

Thanks to Ray Fowler's notes on Psalm 121 which have created the structure for this study.

Pray

Introduction

QUESTION - What have been the most terrifying events to have happened in your life? How did you feel in the middle of this?

There are definitely Psalms that bring great comfort to the reader in times that are really tough. These could be Psalm 23, Psalm 91, and also the Psalm we are studying tonight, Psalm 121. We previously learnt from Will McCallion in the study of Psalm 120 that there are 15 psalms called the Psalms of Ascent. They are 120-134. These psalms would have been sung by those travelling to Jerusalem for the three great feasts. (The feast of unleavened bread – Passover, the feast of weeks – Pentecost, and the Feast of Booths). They are called Psalms of Ascent not only because the people were going up to Jerusalem, but because the psalms themselves lead us upwards to God in our own personal walk with him.

Sometimes the path ahead can be gruelling – we are faced with difficult issues, and yet we should be confident of God's provision and protection.

Story – Andrew Jess, climbing this morning up Slemish with firefighting equipment. Someone had lit a fire which made him very angry. But when he got to the top of Slemish he saw a large cross that has now been placed up there reminding him of the hope, the peace, the protection that comes from Jesus.

We all need help throughout life and yet how often do we call upon God first? We are all good and trying to fix the problem first by ourselves. There's a story of a man who was out walking on a mountain, but lost his step and went off the edge. Fortunately a bush that was growing wild below caught him in his fall, otherwise he would have been dead. And so in desperation he cried out, Help, is there anyone there, please help. A few minutes later after crying out again, the man heard a voice saying "Don't worry, it's me God, I am here to help you, my right hand is here to protect you, so just jump off the edge and I will catch you. You will not fall". The man was amazed to hear the voice, but wasn't sure what to do so he cried out for help again thinking that he was imagining things. The voice of God spoke again, reassuring him that if he would just trust in God, roll off the bush, God would pick him up and bring him to safe ground. There was a slight pause. And then the man shouted out, "Is there anyone else who could help me?"

Is this not a very accurate picture of our lives? Where are we willing to go to for our help? Do we rely upon the security of our pension, do we rely on the protection of our insurance policies? Do we receive great assurance from our private medical cover? Where does our help come from?

QUESTION – what areas of our lives do you think we bypass God on?

READ – Psalm 121, twice. First time let's read it through, but the second time let's read it replacing the words 'you' and 'your' with 'me' and 'my'. Make these truths your own. Let's believe that these words are not just for the pilgrim on his journey to Jerusalem, but they are for all of us as we face struggles ahead.

- 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.

Psalm 121 in detail

This Psalm is known very well in our country in the context of pastoral oversight. It is used regularly by ministers and pastoral visitors. It is also used at funerals to bring comfort. It would be a traditional Jewish custom for a person to read this psalm when leaving or entering their home. A Mezuzah which is a small cylinder that has scripture in it would be attached to a person's door frame, and whenever they would leave or enter their house they would touch the Mezuzah and recite Psalm 121 verses 5, and 8. 'The Lord watches over you – the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and for evermore'.



The other important observation as we step into this Psalm is consider that word LORD. Remember that when we see LORD spelt out in capitals it denotes the Hebrew word “Yahweh” which is God’s covenantal name. It’s the name that speaks of God’s relationship with his people and his faithfulness to them. It also connects us to the relationship and new covenant that exists in Jesus.

We are going to divide this psalm up into 3 parts (verse 1&2, verse 3-6, and verse 7&8)

Verses 1 & 2

When we initially look at these words we might think of an obstacle that is in our eyeline and see it as something rather daunting. If you have to climb a hill and already are out of breath, then it’s hard to see anything other than the hill.

But let’s picture that the writer of this psalm is making his way towards Jerusalem. The psalmist looks at the hills that are in front of him and wonders where his help will come from. But why the hills? Answer - That’s what he would have seen, as there are small hills that surround the city of Jerusalem. These could be seen as a kind of defence around the city and its temple. The size of a hill or mountain makes it a natural symbol of protection. So as the psalmist sees the hills around Jerusalem he is possibly thinking to himself, what will protect him. As the traveller moves closer he can see the temple beyond the hill, which is the dwelling place of God. It therefore helps him to reflect in verse 2 that God will be his protection as he looks to the hills.

For each of us we need to reflect on that image. Picture yourself looking towards Jerusalem and you see the Temple. Reflect on the fact that God is bigger than the mountains and God is beyond the mountains in our lives. Whilst mountains may give

protection, they don't give it in any way compared to the protection from God. We can't just look at the hills in front of us, we have got to look at the one who is greater than the hills. Psalm 90:2 says, "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God".

**QUESTION - What ways each day do you think we can keep our focus on God, knowing he will help us, and not the problem that is pressing on us?
Reading/meditating on the promises within his Word, speaking to him in prayer, finding a place of peace, not dwelling on the issue, become distracted in God, journal and reflect on how he has been faithful to you.**

So the Psalmist understands that his help comes from God, the maker of heaven and earth.

