

PSALM 121

THE GOD WHO KEEPS AND HELPS

DEVOTIONAL STUDY GUIDE

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Introduction: Psalm 121 is one of fifteen Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134) that were sung at three annual festival processions as the Israelite pilgrims ascended to Jerusalem to worship God. It begins with an acknowledgment of God as Creator and ends with a declaration of personal trust in His providential care.

Day 1

I will lift up my eyes to the hills— From whence comes my help?

When your world turns dark and your journey turns rugged, where do you turn for help? What is your source for the confidence you need to face the headwinds of life?

Psalm 121 encourages us in such times. It reminds us where our help comes from and infuses us with confidence: “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”

Of course, the reason the psalmist is looking “to the mountains” is because that’s where his help comes from, help that “comes from the Lord.”

I will lift up my eyes to the hills: The singer of this psalm looked **to the hills**, likely the distant **hills** of Jerusalem as he travelled toward the city to fulfill his pilgrimage.

The singer is still far from the appointed place of worship, lifting his eyes toward the distant mountains. He is not far from Jehovah, however. In Jehovah’s keeping, even though far from the center of external worship, the pilgrim realizes his safety.” (Morgan)

The point is wonderful. The singer understood that the group didn’t need to arrive at Jerusalem before they came under God’s protective care. He would watch over them on the journey. God is just as present in the journey as in the destination.

If you knew before you set out on your Christian walk how challenging the journey would be at times—would you have committed to making the trip? If you became aware early on of the slippery, uneven places and just how dangerous the path could become—would you make the same choices? Obstacles have a way of testing

even the most ardent climber, but it is precisely those hurdles that can either make or break a person's resolve to go higher and reach the summit.

Fortunately for the believer, we walk by faith and not by sight. What's up ahead or around the bend is doable when God is with us, making it more than worth the effort. Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for them who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9). The key to success in the climb is to stay on the path and keep your focus on the Lord. Let Him lead you to higher ground.

There are two other suggestions of what was intended by this looking **up** to the **hills**, though they are less likely.

Some suggest this was a consideration of the *high places* where idolaters set their altars ([Numbers 22:41](#), [Deuteronomy 33:29](#), [1 Kings 12:31](#)).

Some suggest this was an *anxious* look to the hills, looking for danger and threats from often-present robbers and gangs.

Personal Reflection Questions

1. How are you looking to God in this pandemic?

2. How has God shown you that He is your help during this time?

3. What other forms of "help" have you looked for in this pandemic?

4. Tomorrow's Challenge: Read & Reflect on Psalm 46. What is your takeaway from the scripture?

Primary Source: David Guzik, Enduring Word Commentary



Day 2

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

My help comes from the LORD: The traveler looked to Jerusalem as his goal, yet his trust was not in that city itself. **Help** would come from the God **who made heaven and earth**. The Creator would be his helper.

The picture David paints for the reader in Psalm 121 is from the vantage point of standing in the Jericho Valley, some twelve hundred feet below sea level, gazing upward to the mountains surrounding Jerusalem. Walking this path would mean a potential encounter with the likes of wild animals, robbers, and rocky places in which one could stumble and fall. Visually a long, grueling, difficult climb lay ahead; spiritually there would come the affirmation that God was there all the time!

“The sole source of ‘help’ comes from Yahweh, who, as Creator, has unlimited power.” (Van Gemeren)

“What he is telling us is that his gaze did not stop when he looked upward to the hills but that he looked beyond them to God, who made the mountains.” (James Montgomery Boice)

“The City of God, and the Temple, are to be desired and delighted in; the mountains upon which they rest are to be remembered. But not from them does help come to distressed souls; it comes from Jehovah.” (Morgan)

Personal Reflection Questions

1. Looking “to Jerusalem” could be seen as looking to something other God. Do you believe that your help is already here? Whether you see it or not?

2. How secure do you feel in an insecure world? Why?

Tomorrow's Challenge:

Reflect on Psalm 20:7-8. What does that scripture mean to you at this time.



Day 3

He will not allow your foot to be moved;

He will not allow your foot to be moved: God would help His people by establishing them in a firm place, allowing them to stand and not allowing their **foot to be moved**.

