

Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 121
ABC 8/29/21

When I was a kid my parents enrolled me in something called BMA, *Bible Memory Association*. Each week we'd have different vss to memorize, have to recite them to someone outside of the family, & after a certain number of vss were recited, I'd get to pick some kind of prize, like a book or something. I can't say for sure, but it must have been in this program that I memorized the 1st 2 vss of Ps 121 & they've stayed with me & been an encouragement to this day. We're looking at this psalm today, not because someone suggested it, but because it's one of my favorites. It's applicable at all times but especially in times like ours when all is in an uproar & our foundations seem to be shaking. Where do we look for help in troubling times? The Beatles sang, *I get by with a little help from my friends*.¹ Is that the answer? Where do you go for help? Some of us try to find security in ourselves & what we do. When we find ourselves in dangerous & challenging situations, we try to fix it ourselves. Other times we look for a sense of security, help, & stability in other things. It may be in circumstances or it may be help from friends or family. But ultimately, whether we look to our self, our circumstances, or our friends, none of them is a guaranteed source of help & security. It's good to have a support system but we need to look further than that. No friends, safety plan, insurance policy, or security system can keep you absolutely safe in life. You can follow all the safety rules, take every precaution, exercise & eat your veggies, & things will still go wrong, I promise you. The only source of true help, the psalmist tells us, is in God Himself. **1-8**

One commentator says, *The classic beauty of this psalm is haunting. It speaks of nature, time, eternity, & the God who is there through it all*.² Aren't you glad our God is *there through it all*, good times & bad? We don't know the psalm's author or date but we know it's God's Word to us. It's 1 of the 15 Psalms of Ascent (120-135). The Mishnah (the oral tradition of Jewish law) links these 15 psalms with the 15 steps of the temple where the Levites were said to sing these 15 songs. Others suggest this was the traditional evening song for the last campsite of Jews traveling to Jerusalem for the annual feasts. Others have suggested this was a song for those living in Babylon who could

¹ *With a Little Help from My Friends*, 1967

² Donald Williams & Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Psalms 73-150*, vol. 14, The Preacher's Commentary Series, p 388

only see the far-off hills of Judah in their imaginations. All of this is speculation. What isn't speculation is the marvelous spirit of tranquil trust in God that the psalm breathes from beginning to end.³ The flow of thought moves from the acknowledgment that we need help (1-2) to the nature of that help that only comes through the God of Scripture (3-8). The psalmist asks an important spiritual question for all of us & then gives the wonderful answer & preaches it to himself & to us. As we look at the text, we see that the psalm goes from the 1st person perspective to the 2nd person. This makes some think the psalm was a sort of dialogue between 2 people speaking back & forth or was sung antiphonally, back & forth. Whatever the case, the question is this, where does our help come from? We see 1st ...

1. Our Need for Help (1-2) Vs 1 asks a timeless question with poetic power: **1**

The psalmist, in a situation known only to him, is looking with anxiety or longing to the hills. He may have looked with anxiety if he expected robbers to be hiding there. The hills provided cover for those who preyed on travelers. He may also have looked with anticipation to the hills if he were on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Hidden among the hills was the holy city, Jerusalem (125:2). Both thoughts may have occupied the traveler, anxiety & anticipation. These hills aren't like the Cascades, Rockies, or even the Appalachians. They're hills which are barren & foreboding. As he looks to the hills a question enters his mind, *Where does my help come from?* (1). The **help** with which he's concerned pertains to protection, guidance, & blessing (3-8). He wants to succeed in his pilgrimage, as well as in life, so that he may enjoy a sense of harmony in all his endeavors.⁴ The point is we must look beyond the mountains to the God who created them because He is higher & greater than all. God is bigger than the mountains & God is the Creator of the mountains. The important thing is the admission of needing help from someone beyond ourselves. Where does your help come from when things go awry? For example:

- When a relationship begins to sputter & fail?
- When your child turns their back on you & God?
- When your diagnosed with an incurable malady?
- When a loved one dies?
- When you suffer a crisis of faith & find it hard to pray?

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107–150: An Expositional Commentary*, p 1076

⁴ Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms (Revised Edition)*, ed. Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, vol 5, p 894

- When you wonder whether God really cares one way or the other?

