



## Psalm 121 - Assurance of God's Protection

A Song of Ascents.

### Introduction

This psalm is the second in the series and seems to be intended to instil confidence in those making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship. The successful journey becomes a parable for the whole of one's life, in which the faithful can be confident of God's tireless care. Refer also to the introduction to Psalm 120 for the Songs of Ascents.

### Psalm 121:1-2 - Where Does My Help Come From?

The person on pilgrimage to Jerusalem will lift up his eyes to the hills, possibly as a place to be feared, or else to the hills around Jerusalem: <<***As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time on and for evermore***>> (Psalm 125:2), and wonders, "from where does my help come?" The reply shows that the question, which originally applied to seeking help to finish the journey, can be generalised to cover all of the believer's life. The help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth, and therefore no other power can hinder it.

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills –  
from where will my help come?
- 2 My help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.

### Psalm 121:1-2

I lift up my eyes to the hills. The singer of Psalm 121 looked to the hills, most likely the distant hills of Jerusalem, as they travelled towards the city to fulfil their pilgrimage. The point is wonderful. The singer understood that they did not need to arrive at Jerusalem before they were under God's protective care. He

would watch over them on the journey. God is just as present on the journey as in the destination.

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

- Some suggest this was a consideration of the high places where idolaters set their altars: <<On the next day Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal; and from there he could see part of the people of Israel>> (Numbers 22:41), <<He also made houses on high places, and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not Levites>> (1 Kings 12:31) and: <<For they provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their idols>> (Psalm 78:58).
- Some suggest this was an anxious look to the hills, looking for danger and threats from often-present robbers and brigands.

My help comes from the Lord. The traveller looked to Jerusalem as their destination, yet his trust was not in that city itself. Help would come from the Lord who made heaven and earth. The creator God would be his helper.

Who made heaven and earth. Biblical authors cite this idea, based on Genesis 2:4 and Exodus 20:11, to stress that the God of Israel has universal and unbounded power: <<And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord, and said: ‘O Lord the God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth’>> (2 Kings 19:15); refer also to 2 Chronicles 1:12, Psalms 115:15, 124:8, 134:3, and 146:6, Isaiah 37:16, and Jeremiah 32:17 for more on this theme.

### Psalm 121:3-8 - The Lord Will Keep You at All Times.

These verses are dominated by the word keep, Hebrew *shamar*, which means to keep, preserve, guard, watch over, or attend to carefully: the Lord who keeps Israel (the corporate entity) also keeps the individual, the particular member of the community. This means that he will not let their foot be moved, i.e. slip as they walk, nor will he let them suffer from the dangers of day and night.

When v.7 speaks of all evil, and v.8 of a person’s going out and coming in, they are probably taking the safe journey to Jerusalem as a parable for all of one’s life: for the Lord is the keeper at all times; he will neither slumber nor sleep. Not only is God all-powerful (v.2), he is ever-watchful (v.4). This is the confidence the faithful are to enjoy.

<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved;  
he who keeps you will not slumber.

<sup>4</sup> He who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.

## Psalm 121:3-4

He will not let your foot be moved. God would help his people by establishing them in a firm place, allowing them to stand and not allowing them to be displaced or to backslide: <<*For I pray, 'Only do not let them rejoice over me, those who boast against me when my foot slips'*>> (Psalm 38:16), and: <<*who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip*>> (Psalm 66:9). Adam Clarke noted, "The foundation, God's infinite power and goodness, on which you stand, cannot be moved; and whilst you stand on this basis, your foot cannot be moved." And Charles Spurgeon commented, "Our feet shall move in progress, but they shall not be moved to their overthrow." For the Christian, this reminds them of the principles found in Ephesians 6:11-13 – that the believer is to find a place to stand, and this can only be done by looking to the Lord and trusting in him who will not allow them to be moved from his presence and care.

### The standing of the believer in Jesus is impressive:

- **They stand in grace:** <<*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God*>> (Romans 5:1-2).
- **They stand in the Gospel:** <<*Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand*>> (1 Corinthians 15:1).
- **They stand in courage and strength:** <<*Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong*>> (1 Corinthians 16:13).
- **They stand in faith:** <<*I do not mean to imply that we lord it over your faith; rather, we are workers with you for your joy, because you stand firm in the faith*>> (2 Corinthians 1:24).
- **They stand in Christian liberty:** <<*For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*>> (Galatians 5:1).
- **They stand in Christian unity:** <<*Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel*>> (Philippians 1:27).
- **They stand in the Lord:** <<*Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved*>> (Philippians 4:1).
- **The goal: that they should stand perfect and complete in the will of God:** <<*Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills*>> (Colossians 4:12).

He who keeps you will not slumber. This is the first of six times in this short psalm that the Hebrew word *shamar*, translated keeps or preserve in some translations, is used. The theme is that God will watch over his people as a watchman watches the city or the party of travellers. Clarke observed, “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.”

He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The one who looks to the Lord can have confidence in the fact that God does not sleep, and the idea is repeated in v.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 asleep and must be awakened*>> (1 Kings 18:27). All believers have the great comfort in knowing that he who keeps his people Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

<sup>5</sup> The Lord is your keeper;  
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.

#### Psalm 121:5-6

The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The brutal rays of the sun in the world of the Middle East can assault the traveller, such as the pilgrim on the way to one of Israel’s festivals in Jerusalem. God promised care for the traveller, with a thought 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: <<*It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain*>> (Isaiah 4:6), and: <<*For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat*>> (Isaiah 25:4a). Psalm 91 is especially precious, with shade being the same word as shadow: <<*You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust’*>> (Psalm 91:1-2).

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. Spurgeon commented, “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."

7 The Lord will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.

8 The Lord will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and for evermore.

### Psalm 121:7-8

The Lord will keep you from all evil. The singer had great confidence in God's protecting power. Evil people may come and afflict the child of God, but they can never do him or her permanent harm. Derek Kidner observed, "In the light of other scriptures, to be kept from all evil does not imply a cushioned life, but a well-armed one."

He will keep your life is literally 'he shall preserve your soul.' Spurgeon observed, "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."

On the thrice repeated word keep, Spurgeon noted, "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?"

The Lord will keep 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, i.e. going out and coming in: <<*Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out*>> (Deuteronomy 28:6), and at all times, i.e. from this time on and for evermore.

Spurgeon commented, "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." And Kidner added, "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: <<*Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves*>> (Psalm 126:6), and to the home which remains one's base; again, to pilgrimage and return."