In these Psalms of Ascent, the writers emphasise the power which God has over all that he has created. Those words 'Maker of heaven and earth' appear here near the beginning ([Psalm 121:2](#)), once in the middle ([Psalm 124:8](#)) and then again at the end ([Psalm 134:4](#)). Over the last week I have been amazed with the launch of the SpaceX Dragon craft that has sent Americans back up to the Space Station directly from the USA. As the Dragon was docking with the ISS, the pictures of the earth were incredible. Whilst it's only 200 miles up, the ISS provides the scale of God's creation. Remember the words of Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." In other words the Maker of heaven and the earth has unlimited power, wisdom and understanding. He has all the resources and more to meet our every need.

When we sing kids' songs in church, I often wish that more people would join in with the actions because it creates for the kids the sense of God's amazing love and provision. I love it when we have to stretch our arms out really wide to signify the size of God's love, his creation, his protection and his provision – He's got the whole world in his hands, My God is so big, Nothing's too big big big for his power, and Our God is a great big God. These are truths that we all need to realise, especially when we are faced with difficult issues in life.

In the Anglican Communion we have liturgy developed for different seasons, and here is a Creed or Statement of Faith that has been written to declare God's power in creation.

*We believe in God, who creates all things, who embraces all things,
who celebrates all things, who is present in every part of the fabric of creation.
We believe in God as the source of all life who nourishes this planet with living water.
We believe in Jesus Christ, the suffering one, the poor one, the malnourished one,
the climate refugee, who loves and cares for this world and who suffers with it.
And we believe in Jesus Christ, the seed of life, who came to reconcile and renew
this
world and everything in it.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the breath of God,
who moves with God and who moves among and with us today.*

*We believe in everlasting life in God.
And we believe in the hope that one day God will put an end to death and all
destructive forces*

What a difference it makes to know that the Creator of the universe is our helper and our friend!

REFLECT – Let's consider an issue or worry that we have today. Consider the aspects of your life that it is affecting right now. Consider how big it is. Now compare it to the Maker of heaven and earth. Be assured that He has got the whole world in his hands.

Remember that this is God's world, and God's providence means that nothing can happen to you outside of God's will and providential care. So ask yourself who is in control? Where does your help come from?

Verses 3-6

As we go through these next verses we are going to see a recurring word. It's the word 'watches'. It comes from the Hebrew word 'shamar' which means "to watch over, to guard or to protect." This word shows up five times in verses 3-8. As we look now at these verses let's see the different ways in which the Lord watches over us.

A. Verse 3 he will not let your foot slip

I can't remember how many times I have been in visiting people who have either broken their leg or fallen, where I have been tempted to use this verse as a promise for their future safety. However as I think more about this verse I consider the ways in which we can slip in our spiritual lives.

QUESTION – how can we find ourselves slipping or stumbling spiritually?

Psalm 37:23-24 promises that 'The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand'.

We realise from these words that whilst the Lord wants to protect us, and to ensure we do not slip, and also the promise that he will never walk away from us, there are situations that we face where we have to discipline ourselves so that we don't slip into temptation or anger or other human reactions. We must delight in him, we must be in love with his Word, we must desire to surround ourselves in him. Our faith must be in Christ and him alone.

B. Verse 3 & 4 he will not slumber or sleep

The psalmist on his journey to Jerusalem will need to sleep, but here we see a wonderful picture that the Lord doesn't need to. When the psalmist is at the side of

the road asleep God is still watching over him. This is how we distinguish between God and all other manmade deities. In 1 Kings 18 we read about the prophets of Baal trying to reach their god. The story goes that the Elijah confronts Ahab on his worship of the Baal gods. He asked that the people would meet at Mount Carmel. He confronts the people to decide between the Lord and Baal, but the people remain silent. So he then sets up a test involving the burning of a bull. The people summon their God and nothing happens. In what comes across as sheer teasing, Elijah says, "Shout louder! Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened."

The people have called out all day, in fact they go as far as slashing themselves with their swords until the blood ran out of them. Here is a picture of how people feel they have to put so much effort in to receive the favour of their god in order that he might hear and respond to them. But our God is an ever present help in times of trouble – he is always awake. He never falls asleep.

Confession time – I can remember on a couple of occasions being in prayer gatherings where the eyes were closed and I definitely missed a few minutes. I had fallen asleep.

So what's the difference between slumbering and sleeping? Slumbering means you've just dosed off for a minute or two and may therefore have lost the train of thinking in a conversation. Sleep is obviously where you are out for the count. It is so reassuring therefore that God doesn't just stay awake, but because he doesn't even slumber it means he is fully attentive to his children because of his love for us. There is no distraction.