If you don't hear anything else in the sermon this morning, hear this: If your help comes from anything or anyone else other than the Lord God Almighty, you're going to be disappointed. Family, friends, business associates, even your pastor, will let you down. God never will. Vs 2 is the answer to the cry of vs 1: 2

Derek Kidner captures the idea when he writes, *The thought of this vs leaps beyond the hills to the universe; beyond the universe to its Maker. Here is living help: primary, personal, wise, immeasurable.*⁵ We all know life is full of dangers, such as disease, injury, accident, war, fire, unemployment, sin, corruption, division, etc. What more natural question to ask than, **where shall my help come?** The answer is it **comes from the Lord, Yahweh, Jehovah.** Our eyes must lift beyond the hills to the Creator of the hills. They're lifted up to the God who stands before, outside, & within His creation. They're lifted up to the God who spoke the stars into space. They're lifted up to the God who placed our planet in orbit around the sun. They're lifted up to the God who made heaven, the angels & all their hosts, & the earth, the world, & everything else. This living Creator God is the help we all need. Since He created the heavens & the earth, then He's a God of power, wisdom, & glory, & we have nothing to fear. This is still our Father's world. When the Jewish travelers caught sight of Jerusalem, situated on the mountains (87:1; 125:1-2; 133:3), they knew God dwelt there in His sanctuary & was the help they needed (3:4; 20:2; 46:1; 124:8; 134:3; 1 Kgs 8:29-53). Everything in the heavens & everything on the earth bears witness to the great Creator who's our heavenly Father, so why should we fear? The Maker of **heaven & earth** has unlimited power, wisdom, & understanding. He has all the resources & more to meet your every need. The God who is committed to helping us is the God who created everything, including the mountains of our lives. He who created is more than able to help. God isn't just the Creator, He's actively involved in His creation. He's involved in every aspect of His creation & that includes you. God's power over all creation is called His providence. The Westminster Confession of Faith gives us a beautiful description of this:

⁵ *Psalms 73-150*, p 431

*God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, & govern all creatures, actions, & things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise & holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, & the free & immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, & mercy.*⁶

How big is your problem this morning? Now compare it to the Maker of heaven & earth. What's the verdict? God's got this. To drive home the fact that God is our help, the psalmist preaches sermons over & over to his own heart & to his fellow travelers about God's protection in the next 6 vss.

2. The Nature of Our Help (3-8) The style changes from personal address (1-2) to a reflection upon the God who is our help. Vss 3-4 carry the 1st theme: He keeps us. Vss 5-6 carry the 2nd theme: He protects us. & vss 7-8 carry the 3rd theme: He preserves us. But they all overlap & mean much the same.

A. He Keeps Us (3-4) He, the One who **made heaven & earth** won't **allow your foot to slip** (3), slide, stagger, or be shaken. This is a figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole. Just like the phrase, *all hands on deck*, means all the crew, not just their hands. God gives protection not just from slipping (though that can be a legitimate concern), but He protects us from every problem encountered in our journey of life. God is the firm foundation for our lives. He is the rock of our salvation. He is our security. The only way in which our foot can't be moved is for it to be standing upon the solid ground of God Himself. When we're united to the One who moves all things, we ourselves cannot be moved. As Christians, this reminds us of the principles found in Eph 6, that the believer is to find a place to **stand firm**, & this can only be done by looking to the Lord & trusting the One who **will not allow your foot to slip**. Our standing in Christ is impressive.

- We stand in grace (Rom 5:2).
- We stand in the gospel (1 Cor 15:1).
- We stand in courage & strength (1 Cor 16:13).
- We stand in faith (2 Cor 1:24).
- We stand in liberty (Gal 5:1).
- We stand in unity (Phil 1:27).
- We stand in the Lord (Phil 4:1).

