

Psalm 121

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[0 : 00] Can we turn again this evening to Psalm 121, and that's page 622 in Pew Bibles. We shall consider this passage this evening and the glorious truths which are contained therein.

It's interesting coming back to the UK and to watch the television adverts for the cars, and how they emphasise their safety features, and how they also emphasise that life is a journey, and that if you choose their particular brand of car, the journey of life will be smooth and safe.

You will enjoy the ride if you only choose this particular model. Look here, check out the features. We love the side impact bars, we love the automatic braking system, we really do love the airbags. All these little features that, in these past years we've been away, have now become almost standard in most cars.

When, on a journey, we demand security. We want to feel, when we step into our motor cars, that this is home.

[1 : 38] We are safe. Indeed, many psychologists would say that society today sees the car as an extension of our very homes.

We want security. We want security where we live, in our home. Having come from South Africa, where bars are on the window, razor wire is on the fence, and for most homes a press of a button will bring the armed response unit.

We want security. But even here, we want security at home. We want an alarm. We want to make sure that our doors and our windows are locked.

We want security in life as we live it. We want the pension plan. We want the private health care, so that should anything happen, we are going to be okay.

We join the gym to get ourselves fit. Make sure that our stomachs are kept trim, so that we can follow our doctor's advice and get plenty of exercise, so that our journey in life may be safe and long.

[3 : 01] We want, if we can use the metaphor, to be car sick free. We want security as we travel, as we fly, as we drive, as we walk down the road.

We have insecurities in this life, and there are many difficulties that may befall us on the journey.

We may even have stories to recall how close things happened to us, how it was nearly us that was involved in the accident, how we were taken and kept by God Himself.

True stories of God's goodness to us. We want to know the Lord's protection. And that is a key theme, if not the key theme of this psalm.

Six times the psalmist repeats the idea that the Lord keeps us. That He is our helper.

When the pilgrim left home in ancient Israel, there were concerns for safety. He was as concerned as you and I are today.

[4 : 28] And this psalm teaches us that God's providence and protection cover our entire lives. as individuals and as part of the covenant people of God.

Our entire lives and all eternity. The theme of this psalm echoes the promise that was given by God to Jacob back in Genesis chapter 28.

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. And often times we take Psalm 121.

When we face a personal emergency or if we embark on a journey away from home, we read it, we recite it, we sing it, we pray it.

And we forget sometimes that this Lord God is in control, not only as we step out of the door, but also while we remain at home in good times and in bad.

[5 : 42] this is a psalm, a song of ascent. It is one of those psalms that it is believed to have been sung by the covenant people of God, of Israel, as they went up to Jerusalem, as they ascended up to Zion for one of the major festivals in the year.

Here is a psalm that the people could sing together. And this little cluster from Psalm 130 onwards is these covenant psalms sung by people on the march to God's holy city.

Do you imagine setting off, excited, looking forward to going up to the city to worship God together? not going up there to shop or to see friends, but so much as to go and see the splendour of the temple to be at the footstool of God's feet.

And this psalm provides the people and provides us with three points of assurance. Point number one, God is a God who helps.

[7 : 13] The people are assured that there is a source of help for them. I lift up my eyes to the hills.

Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. It wasn't easy travelling up to Jerusalem.

It wasn't a case of flagging down a taxi or jumping on a camel and getting there risk-free. In these days, there were hazards.

These pilgrims had to cross difficult terrain. There were ravines that had to be navigated, both going down and coming up. there was the ever-present danger of slipping and falling, of breaking a bone, of twisting an ankle.

And if those physical injuries weren't enough, there was also the danger of wild beasts, of bears, of lions, of wolves. And then, on top of that, there were robbers and bandits who lived in the hill country looking for easy prey, looking to pick off the stragglers so that they could make some easy money.

[8 : 37] There was a danger of sunstroke. There was a danger of physical fatigue. If you did have a donkey or a camel, it could break down.

And there was no AA to call out. Your supply of food may run low. Your water may disappear.

Travel took time. It did not take a matter of hours, but rather days and weeks. And these pilgrims needed assurance.

Who is our help? And although our travel hazards, our life's journey difficulties are different, we have the insecurities of life that press in upon ourselves.

Whether they be physical, when the health is starting to fail, perhaps they are financial, when you have overextended yourself and you do not know where to turn for help financially.

[9 : 47] Maybe you suffer from psychological problems. Maybe you are down spiritually in the dark night of the soul. Is there a help in this journey for me?

And sometimes we can become so overly concerned with these matters. They become so big and so real and far greater than what they are that they can indeed almost paralyze us.

And we stop. And we become hostage to these fears. and we are left as if at the point of not being able to cope.

Life unexpected turns keep indeed turning. And while one day we seem so bright and cheery, in a moment it can be all different.

The sudden death of a loved one. An illness that comes upon us and we don't expect it. And what does the psalmist ask us to do?

[11 : 05] He takes practical cognizance of this and says look up I lift up my eyes to the hills.

lift up your eyes to God. Lift up your eyes to Zion pilgrim as you walk there.

I can see the journey. I can see the difficulties. I know what the terrain is like. I know what dangers lie ahead. I know what's the unexpected that you cannot see.

