keep our life" (Peterson, 40-41).

Psalms 121 reminds us that we don't have to live in fear, we don't have to be paranoid or keep looking over our shoulders thinking that we are about to be pounced on by the forces of evil, however aggressive they might, in fact, be. Our faith is not a precarious thing. It is solid and secure, rooted in the promise of **verse 8**: "*the Lord will watch over your coming and going, both now and forevermore.*"

## Our Helper and Keeper Psalm 121

**Main Idea:** The Lord is our constant Companion in life's journey, standing between us and every threat of evil, and guaranteeing our security along the way

### **Psalm of Ascent**

**The futility of the hills (v.1)**

**The one, true God (v.2)**

**The most fundamental doctrine**

**The creator of all**

**The LORD vs. pagan gods (vv.3-7)**

**He ensures sure-footedness (3a)**

**He is ever watchful (3b-4)**

**He protects from sunstroke (5-6a)**

**He shields from *lunacy* (6b)**

**He preserves from all evil (7)**

**Preservation and protection in a dangerous world**

# Family Life Groups

## Sermon Discussion Questions

### Our Helper and Keeper

#### Psalm 121

**Main Idea:** The Lord is our constant Companion in life's journey, standing between us and every threat of evil, and guaranteeing our security along the way

In Psalm 121 (a psalm of ascent) the Hebrew community was declaring that God alone was their salvation. They were choosing to trust Him for protection and preservation, rather than the superstitious methods of their fearful neighbors. Think about your life. Are you fearful? Do you worry about your health and safety (or the health and safety of your loved ones), your future, your finances, etc.? What steps do you take to ensure your safety and security? How can you make sure that God is the One you trust for your security, and not those steps?

When verse 7 promises that "...the LORD will keep us from all evil; he will keep our life," it is not a promise that God will prevent bad things from happening to us, or that we are exempt from pain and suffering. It means that God is with us at all times, he watches over us at all times, and he will preserve us from evil (even when bad things happen). How can this truth help you when you are facing trials, injustices, and hardships?