& we will stand mature & complete in the will of God (Col 4:12). Aren't you glad that God is actively guarding us? The word **keep** means to guard & protect & is used 6x in the psalm (3, 4, 5, 7, 8). ESV

⁶ Westminster Confession, 5.1

translates all with the word **keep/keeper**. All the other versions use a mixture of **keep, watch, protect, preserve, & guard**. 3-4

Even while we sleep, God watches over us because He doesn't sleep. The God of Israel never sleeps & never takes a nap. He's always watching over His people. & the psalmist reminds us of that: *Lord, You're always watching. You never take a break. You're always looking out for me. You're always watching. You're never sleeping. Because God is awake, we can sleep.* It doesn't matter what problems you're dealing with, you can safely leave it in God's hands & go to sleep knowing He never slumbers nor sleeps & He'll take care of it & He'll take care of you. The story is told about a poor woman who came to her Sultan one day & asked for compensation for the loss of some property. *How did you lose it?* he asked. *I fell asleep & a robber entered my dwelling,* was the reply. *Why did you fall asleep?* he asked. She said, *I fell asleep because I believed you were awake.* The Sultan was so delighted with her answer, he ordered her loss to be made right. How much more soundly should we sleep when God, who never slumbers nor sleeps, is guarding us. This faith that God never slumbers nor sleeps is a faith that's severely tested & questioned at times (Ps 44:23). It's a faith that is rooted in 3 convictions. 1st, as we've already noted, the Lord is the creator God who has the whole world under His control (2). Do you believe that? 2nd, the Lord is the one who **keeps Israel** (4), the one who's been with His people throughout their history. Do you believe that? 3rd, jumping to vs 5, the Lord is **your keeper**, not simply the nation's God, but your God. Do you believe that? Nothing is more characteristic of the psalms than their emphasis upon the intensely personal concern God has for each of His people.⁷ We're on solid ground because God **keeps**, guards, & protects us. God is always awake. We can pray to Him at any time & He hears & answers. Moreover, God is always faithful to His people. All people age, grow weary, become exhausted, & die. God experiences none of that. He knows our every moment. His eye is upon us. He is for us & will **keep us**. The language is repeated over & over. He will keep you; He will protect you; He's your **keeper & protector**. He protects Israel & He'll protect you . & so the psalmist preaches this to himself & we must do the same. We must continually remind ourselves,

⁷ Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Theological Commentary, p 408

He's watching over me & He will keep me. He will protect me. He's always there, **a very present help in trouble** (Ps 46:1). If God doesn't keep these promises, how do we know He'll keep any of His promises? If He breaks one, how could we know that He won't break them all? He keeps us.

B. He Protects Us (5-6) The psalmist rejoices in the fact that it's the Lord Himself who is his keeper. It's not simply that the Lord provides him protection. It isn't just that God delegates His protection to someone else. God Himself, in a very direct & intimate way, is our **keeper** & protector. Vs 5 opens with the confession, **The Lord is your keeper**. What does this mean? The psalmist continues & explains that as our **keeper** God will be our **shade at our right hand**. You know how refreshing shade can be. To be shaded by God is to be protected from whatever may harm us. He casts His shadow over us. He is our **shade** which protects from the harsh & harmful effects of the sun. The sun not only burns it dehydrates & can cause heatstroke & even death. Vs 6 goes on to say that, because God is a shade, the sun will not hurt His people. The meaning of the next phrase, **nor the moon by night**, isn't as obvious. God is a shade who protects His people from the harmful effects of the moon. What does that mean? There are several possibilities. 1st, **sun & moon** may be used as a literary device using a pair of opposite words to signify totality. In other words, God is on a 24-hour watch over His people. 2nd, in those days both **sun & moon** were thought to be deities that could bring harm on people. Of course, Gen 1 makes it clear right from the start that the sun & moon are God's creation & aren't gods. This would be saying God protects His people from false gods. 3rd, at least by NT times, it was thought the moon could affect people's mental & physical abilities. In Mt 17:15, the verb **lunatic** can be literally translated as *moonstruck* & was often used to refer to epileptic seizures.⁸ However, we can't be certain this understanding goes back to the time of the psalm. Whatever the case, the point is clear: We can have confidence because God is constantly protecting us from all kinds of dangers.⁹ God protects us at all times, both day & night, & everything in between. God is present to help us with every problem of life. He is our Protector. Whether by day or by night, in heat or cold, the Father's presence provides all that we need. We

⁸ Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Theological Commentary, p 409

