

“The Lord Is Your Keeper” (An Exposition of Psalm 121)¹

Introduction

The superscription for Psalm 121 says that it is “**A Song of Ascents.**” This is the second in a string of fifteen straight Psalms (Psalms 120-134) which are given that designation. Many commentators believe that the *ascents* (plural) that the Psalmist has in mind here are the various pilgrimages that faithful Israelites made to the city of Jerusalem for the religious feast days such as *Passover*, *Pentecost* (or the *firstfruits*), and *Tabernacles* (or the *harvest*). These are mentioned in some detail in Exodus chapter 23.

The city of Jerusalem is where the temple was located, and the city was situated on a hill. And so the pilgrims had to go up or ascend the hill in order to go to Jerusalem and worship at the temple.

And so this Psalm has often been thought of as a *pilgrimage* Psalm or a *traveler's* Psalm. It speaks of God's watchful protection over the weary traveler, who could no doubt encounter any number of difficulties or dangers along the way. In some ways you could say that these pilgrimages were a reminder of the wilderness wanderings that their fathers in the faith endured during the days of Moses.

So what does this Psalm have to do with us as believers today? We no longer worship at an earthly temple, nor do we need to make pilgrimages in order to worship God at a particular location. As our Lord Jesus Himself told the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:21–24,

“Woman, believe me, *the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*” (Italics added)

But while we no longer have to make pilgrimages to worship God, this Psalm of ascents still has a lot to teach us about a life spent walking with God by faith in Jesus Christ.

In his book, *Learning to Love the Psalms*, Robert Godfrey writes,

“In Old Testament times, the journey was a real trip over difficult terrain to a physical city. For Christians in the New Testament, there is still a journey. We are still pilgrims on the way to the heavenly Jerusalem. This psalm is as much for us as it was for them.” (p.215)

Everyone who is a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ is in a very real sense a pilgrim or a stranger in this world. This world is not our true or ultimate home. That is why, for example, the Apostle Peter writes:

“Beloved, I urge you *as sojourners and exiles* to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” (1 Peter 2:11–12, Italics added)

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

And the writer of Hebrews says, **“For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”** (Hebrews 13:14) And in Philippians 3:20–21 Paul likewise writes,

“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.” (Italics added)

And so this Psalm is given to help us on our way, so that we might worship the Lord and learn to trust in Him as our keeper while we walk through this vale of tears on our way to our heavenly home.

The Psalmist's Question - Where Does Your Help Come From?

The first thing the Psalmist does is ask himself a question, and we are to ask *ourselves* the very same question as well. In v.1 he writes,

**“I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does my help come?”**

Commentators are somewhat divided over how this verse is to be understood. The King James Version (KJV) renders this *not* as a question, but as a declaration. It says, **“I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.”** It is as if the Psalmist is looking to the *hills* for his help. Others think that the hills that the Psalmist is looking up to “represent the dangers and difficulties the psalmist will face.”²

But I think that the ESV, NASB, and others render this best as a *question* of sorts. When the Psalmist lifted his eyes up to the hills leading up to Jerusalem, he was reminded of the true source of his only real help in this world.

In some ways that is what *public worship* in the church every Lord's day should do for each of us. It is a time for us to re-calibrate our vision or perspective on this life. It is an opportunity to be reminded of the things that matter the most, such as your relationship with the Lord, His watchful care for you, and the sure hope of heaven.

Ask yourself this question – where does your help come from? Where do you look first when facing trials and difficulties in this life?

Do you look to *yourself* – your own abilities & resources? Do you look to *your bank account*, as if your money were all the security you might ever need? Do you look to *politicians or the government* in general as your ultimate help in time of need?

Those things can't help but let you down, as we are seeing more and more in our day. Psalm 20:7 says, **“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.”** And Psalm 146:3 counsels us, saying,

**“Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.**

2 Robert Godfrey, *Learning to Love the Psalms*, p.215

Many in our day look *everywhere but* to the Lord Jesus Christ for help. They look everywhere under heaven for their source of help, rather than looking to the One **“who made heaven and earth”** (v.2).