“The foundation, God’s infinite power and goodness, on which thou standest, cannot be moved; and whilst thou standest on this basis, thy foot cannot be moved.”
(Clarke)

“Our feet shall move in progress, but they shall not be moved to their overthrow.”
(Spurgeon)

For the Christian, this reminds us of the principles found in [Ephesians 6:11](#) and [13](#) – that the believer is to find a place to *stand*, and this can only be done by looking to the Lord and trusting the One who **will not allow your foot to be moved**.

The standing of the believer in Jesus is impressive.

- We stand in grace ([Romans 5:2](#)).
- We stand in the gospel ([1 Corinthians 15:1](#)).
- We stand in courage and strength ([1 Corinthians 16:13](#)).
- We stand in faith ([2 Corinthians 1:24](#)).
- We stand in Christian liberty ([Galatians 5:1](#)).
- We stand in Christian unity ([Philippians 1:27](#)).
- We stand in the Lord ([Philippians 4:1](#)).
- The goal: We will stand perfect and complete in the will of God ([Colossians 4:12](#)).

Personal Reflection Questions

1. How would you describe the promises of these verses? What might this look like in your life?

2. List some challenges that Christians face. Pick one or two of these challenges. How can God help you through them?

Day 4

***He who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, He who keeps Israel
Shall neither slumber nor sleep.***

He who keeps you: This is the first of six times in this short psalm that the Hebrew word *shamar* (translated **keeps** and **preserve**) is used. The theme is that God will watch over His people as a watchman watches over the city or the party of travelers.

“This psalmist is so absorbed in the thought of his Keeper that he barely names his dangers. With happy assurance of protection, he says over and over again the one word which is his amulet against foes and fears. Six times in these few verses does the thought recur that Jehovah is the Keeper of Israel or of the single soul.”
(Maclaren)

“The Divine Being represents himself as a *watchman*, who takes care of the city and its inhabitants during the night-watches; and who is never overtaken with slumbering or sleepiness.” (Clarke)

He who keeps you will not slumber: When we look to the LORD, we have confidence in the fact that God does not sleep. The idea is repeated in verse 4 for emphasis. God’s watchful eye is always open, looking with love and care upon His people.

In his confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, Elijah mocked the idol prophets when Baal did not respond, saying of Baal *perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened* ([1 Kings 18:27](#)). We have the great comfort in knowing that **He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.**

“A poor woman, as the Eastern story has it, came to the Sultan one day, and asked compensation for the loss of some property. ‘How did you lose it?’ said the monarch.

'I fell asleep,' was the reply, 'and a robber entered my dwelling.' 'Why did you fall asleep?'.... 'I fell asleep because I believed that you were awake.' The Sultan was so much delighted with the answer of the woman that he ordered her loss to be made up." (McMichael, cited in Spurgeon)

Practical Consideration:

We can sleep knowing that God is awake.

It is often the case that when we are experiencing demanding and difficult circumstances we lose sleep. It is at those times that sleep seems to escape us. We lie in bed staring at the ceiling as millions of anxious thoughts race across our hearts and minds. We play out dozens of scenarios as we long for a solution to our very present troubles. As a consequence we become increasingly tired and our perspective and patience slowly begins to ebb away. We begin to long for the peaceful sleep known to children.

The Psalms offer an important message to those who long for sleep in the midst of life's anxious times. In Psalm 121:3b-4 we are told, "[God] who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." There is a very simple message here: God never sleeps, slumbers or naps. God is awake when we are asleep.

And so, when we find ourselves in the midst of difficult circumstances that are robbing us of much needed sleep, we should turn the matter over to God when we go to bed because He will be awake all night anyway! We must learn to trust the Lord in the light of day and in the deepest darkness of night. Only then will we be able to say along with David, "In peace I will both lie down and sleep, For Thou alone, O Lord, dost make me to dwell in safety" (Psalm 4:8).

Day 5

***The LORD is your keeper;
The LORD is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
Nor the moon by night.***

The LORD is your shade at your right hand: The brutal rays of the sun in the world of the Middle East could assault the traveler, such as the pilgrim on the way to one of Israel's feasts in Jerusalem. God promised care for the traveler, with a reference that goes back to the cloud by day that followed Israel in the wilderness from Egypt and shielded them from the sun.