⁹ Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction & Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 15–16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, pp 414–415

don't need to be afraid of attacks that can come at any time because **the shadow of the Almighty** covers us (Ps 91:1). He will protect us from the perils of the day & of the night, the known & the unknown. There's no force out there anywhere that's greater than our God's protection. He is our covering against every calamity. He's our shade against the visible dangers of the day as well as the hidden risks of the night. Our Keeper isn't only on the throne looking down on us, He's at our side to shield us from all harm. This doesn't mean we never find ourselves in difficulty or danger or that we'll never feel physical & emotional pain. The things that God permits to happen to us in His will may hurt us but they will not harm us. Day & night, our Father is with us to shelter us from that which could harm us. Again, does this mean that no adversity can come to the Christian? Does it mean we should enjoy perfect health & wealth? If we were to take these vss out of their context, we might come to that conclusion. The fact is, however, the psalmist has already seen his need for help in vs 1. He knows difficulty, & in it he cries out for God to intervene. God doesn't promise we'll never have problems; He does promise to be with us in our problems & He assures us that nothing can touch our souls & separate us from His love (Rom 8:37-39). Likewise, since God protects us, we know our eternal destiny is held securely in His hand (Jn 10:28-29). All must pass before Him before it comes to us. When He allows it to come to us, it's for our ultimate good. What does the truth of God's protection mean? He protects, guides, & blesses His own. He won't permit them to slip & stumble. He's unlike any other god. He doesn't need to eat or sleep. He's always there to help. He's the Shepherd of His people who protects, guides, & blesses His sheep. Regardless of the whims of life, He is there to help & protect. Nothing can happen to believers that God doesn't allow. He's there to guide & protect us. He's the Good Shepherd who leads His sheep along the journey of life. In the storms of our life, God will at times set Himself between us & the fury of the storm & so protect us from it. At other times, He'll expose us to the storm so that its ravages may serve to press us closer to Him. But either way, He is protecting us. He is our Help, our Keeper, & our Protector.

Vss 1-6 are all in the present tense, describing what God does for us. Now in vss 7-8 we're given promises for the future, telling us of what God will do for us. & in these vss the psalm moves from

giving specific examples to one overriding general principle: The LORD will keep you from all harm as ...

C. He Preserves Us 7-8

We need not fear life or death, today or tomorrow, time or eternity, because we're in the loving care of the Father who preserves us. This doesn't mean we'll never experience any hardship or difficulty. Just as Ps 23 doesn't tell us we won't go through the valley of the shadow of death. Instead, when we do go through it, He'll be with us. God doesn't say we'll never have problems, but He promises to be with us in our problems & to turn them to our good. We have a whole string of beautiful promises in Rom 8 that assure us God is directly involved in our lives & that He is for us, not against us. Although we will have problems & troubles in life, we know that **evil** will never win out because nothing can thwart God's purpose for us & nothing can separate us from God's love for us in Christ. **The Lord will protect you from all evil.** What does this mean? No sickness? No sorrow? No suffering? **All evil** means anything that could harm us. He protects us from **evil** not by never allowing it into our lives but by His grace, He turns even **evil** into our good, conforming us to the image of Christ. As Joseph said, **you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good** (Gen 50:20).

The psalmist continues, **He will keep your soul** (7). No sin, no attack from the devil, no **evil** can take us away from God. His love is constant. His presence is unailing. He guards us to eternity. Thus He keeps us as we go out & come in (8). This refers to the daily activities of life (Dt 28:6; 1 Sam 29:6; 2 Sam 3:25). Our God is concerned about our tasks, schedules, & even the so-called minor details that we too often take for granted. Our every departure & arrival is monitored by Him. But how long will this be? The psalmist answers, **from this time forth & forever**, starting now & throughout eternity. This is the help we need & this is the help we get. What a delight it is to know that, as we go in & out, to & fro throughout life, the Father is with us & cares for our every need. How does Peter put it? **Casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you** (1 Pt 5:7). & His loving care will go on forever (8).

God isn't only watching over us but is actively protecting us from **evil & harm**. Remember Jesus' high priestly prayer, where He asks His Father to **keep them in Your name** (Jn 17:11)? Our confidence is further strengthened by Paul's statement **that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Rom 8:38–39). God preserves us & He'll keep on doing it for all of eternity. This is practical & relevant because God knows we're quick to despair & are weak of faith & so He doesn't mind pulling up next to us & saying over & over in our ear, *I will keep you. I will help you. Your foot will not slip. You won't fall because I am your God & I made the heavens & the earth & I will be your help.* For how long? **From this time forth & forever.** God is watching over you now & He'll continue to watch over you forever.