The Psalmist's Answer – My Help Comes from the Lord

That brings us to the second thing that we see in this Psalm, which is the Psalmist's answer to his own question. And it is a confession of faith or trust in the Lord! In v.2 he writes,

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

The Psalmist's help came from the Lord Himself - the One **“who made heaven and earth.”** Notice how *the almighty power of God* is of such great comfort to the believer's heart and mind. When he thinks of God in his time of trouble, he reminds Himself of God's infinite power in creation.

Charles Spurgeon writes,

“Jehovah who created all things is equal to every emergency; heaven and earth are at the disposal of him who made them, therefore let us be very joyful in our infinite helper.”³

As the Psalmist says in Psalm 46:1–3,

**“God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah”**

If you have anyone or anything *other than or less than God Himself* as your help, you *cannot* say that you will not fear even **“though the earth gives way.”** But if *God* is your help, you have an *“infinite helper,”* to use Spurgeon's phrase.

See how the Psalmist would have us remind ourselves of God's infinite perfections and mighty works. The biblical *doctrine of creation* is no mere academic matter, but is the source of great comfort and assurance to the heart of a believer in Christ.

William Plumer (1802-1880) notes,

“Let us carefully study the works of creation, v.2. They reveal the power and other perfections of God in a manner very important for us to apprehend. Nor is it possible ever to bring the heart to confide in God as we ought until we have right conceptions of his omnipotence.”⁴

Is the Lord Jesus *your* help? He is *the One through whom all things were made*, and without Him nothing was made that was made (John 1:3). That is who **“became flesh and dwelt among us”** (John 1:14), that He might live and die in our place to save us from our sins.

³ *The Treasury of David*, Vol.3 (Part 2), p.14

⁴ *Psalms* (Geneva Series of Commentaries), p.1098

The Psalmist's Exhortation – The Lord Is Your Keeper

The *third* and final thing that we see in this Psalm is *the Psalmist's exhortation* or encouragement to us. He does not write this Psalm just to tell us about how the Lord was *his* help and keeper, but in order to encourage *us* as well, that we too might learn to trust in the Lord as our help and keeper.

Notice that the Psalmist switches gears in v.3. In v.1-2 he spoke in the first person singular, saying that ***“My help comes from the LORD”*** (Italics added) Now in v.3-8 he speaks in the second person singular - ***“he who keeps you will not slumber”*** (v.3, italics added).

In fact, the word **“keep”** (or watch over, guard) occurs no less than 6 times in the last 6 verses of this Psalm. It is clearly the main theme of this Psalm. In v.5 the Psalmist puts it best when he says, **“The LORD is your keeper.”**

He *doesn't* just say that the Lord will provide help in time of trouble, and provide protection in time of danger, but rather that *the Lord is Himself our help and our Keeper!*

The Lord Himself is the One who *keeps watch over us* in such a way that not a hair of our heads will perish (Luke 21:18).

The Psalmist calls to mind not only God's mighty work in *creation* (v.2), but also of His watchful care over the children of Israel during the wilderness wanderings as well. In v.5-6 he writes,

**“The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.”**

Not only does the Lord our keeper **“neither slumber nor sleep”** (v.4), but He also protects us day and night! That He Himself is our **“shade”** (v.5) so that the **“sun shall not strike you by day”** (v.6), but the moon will not be able to strike us at night either.

This calls to mind the pillar of fire and cloud that led and protected the Israelites during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Just as God watched over *them*, even so He will watch over *you* if you are in Christ!

In v.7-8 he then adds,

**“The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.”**

Does this mean that Christians are promised a care-free, trouble-free life? Of course not! But we are promised in Romans 8:28 that He will make *all things* (even our trials and tribulations in this life) work together for our good. In fact, the Psalmist teaches us that there *will* be trouble in our lives, by asking where our help comes from in the first place!

Conclusion

The message of this Psalm is essentially the same as the message of *Romans chapter 8*, which is really just *the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ*. And that is that you are in Christ by faith, **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”** (v.1).

And not only that, but in Romans 8:31–39 Paul goes on to say:

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

**“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”**

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

If *God* is for us, who can be against us? If He is our Help & Keeper, we are secure indeed! And *nothing* in all of creation can separate us from His love in Christ Jesus! - Amen