

“Singing on the Journey”

PSALM 121

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
May 27, 2012



It would probably be very safe to say that all of us here this morning have needed help at one time or another. And for many of us, the need for help has come when we are on a long trip, perhaps many miles away from home. We know that this is a big travel weekend, and we know that many of us will be traveling at various times throughout the summer, and on our journeys, many of us will need something. Maybe we need directions, maybe we need help with travel arrangements, or maybe we need help keeping things squared away at home while we are out of town.

With this in mind, this morning I would invite you to turn with me to the Old Testament book of Psalms, to Psalm 121 (p. 983). And as we turn to this psalm, I would like for us to notice the heading. In most Bibles, somewhere at the top of this chapter, the psalm is described as being *“A Song of Ascents.”* In fact, if you look back at Psalm 120, that one is labeled in the same way. If you look ahead, the next one is also labeled in the same way. In fact, you can look at Psalm 120 all the way through Psalm 134, and each of those psalms carry the heading *“A Song of Ascents.”* When we “ascend,” of course, it means that we go up toward something. And the idea is that the songs in this part of the book of Psalms were meant to be sung as the Jewish people were making their three annual trips to visit the city of Jerusalem. For that reason, I am using a picture that was taken by a young couple who spent a year or so doing some hiking in the land of Israel – just to give you some idea of what it might be like to travel on foot in that part of the world. Concerning the distance involved, if you could imagine roughly the southern half of the state of Wisconsin walking to Milwaukee three times a year, that might give you some small idea of what we are talking about here. A lot of people would need to do a lot of walking, and to get to Jerusalem, pretty much all of that walking would need to be done uphill. Jerusalem was in the mountains, and thousands upon thousands of people would make that journey three times every year – no interstate, no cars, no rest areas, no cell phones. For many people, that was a serious bit of travel. It was dangerous. There had to be some planning involved. A lot of times, neighbors had to work together just to make it happen. And as a dad, I can imagine that on those long journeys, there might have been at least a little bit of whining involved. Imagine walking from here to Milwaukee!

On these trips, therefore, the people would often sing, and those songs have been arranged together almost as a supplement to the rest of the book of Psalms (kind of like we have our little Beaver Creek songbooks), and those songs are Psalms 120-134. This morning, then, as many of us may be doing some traveling of our own over the next few days and weeks, let us please look together at the second of the Psalms of Ascent – Psalm

121. As we look at these words, let us imagine that we have been walking for several days. We are tired, we are hungry, we are nervous and a little bit scared about being so far away from home, maybe we are hot or cold or soaking wet, and we are pretty much ready to get this trip over with. With that, let us please consider Psalm 121,

- 1** *I will lift up my eyes to the mountains;
From where shall my help come?*
- 2** *My help comes from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.*
- 3** *He will not allow your foot to slip;
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 will not smite you by day,
Nor the moon by night.*
- 7** *The Lord will protect you from all evil;
He will keep your soul.*
- 8** *The Lord will guard your going out and your coming in
From this time forth and forever.*

As we focus our thoughts on this song that was sung while walking to Jerusalem in the ancient world, I would like for us to focus our attention on God in particular, and the help that God provides.

I. And this leads us to the first two verses, as we find that GOD IS THE SOURCE OF OUR HELP.

In the NASB (and most other modern translations), we have the idea of a question, ***“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”*** Unfortunately, the KJV has led to some misunderstanding of this verse for many, many years. The KJV says, ***“I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.”*** And so it is in the form not of a question, but in the form of a statement, as if the author was saying that his help was going to come from the hills. So, the wording in the KJV is awkward and even a little bit misleading to say the least. And I say this, because for a pilgrim making that journey to Jerusalem, the hills were definitely not the source of help; in fact, the exact opposite is true: The hills were the problem! The hills and mountains were dangerous – narrow mountain paths, wild animals, snakes, robbers, the danger of slipping, cold at night, hot during the day. And so when setting out on that journey to Jerusalem, the author is not looking to the hills for help, but instead, he sees the hills, and he basically says: Oh no! Look! There are hills on the horizon! How am I going to do this? Who will help me make it to Jerusalem?

And at this point, it seems rather obvious that verse 2 provides the answer, ***“My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”*** Psalm 121, therefore, is a song written by someone in trouble, a song being sung by those who were at least a little bit nervous about what might be lurking around the next bend in the trail, a song for those who are nervous, or hurting, or scared. And the singer clearly identifies the source of his help as being God, the God who made heaven and earth.

