

Summer in Psalms

“The Lord is Your Keeper”

[Psalm 121](#)

Psalm 121 is part of a series of 15 psalms that starts from psalm 120 and ends at psalm 134. They are titled “A Song of Ascents” and often referred to as the traveler’s psalms. Though some have argued that psalm 121 was written in anticipation of going into battle, most scholars now believe that, like the other 14 psalms in the series, this psalm also was written for, and sung by, pilgrims during their journey.

People would travel to the Jerusalem Temple up to three times a year for holy festivals, such as Passover. The elevation of the city of Jerusalem was almost 2,500 feet above sea level. As the travelers made their way up to the city, walking on the treacherous uphill road, they would sing these psalms to encourage and cheer each other on. That’s why these psalms were called Songs of Ascents.

Among the 15 Songs of Ascents in the Bible, I imagine that psalm 121, with its poetic structure and imagery, was the most favorite psalm among the Jewish pilgrims in the ancient world. It certainly is one of the most popular psalms among Christian believers today. For many people hitting the road, this psalm is a beautiful prayer for God’s traveling mercy.

This psalm is also a powerful affirmation of God’s providence and protection in times of trial or tragedy. It reminds us that God is our keeper from our birth to death. And it gives us comfort and confidence amidst the insecure and uncertain circumstances of our lives.

The structure of psalm 121 is something we should take notice of. There are 8 verses in the psalm, and they all go together in pairs. Made of 4 couplets, it is highly likely that the psalm was sung in a responsive fashion as we read it today. And, in a highly illustrative way, each couplet highlights a different aspect of God’s care. The message we hear in verses 1 and 2 is that God helps us; In verses 3 and 4, we hear of God’s faithfulness; In verses 5 and 6, the theme is that God protects us; and we hear in the final couplet of verses 7 and 8 that God preserves us.

Here is another significant feature of psalm 121 you might find interesting. The writer uses a poetic technique known as **anadiplosis**. It is the mirroring or repeating of a thought or an image. Let me read the first two verses of the psalm: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does *my help come*? *My help comes* from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Did you notice the technique? Like an echo, the ending words of verse 1 are repeated as the beginning words of verse 2.

We see this again in verses 3 and 4: “The Lord will not let your foot be moved, the Lord who keeps you *will not slumber*.” “Behold, the One who keeps Israel will *neither slumber nor sleep*.” Did you catch it? The words “Will not slumber” in verse 3 are carried over in verse 4 as “neither slumber nor sleep.”

And, there is another kind of repetition found in the psalm. The Hebrew word *shamar* which is translated as “to keep” in our translation is echoed and repeated again and again throughout the psalm. “The Lord who *keeps* you” in verse 3; “The One who *keeps* Israel” in verse 4; “The Lord is your *keeper*.” in verse 5; “The Lord will *keep* you from all evil, and will *keep* your life” in verse 7; “The Lord will *keep* your going out and coming in” in verse 8.

The Hebrew word *shamar* also can be translated to guard or to watch over. Thus, the sort of keeping that the word captures is different from that of physical possession but rather has to do with care. *In Feasting on the Word, a lectionary commentary*, Robert W. Fisher writes about the difference:

“There is a big difference between having and keeping. For instance, I might have a favorite sweater. It is my possession. However, I keep my puppy dog. He is not merely a possession. He is my beloved dog. He is dear to me. Therefore, I watch over him not for my sake, but for his. I protect him from harm because if he suffers, it hurts me too. Likewise, God does not merely have us. God keeps us. We are God’s beloved, and immeasurably dear to God. We are not merely possessions in the eyes of the Lord because if we suffer, it hurts God, too.” (Vol. 2, p.56)

Yes, the theme that echoes throughout the psalm, and which surely echoed against the walls as the pilgrims made their ascent into Jerusalem singing this psalm, is that the Lord keeps us. As God’s beloved, God cares for us, watches over us, protects us, and preserves us in our journey of life. And it is the Lord who leads us, guides us, and accompanies us in our journey of faith.

The psalm starts with a cry for help: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come?”

For us living in California, especially in this bay area, it may be difficult to fully understand the psalmist’s cry for help. The hills and mountains around us do not look dangerous or scary, but rather beautiful.

By the way, I am really enjoying the beautiful landscape of mountains here in California. Having lived in the Chicago metropolitan area, which is very flat, for 28 years, I am constantly marveling at the beauty of every mountain and hill that I see. I marvel even at the barren, yellow and brown mountains. They look exotic to my Midwestern eyes!

However, this was not the experience of the ancient pilgrims. The hills and mountains on their way to Jerusalem were always full of dangers.

They could be attacked by either wild animals or robbers at any time. The dangers of the road were not only physical but also spiritual in nature as well. Many high places in ancient Israel were scattered with idols, often celebrating immorality. There were many other gods that were trying to lure the pilgrims off their path. All around them, they were surrounded by nothing but threat and alarm.

Actually, we too know from our own life experiences what it means to lift up our eyes to the hills and ask for help. We all have made that cry at some point in our lives, faced with the challenges and burdens of life. We all have things that cause us to fear.

Whether it is concerns about your health or finances, worries about your children or parents, burdens of relational issues within your family or others you care about... You look to the hills and ask the same question the ancient pilgrims asked, “Where does my help come from?” Who can help me with my problem?”

In this age of self-help and self-sufficiency, asking this question and uttering the cry for help can be rather difficult. We believe that we are the ones keeping our own lives together. This is the message we get from our culture. From balancing our checkbooks to staying on the top of our medical appointment, we are in

charge of our own well-being. We are responsible for our own lives. We are captains of our own destiny. So, crying out for help, asking where our help comes from, can be seen as signs of weakness or irresponsibility.

But, from the perspective of faith, crying for help is an act of acknowledging our powerlessness, an act of giving up our incessant need for control, and surrendering ourselves to the will and power of God. It is an act of fully trusting and fully relying on God. In that moment of crying out for help, you hear the voice of your heart joining in the ancient song: “My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.”

The rest of psalm 121 affirms that God will be the keeper who guards, watches over, and looks out for us, God’s pilgrims. The psalmist does not tell us that our journey of faith will be problem-free. However, the eternal promise and the source of our hope in times of trouble is that God will be with us always, guiding us and leading us by God’s hand.

Thanks be to God! Amen.