Similar promises are made in other verses such as [Isaiah 4:6](#) and [25:4](#). [Psalm 91:1](#) is especially precious, with **shade** being the same word as "shadow": *He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.*

Your shade: "...both to refresh thee and keep thee from the burning heat of the sun, as it is expressed in the next verse, and to protect thee by his power from all thine enemies; for which reason God is oft called a *shadow* in Scripture." (Poole)

Nor the moon by night: Any superstitious fears they may have had from the light of the moon were of no concern to those whom God protected. He would keep and preserve His people day and night.

"What the psalmist really means, though in figurative language, is that nothing either of the day or night can harm us if God is keeping guard. God is our covering against every calamity. He is our shade against the visible perils of the day as well as the hidden perils of the night." (Boice)

"God has not made a new sun or a fresh moon for his chosen, they exist under the same outward circumstances as others, but the power to smite is in their case removed from temporal agencies; saints are enriched, and not injured, by the powers which govern the earth's condition." (Spurgeon)

"But let the pope be the sun and the emperor the moon (as the canonists called them), yet the sun shall not smite the Church by day nor the moon by night. Luther was at the same time excommunicated by the pope and proscribed by the emperor; yet died he in his bed." (Trapp)

Personal Reflection Questions

1. The Lord is your “shade at your right hand” (v. 5). Does this assurance guarantee nothing will hurt you? Explain.

2. What makes you, as a child of God, completely safe and secure?

3. To what degree and for how long, does the Lord preserve you?

Day 6

The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul.

The LORD shall preserve you from all evil: The singer had great confidence in God's protecting power. **Evil** men may come and afflict the child of God, but the **LORD shall preserve your soul.**

“All evil” will be averted from him who has Jehovah for his keeper; therefore, if any so called Evil comes, he may be sure that it is Good with a veil on.” (Maclaren)

“In the light of other scriptures, to be kept *from all evil* does not imply a cushioned life, but a well-armed one.” (Kidner)

He shall preserve your soul: “Our soul is kept from the dominion of sin, the infection of error, the crush of despondency, the puffing up of pride; kept from the world, the flesh and the devil; kept for holier and greater things; kept in the love of God; kept unto the eternal kingdom and glory.” (Spurgeon)

The LORD shall preserve...He shall preserve.... The LORD shall preserve: “Three times have we the phrase, ‘Jehovah shall keep,’ as if the sacred Trinity thus sealed the word to make it sure: ought not all our fears to be slain by such a threefold flight of arrows? What anxiety can survive this triple promise?” (Spurgeon)

Personal Reflection Questions

1. How does the fact that God is preserving us from the world impact my daily life?

2. What healthy lifestyle habits do I need to develop in my life to preserve the peace that God has promised me?

3. Read and Reflect on the following verses



Day 7

The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore.

The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in: The promise is comprehensive. God’s people may trust in His preserving power for all of one’s activity (**going out** and **coming in**) and at all times (**from this time forth, and even forevermore**).

“When we go out in youth to begin life, and come in at the end to die, we shall experience the same keeping. Our exits and our entrances are under one protection.” (Spurgeon)

“*Your going out and your coming in* is not only a way of saying ‘everything’...in closer detail it draws attention to one’s ventures and enterprises (cf. [Ps. 126:6](#)), and to the home which remains one’s base; again, to pilgrimage and return.” (Kidner)

Personal Reflection Questions

What has been the most important lesson, for you personally, as you studied this psalm? How will you begin today to put what you are learning into practice?

Conclusion

Our relationship with God is a kind of destination, too. Are we at the place we want to be spiritually? Have we conformed in many ways to God’s will? God might expect us to follow him closely (Matt. 5:47-48), but we know very well that we don’t meet that expectation. How wonderful, then, that we look to a God who not only calls us to conform to his will but also gives us grace, help, and assistance when—not if, but when—we fall short. Following Jesus is *also* acknowledging our inability to follow him well and, in turn, experiencing his help.