And while we're on the first two verses, I would point out something about the word **"LORD"** (in verse 2). Most English translations put that word in all caps to represent the word behind it (in Hebrew), a word that we basically do not really know how to pronounce. In Hebrew, we refer to the word as a tetragrammaton, literally, "a four letter word." Specifically, it is a word with four consonants and no vowels, and that's where the confusion starts concerning how to pronounce the name of God in Hebrew. Doing the best we can to bring it over into English, we might spell it YHWH, but I would challenge you to try to pronounce YHWH! Some have settled on Jehovah, but most people have gone with Yahweh. And yet because we are not 100% certain as to the pronunciation, and also due to an ancient Jewish warning, an ancient Jewish tradition against accidentally blaspheming God's name by using it incorrectly, most modern translations simply use the word LORD in all caps as a substitute. But the word itself appears to come from the state of being verb "am" with a first person singular subject, "I AM." We remember God's response to Moses in Exodus 3 as Moses kept coming up with excuses for not doing what God wanted him to do. Moses wanted to know what he would say when the sons of Israel wanted to know God's name, and God said to Moses, **"I AM WHO I AM,"** and God said, **"Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"** God then went on to say, **"This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations."** The author of Psalm 121, then, was saying: My help comes from Yahweh, the great I AM, the maker of heaven and earth. When we face challenges, when we need help along the way, we turn to God, our Maker, our Designer. When an engineer designs a product, that person (more than any other) knows the strengths and weaknesses of that product. In the same way, God our maker knows and understands what we are going through and how much we can handle (even more than we do). And for that reason, God is the source of our help.

II. As we continue with the rest of Psalm 121, I would like to go on and point out (very specifically) that God is described as our KEEPER.

I was always taught that when reading a passage, it is important to keep an eye out for words that are repeated, and when looking at this passage, the word **"keep"** just keeps on popping up! The NIV messes this up a little bit by switching between the word **"watch"** and **"keep,"** but in the original language, the words are the same and the word is repeated six times in these last six verses – that is significant! The word refers to watching or protecting, kind of like the work that a bodyguard would do – not just looking at someone, but watching over them with the intent of doing something about it. It is the idea of setting up some kind of protective perimeter. At home right now, we have a fence around our garden, and that fence is there for a reason. I love little critters, but I do not want to share my garden with them, and so I have set up a little bit of a bubble in our back yard – we have a fence, and I watch over that area with the idea of protecting it from little invaders. I am the keeper of the garden, so to speak. I care about what happens in that little zone. I am the watchman. And that is the idea in verses 3-8. God is our keeper. He is our protector. And as we think about that concept, I would point out several things we know are true. And these basic concepts are true no matter what our exact circumstances might be. Maybe we're facing an actual trip, a journey like the author of this song. Maybe we're facing family trouble – kid trouble, spouse trouble, in-law trouble. Maybe we're facing some serious health struggles. Maybe we're facing job trouble. No matter what we're facing, several things are always true about God.

A. First of all, for example, the song tells us (in verses 3-4) that as our keeper, God never sleeps – He is attentive.

The God who keeps us will neither slumber nor sleep. In other words, His eyes are always open. Not that God will prevent any bad thing from ever happening; but instead, the Lord God is always paying attention to what is going on in our lives. We think about a parent staying up late, concerned about a child who has not come

home for the night. In a similar way, almost like the parent of a teenager, God never sleeps, but He pays attention to what is going on. One author has suggested that God has never been caught off guard by anything. Nothing ever really surprises God. Nothing ever really sneaks up on God. At the beginning of verse 3, ***“He will not let your foot be moved.”*** And the idea here, I believe, is not that God will keep anything bad from ever happening to us, and yet He does protect us. He is looking out for us. He keeps us. Nothing ever slips by without Him knowing about it. We go back to the idea of staying up late for our children – not that we prevent them from ever making any wrong choices, not that we put a bubble around them so that nothing bad ever happens, but we as parents are there for them. And maybe in a similar way, God never sleeps. He is with us at the beginning of the journey, He is with us at the destination, and He is with us all the way along the rocky path.