Some of you have played the game, *Would You Rather?* It's a conversation or party game where you have to choose between 2 scenarios & explain why. For example: *Would you rather work an overtime shift with your annoying boss or spend full day with your mother-in-law? Would you rather be forced to sing along to every song you hear or dance to every song you hear? Would you rather find a rat in your kitchen or a roach in your bed?* Some questions make no sense: *Would you rather be able to slide down rainbows or jump on clouds?* God is keeping you now & He'll keep you forever. If you had to choose one or the other, which would you choose? Would you rather God keep you now or forevermore? Thank God we don't have to choose. They're both true for the Christian. Jesus said in Mt 28:20, **I am with you always, even to the end of the age.** & Heb 13:8 says **Jesus Christ is the same yesterday & today & forever.** & so God's promise to watch over you in Christ is true today, it's true tomorrow, & it's true forever. The Creator is your Helper. The God of Israel is your Protector. The LORD will keep you from all harm. & so we move from God as Creator of heaven & earth, to God as protector of Israel, to God as our personal Lord & Savior who protects us from all evil & harm. Take comfort in this. Learn to trust God in all things & to look for the good in all the details of life. God cares for you. He will provide for you. He's there to help you. You don't need to fear. He's with you always. He's watching over you even in the midst of what you see as an

impossible situation. He'll keep you from stumbling, from falling into hopelessness. He'll keep you in the midst of surgeries, cancer, accidents, loneliness, illness, & failure. He will never abandon you because He never sleeps nor slumbers. If you're His child, He's promised to keep you as you go out & when you're coming in. He's promised to be with you in the hardest of times. The same God who's our refuge & strength & a very present help in trouble, is the same yesterday, today & forever. God has been, is today, & will forever be our helper & keeper, protector & preserver. He's a consistent & orderly God who doesn't change. If He's been our Keeper in the past, He'll keep us in the present & in the future forever. 6x in 8 vss we're reminded that God is our keeper. He keeps us now & forever. Our protection, our well-being, don't depend on our abilities. You can't protect yourself, you can't even turn one hair white or black, & you can't determine what comes into your life. You can't control your health, your situation, your family, nor your future. We're far too small. We're inadequate for the challenge. We can't do these things & neither can we save ourselves. So how can we be safe? We must depend on Someone who's beyond us. Our lives, our salvation, all we are is kept & guarded & protected because of God's gracious love for His people. His love is made known to us through the death of Jesus for our salvation & ultimate protection. Without Him, we're nothing. Without Him, we aren't reconciled to the Father nor kept from evil. But with Him, with Jesus, we're made pure, righteous, & holy. We're covered under the shadow of His wing. Nothing can move us or separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We can move confidently in God's grace & power, knowing that He who created all things will keep us in our going out & our coming in from this time forth & forevermore. One author put it this way:

The Christian life is not a quiet escape to a garden where we can walk & talk uninterruptedly with our Lord; nor a fantasy trip to a heavenly city where we can compare blue ribbons & gold medals with others who have made it to the winners' 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 & 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; & therefore no matter

*what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will preserve us from evil, He will keep our life.*¹⁰

The mature Christian is neither blind to trouble nor in fear of it because he's following Jesus who said, **In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world** (Jn 16:33). Our despair over life in this fallen world would be the end of us were it not for His cross that stood on a hill 2,000 years ago. Jesus climbed that hill & took on the greatest obstacle humanity has ever faced, the just wrath of God because of our sin. He suffered & died for our sins, **the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God** (1 Pt 3:18). As John wrote, **see how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; & such we are** (1 Jn 3:1). In this life we may be struck down, but not destroyed (2 Cor 4:9). In the shadow of the cross, every affliction that threatens to squeeze our joy out of us is meant to strengthen our faith. Because the decisive battle in the war against our soul happened at the cross, we don't have to put false hope in hills or be afraid of what's hiding in them. Jesus offers us a life that is more full & more enjoyable than anything else. Look away from those hills to the hill of Calvary, to Christ crucified on our behalf. He alone is our **help both from this time forth & forever.**

¹⁰ Eugene Peterson, *Song of Ascents*, pp 40–41