But it does therefore imply that because he is always attentive to our needs, we can rest while he doesn't. It is very difficult to sleep when something is weighing on your mind. But if we know that God is in control, then we can hand it to him so we can rest while he doesn't

C. Verse 5 – the Lord is your shade at your right hand

When something is looming, whether that's a medical test or whatever it is, our focus can be only that thing. We can only see what is ahead of us. This verse gives us a picture of the closeness of God beside us. David wrote in [Psalm 16:8](#): "I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken." That means God accompanies you every step of the way. He is close beside you. How often when we pray do we pray for the operation that is coming up, and forget that God is beside us today. Therefore consider what are the things to pray for today knowing that God is with us now, not just on the day that we are so focused on.

D. Verse 6 – the sun will not harm us by day or the moon by night

Alison was out the other day in the back garden, and you would not have realised the strength of the sun until she came in later. It had burned her, and that was with

sun cream on. The sun can cause real damage even with our climate. So can you imagine the risks placed on travellers going to Jerusalem 2,500 years ago. There was no Factor 50. There would have been real danger of sunstroke. There was also a belief that the moon was associated with driving people mad. At night there would have been the danger of wild animals or thieves coming to steal. And so this puts verse 6 into more context. We hear it again in Psalm 91:5&6 “You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.” ([Psalm 91:5-6](#))

Think about the terror of the night. Think about people who live on their own, in particular the elderly. Think of the vulnerability they are under. Think about the loneliness that they feel. The idea of harm by sun and moon can very much be put into the context of today. No one is really safe any longer, and due to social media we are seeing how our children can be terrified night and day by things said to them online.

It is worth noting here a style in Hebrew writing that is shown here. It's called merism. Merism demonstrates the opposites or extremes as an example, and therefore considers everything in between them. So when we read that the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night, what this is really saying is that God protects you at all times – both day and night and everything in between. God is present to help you with every problem in your life.

Reflection for all of us – If we are God's people, his children, and we are called to love each other as he loves us, we can play a part in providing a reassurance to people who are lonely, isolated or worried and consider being in touch with them a few times every week. Take a moment to consider 1 person who you might be able to commit contacting regularly so they know that the Lord is watching over them.

Verses 7 & 8

When I read that the Lord will keep me from all harm, I immediately think to myself about all the issues that have occurred in my life and wonder whether God has actually kept me from these. If he has them why do I (and all of us) face those trials?

I therefore reflect on the many issues in life where I know that God has been present to guide, to provide wisdom, to provide his presence, to provide support, to love and to heal. I still faced the issue but the harm I faced was easier to withstand knowing that he was with me, and that is how I consider this verse ‘keeping me from harm’.

Up to this point all verses have been in the present tense, but now comes the extra assurance about the promises of the future as verses 7 & 8 are written in the future tense.

In this it gives us the assurance that God watches over all aspects of our lives.

The word “harm” here is a word that can mean “harm or evil.”

I want us to have a look at the promises that God gives us in Romans 8 where he is so directly involved in our lives, where he is for us and not against us.

Remember these promises from Romans 8

Verse 1 – there's no condemnation

Verse 2 – we are set free

Verse 11 – he gives us life

Verse 14 – we are sons & daughters

Verse 17 – we are heirs

Verse 26 – the Spirit intercedes for us

Verse 28 – God works for our good

Verse 31 – God is for us, not against us

Verse 32 – God gave himself up for us in Jesus

Verse 34 – Jesus intercedes for us

Verse 35 – nothing will separate us from God's love

Once again these verses do not teach us that you will never have problems or trouble in your life, but rather that evil will never win out, that nothing can thwart God's purpose for your life, that nothing can separate you from God's love for you in Christ.

Question - How do these promises of Romans 8 make you feel right now?

The Lord journeys through your transitions

Transitions or changes are the things that will mess us up the most. When there's no illness, no worries, everything seems fine, everything is good with the world. But when there's a change in health or a change of jobs, or a change in a relationship, that's when the struggles hit us most.

But God promises here that "he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore".

David prayed to the Lord in Psalm 139: "You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways." ([Psalm 139:2-3](#))

This is another example of the Hebrew language using merism. Verse 8 refers to our comings and goings, and therefore it means everything in between. So often it's the in-betweens that I can never fully recall – even all the ordinary stuff that happens every day that is nothing really special. And yet God is watching over all the ordinary stuff/ Wherever we are God is keeping us safe.

The Lord is the Lord yesterday, today and always.

God is watching over you now, and he will continue to watch over you forever.

Jesus said in [Matthew 28:20](#): “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” ([Matthew 28:20](#)) [Hebrews 13:8](#) says that: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” ([Hebrews 13:8](#)) And so God’s promise to watch over you in Christ is true today; it is true tomorrow; it is true forevermore.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:34 “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own”. Jesus said this after teaching his disciples how to pray, to not store things up as treasures, and to not worry about all their possessions. He was basically saying in this chapter of Matthew, get your priorities right. I am everything you need. I’m the Alpha and the Omega. You don’t need to worry about anything else. Nothing can happen to you without God’s knowledge of it already.

CONCLUSION:

Whatever comes your way in life, look always to God for your help, even in the ordinariness of life. Don’t exclude him from **anything**.

God is for you, not against you. He is committed to your good, and you can trust him in all things.