B. There is a second basic idea concerning God’s care for us in the second half of this psalm, and that is: As our keeper, God has the ability to give us comfort in times of trouble (verses 5-6).

We find that as our keeper, the Lord God provides shade from the heat of the sun. What an appropriate thought for us to consider this morning! We know the danger of the sun. We know the danger of heat. Sunburn, and heatstroke, and dehydration. Today’s marathon has been canceled due to the heat. We understand the danger of the sun. But what about the moon? As far as I know, I have never met anybody who has been scared of the moon, and yet in the ancient world, many people thought that the moon caused all kinds of problems. Let’s just say there is a pretty good reason for the word “lunatic.” In the ancient world, people thought that being out in the full moon would make you mentally ill. There were several leading theories on this. Since the brain is mostly water, some people thought that the moon’s gravitational pull would actually pull the brain to one side or the other inside the skull, causing damage. Others have tried to suggest that during a full moon, people would not sleep as well due to the extra light, and so those with a preexisting mental illness would kind of be thrown over the edge with just a little less sleep. There have been many other explanations through the years, but for thousands of years the moon was considered dangerous to our mental health. And so an unstable person was labeled with the Latin word for moon – that person was “moonstruck,” a lunatic. But the point here is that God would shade and protect them from all kinds of danger (either real or imagined), both night and day, at all times.

And notice: God does not remove them from the situation, but He shades them from it. He does not necessarily make the bad thing go away, but He helps them through it. As Paul put it in Romans 8, nothing can separate us from the love of God. He is the shade on our right hand.

C. There is another aspect of God’s care (in verse 7) as we find that the Lord God will keep us from evil.

So, we have the danger of accidental injury (verses 3-4), we have the danger of weather (verses 5-6), and it seems that we now have the danger of other people intent on doing harm – the danger of evil. Imagine being a thief back in those times. You had thousands of people traveling far away from home, they were traveling through these remote and deserted mountain passes, and most of those people were bringing at least 10% of their income over the past several months. For a thief, the circumstances were perfect! And not only would they steal possessions, but they probably would not feel too bad about taking a life or two here or there as well. The singer of this song, then, was putting his trust in God to protect him from that kind of danger, ***“The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.”*** We think of how Jesus taught His disciples to pray, ***“And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil”*** (Matthew 6:13). God, then, has a way of keeping us from evil. He is able to provide us with a way of escape.

D. There is a final aspect of God's care (in verse 8) as we discover that God's care is constant.

In verse 8, the singer seems to address a common fear, the fear that maybe God's care is just temporary, the fear that since things are not going well in my life right now, that maybe God has lost interest in us for a little while, that maybe God has turned away, that maybe God is just kind of playing with us. But the singer assures us that God's care and concern is permanent. God's care is consistent – even with things do not seem to be going very well. We think about Job. Job was a righteous man, but after a long series of challenges, even Job started to question God. Job, of course, had no idea that the torment was coming from Satan. Job had no idea that the challenges were being allowed by God, allowed very briefly as a way for Job to prove his faith.

From time to time, then, bad things will happen to good people. As Christians, we drive the same roads as everybody else. We pay the same price for gas. We have the same pressures at work. But, we do have God providing shade for us, and we learn here that God's care is constant. He keeps our ***"going out"*** and our ***"coming in."*** He takes care of us coming and going!

Conclusion:

As we close, I certainly realize that we do not travel to Jerusalem three times a year like the author of this song did, and yet I do hope we realize that we are on a journey, and as we travel through this life, there will be dangers and distractions along the way. We know that Christians and their loved ones are not exempt from unemployment, and cancer, and injuries, death, and accidents, and all kinds of various diseases. We do not have a free pass on these things, and just in case these things sound familiar, it's because it's simply a summary of the announcements here at this congregation over the past few weeks. We hurt here. But like the Jews on their way to Jerusalem, we can also say, ***"My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."*** He pays attention at all times, he comforts us in what we're going through, he keeps us from evil, and His care is constant. And that is why WE have been singing this morning! We sing, because we are on our way to heaven, and God is helping us get there.

At this time, we would invite you to accept God's invitation. God sent His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. We respond to His sacrifice by turning away from sin, by confessing the name of Jesus as being God's Son, and by allowing ourselves to be briefly dipped in water so that our sins will be forgiven. If you have any questions, we would love to study with you at some point this week, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com