

Psalm 121- "A Song of Confidence"

Bible Study and Devotional

By Pastor Randy

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?

David Livingstone, the famous missionary and explorer of the continent of Africa, read [Psalm 121](#), which praises God for his sovereign rule over all things, as he worshiped with his father and sister before setting out for Africa in 1840. His mother-in-law, Mrs. Moffat, wrote him at Linyardi that [Psalm 121](#) was always in her mind as she thought about and prayed for him.

I choose Psalm 121 because it speaks of God watching out for us. During these days of Covid – 19, we are anxious about how our present journey in life is going to turn out. There is much fear surrounding us at these times that I believe we need to lean into God's love a little more.

It reminds me of a great African proverb: *"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."* We need to be together in spirit with others, but also with the Almighty.

I ask you to read the Psalm through completely, and then join me below as we direct our study to the implications of this great song of hope and confidence.

A song of ascents.

1 I lift up my eyes to the mountains—

where does my help come from?

2 My help comes from the Lord,

the Maker of heaven and earth.

3 He will not let your foot slip—

he who watches over you will not slumber;

4 indeed, he who watches over Israel

will neither slumber nor sleep.

5 The Lord watches over you—

the Lord is your shade at your right hand;

6 the sun will not harm you by day,

nor the moon by night.

⁷ The Lord will keep you from all harm—

he will watch over your life;

⁸ the Lord will watch over your coming and going

both now and forevermore.

Background:

- Many scholars believe the title – “A song of ascents” - indicates that these psalms were sung by worshippers as they ascended the road to Jerusalem to attend the three great Jewish pilgrim festivals – Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot.
- Others scholars believe they were sung (there are 15 grouped together – Psalms 120-134) by the Levite singers as they ascended the final fifteen steps to minister at the Temple in Jerusalem.
- Still others consider that they may originally have been individual poems which were later collected together and given the title linking them to the pilgrimage back to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity.

It is traditional for some Jews to place a copy of Psalm 121 in the labor and delivery room to promote an easy labor by asking God for mercy. As well, it is placed on the baby's carriage and in the baby's room as a sign of protection for the child.

A song of ascents.

¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains—

where does my help come from?

Mountains were always places associated with gods, and given that Jerusalem is on a small mountain (at least by Colorado standards), looking up towards the mountains is to look for the Almighty. Mt. Moriah – where Abraham was going to sacrifice Isaac, and Mt. Zion are often times associated with Jerusalem.

As in these days with Covid 19 and our other struggles, it is easy to cast our eyes downwards in worry and defeat. But when we literally look up, with see a larger and a more expansive creation, giving us hope that things will improve. When we allow God to change our perspective, we begin to see beyond our problems. As anyone would tell you who has climbed a mountain, looking up towards to summit gives us a focus - that helps us overcome the very struggle to get there.

² My help comes from the Lord,

the Maker of heaven and earth.

Along with the first verse, these two together form a chiasm:

- A creation (mountains)
B where does my help comes from
B' my help comes from the Lord
A' the Maker (heaven and earth)

The psalmist does not look to nature for help. Those hills, after all, might be hiding some threat, some predator. The psalmist's help comes from the very one who made the hills, the heavens and the earth: God! Indeed, the first two verses of Psalm 121 are a confession of faith in God who not only creates, but looks out for God's people.

***³ He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;***

"Foot to slip" This is common Hebrew imagery which:

1. Speaks of a godly life as a clear, straight, level road/path/way (Ps. 139:24)
2. Speaks of evil as stumbling on the path the God has set before us.

The older I get, the less I like to slip and fall. When in the act of climbing, the fall can actually become worse. Here, we see the faith and confidence that God is with you, wherever you journey, to keep you from falling down or away.

When we experience evil, we may wonder if God has abandoned us or maybe had fallen asleep. We do not want to face life without God, for we know the way is full of danger. Here, the psalmist reassures the reader or listener that God will not grow tired of protecting us.

***⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.***

This is the first of six times in this short psalm that the Hebrew word "*shamar*" (translated **keeps** and **watches**) is used. The theme is that God will watch over His people as a watchman watches over the city or stands guard to protect a party of travelers.

Ironically, this psalmist is so absorbed in the thought of his Keeper that he barely names his dangers. With assurance of protection, he has the confidence to trek further along on life's journey.

Brene Brown, theologian and sociologist, speaks on the subject of being vulnerable (you may have seen her on "**60 Minutes**" recently). That is often when and where personal growth occurs. The very fact that we can admit to being vulnerable is an honest expression of our human predicament, and coincides with our need for God's presence to be near us.

**⁵ *The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;***

In these times of the pandemic, it may feel as if God is distant or absent. Yet once again the Psalmist reminds us that we are being watched over by God. This feeling is amplified once again that God is our protector wherever we journey.

I have always like the image of the Lord being our shade. Having spent considerable time in the Middle East, in Israel, and in both the Judean Wilderness and in the Negev Desert, I can tell you of the importance of shade. With temperatures approaching 115 degrees Fahrenheit, shade is not just simply a matter of coping with extreme high temperatures; it is a matter of life and death. In the stone carvings in the temple ruins of Egypt, I have seen royalty being protected by slaves holding up large palm fronds to block the intense sun.

Likewise, God protects us on our right side, the side which is most used, needed and therefore most protected. The allusion may also be about the “*pillar of cloud*” by day, which guided and guarded the Israelites in the Sinai wilderness, and was a shadow from the heat during the day.

**⁶ *the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.***

I believe the psalmist simply states that they shall not be injured by heat nor cold; by a sun-stroke by day, nor a frost-bite by night. We must remember that like Colorado, the desert and the wilderness have large temperature extremes that challenge all those who live outdoors.

Some have supposed that the allusion is to the effect of the moon, and of sleeping under the open air, in producing “ophthalmia” - a disease very common in the Middle East - an effect guarded against by covering the face. The influence of the moon, in producing madness or disease (“lunatic” comes from the root word of “lunar”) - the general influence of it on health - is often referred to. Thus Shakespeare says:

“The moon, the governess of floods,

Pale in her anger, washes all the air,

That rheumatic diseases do abound.”

“It is the very error of the moon;

She comes more near the earth than she was wont,

And makes men mad."

Midsummer Night's Dream, ii. 2.

***7 The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;***

The psalmist reinforces and extends the theme of God's attentive and protective care in the final strophe with the repetition of the verb *shamar* ("to guard," "to watch," "to keep") in verses 7a, 7b, and 8a. "The repetition of the verb in all three cola should not be missed, however. As the psalm draws to a close, **the thrice-repeated word creates a sort of crescendo celebrating the Almighty as the guardian and keeper of all life**".

***8 the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.***

What does God promise to do? God promises to keep you. God will guard you as you go on your journey of life, and as you return home. As you go out and come in. As you face the dangers of the day and of the night.

The list of promises here is not meant to suggest that those who walk in the shelter of God will face no harm or that nothing ill will befall them. The Psalter knows all too well that the wicked are everywhere and that they thrive unjustly.

These promises, however, are meant as characteristic promises -- these are the sort of things that the Lord does for those who rely on him. And the words of blessing and promise evoke God's protection and our awareness of it.

Conclusion:

The Songs of Ascent collection depicts the world as a hostile and threatening place, and the writer of this psalm within that collection "**understands well that the journey to God and the journey with God never occur in a vacuum, but rather in the context of a life that at times feels more like a tempest than a solitary walk down a quiet pathway**". And yet the psalmist exudes confidence, which is rooted in the character of the Almighty. May it be so for us as endure this pandemic and its effects on our lives.

"Stay calm and keep the faith!"