It's all in my plan. Look up to God. who sees and knows everything. Lift our eyes up rather than being downcast.

And if you can think of these hills as being the hills of Judea or the hill of Zion on which Jerusalem and the temple stood, here is practical advice.

[12 : 12] Here it is. Look up. Look in the distance. Look to that place. You can see it through the mist, through the heat haze. Can you see it?

Can you see that city on a hill? That's God's city. That's where God stays. That's His earthly abode. That's where we're going. And He can get us from this point to that point. He will be with us. refocus.

Get your eyes off your feet. Don't look at the precipice. Look out to God.

Look away from your immediate situation. Get the perspective. God's perspective. See it as He sees it.

[13 : 12] Look out to Him. Because there, in Jerusalem, there is the throne, the earthly throne room of God Almighty.

This is the place that He has chosen through David to be His place. To meet with His people. To accept their worship.

To accept their offerings of praise. There, on that hill. Look up. Don't you worry what's around the next corner.

You look up. You're going there. And, as you read through many of the Psalms, it becomes clear that God's covenant people, the people that God has said to, you will be my people.

I will be your God. I will go with you. these people expect God to help them.

[14 : 17] They expect God's help to come from His sanctuary on His holy hill. They expect the God Himself to be with them.

Refocus, refocus, refocus. pilgrim on the way. Get your eyes on the Lord.

Where then does our help come from? It comes from God. Verse 2 augments it. My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of Heaven and Earth.

Here we have both the covenant name of God, the Lord. And we see that in small capitals. That's the covenant name being used here. My help comes from that covenant God who said He will be with His people.

And this covenant Lord God is the Maker of Heaven and Earth. He's the Creator of this world. He's the Creator of these ravines and gullies and hills and mountains and rocks.

[15 : 25] He is the One who has called us to Himself. He is the Maker of Heaven and Earth. and yet notice He's not some distant God who winds up the universe and says well there you go get on with it.

This is God who's involved personally with His people. This is a God who wants to be with His people. A God who has revealed Himself as such from the very beginning in Genesis where He is to be found the Creator of Heaven and Earth walking in the Garden with Adam.

God. This God, this mighty powerful God who has created the whole of the cosmos, who hears every bang, every star collapsing throughout the whole of the universe.

This God is not deafened by these bangs so that He cannot hear the voice and cry of His pilgrim people that said Lord, help.

I'm in danger. I need You here. I need You to help me here. I cannot cope. I'm about to slip over.

[16 : 59] He hears this is a God who has created Heaven and Earth and has the power, but is a God who from the very beginning has revealed Himself to be one who cares personally.

This is a mighty God. And in this age where men and women and boys and girls are placing their trust in other gods and other idols, dumb, made either by themselves or by the media, they do not know the Lord Almighty, the Maker of Heaven and Earth.

This little epithet, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, is a way of saying all the other gods can't do it, but our God, He created all this.

So it's nothing for Him to move a mountain and throw it into the sea. You remember Elijah calling on the name of the Lord and showing how impotent Baal really was.

all who cry on the living Lord have available someone who has enough power and the ability to create both Heaven and Earth in all its variety.

[18 : 46] And that should be a comfort to us when we are worried and concerned, when the doctor sends us for the tests, to quit and ask what's the problem, God already knows before the specialist because He has created us.

We are His and He is ours. And that should encourage us as we step out in life's journey that wherever we go, the Lord God Almighty goes with us.

Whatever we face, He's with us. And in our despair, He hears us. We have a God who helps.

That should assure us that we have one we can cry out to who hears and who answers. But there's a second assurance.

The second assurance is this. Not only is God a God who can help for those who cry out to Him, but God is a God who will certainly help.

[20 : 04] We see this in the following verses from 3 to 6. He will not let your foot slip. He who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

the Lord watches over you. The Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun will not harm you by day nor the moon by night. You might say to yourself, well, okay, I don't doubt that God has power, but will He use His protecting power for little people like me, insignificant, sitting in the back row, quietly going through life, not causing a stir.

Will He help me? Am I important enough? To what extent will God help us? Well, first is that the psalmist tells us here in this passage that, again, He does it personally.

And He also emphasizes the fact by changing it from, I will look up to, He will look after you, you, you. Driving the point home in the second person.

So He's assuring the pilgrim, pilgrim, it doesn't matter how big or small you are. He will prevent your foot from slipping and stumbling and sliding away.

[21 : 36] The slip of a footstep. So small. If you've got flat feet like mine, there's nothing surer in the day that you're going to trip over something, that you're going to twist an ankle on the uneven pavements of life.

So small. insignificant we might be, but God notices and God cares. He's saying to them, don't worry, He's looking after the little things as well as the big things.

He's got all things in His hands. A simple turn of your ankle, nothing for our God. He won't let it go. He won't let you slip and slide.

The psalmist is using this for almost any type of trouble or misfortune. Whatever it might be, small or big, don't worry.

And we look throughout the Psalms and we read this, My steps have held to a path, my feet have not slipped. For I said, do not let them gloat or exalt themselves over me when my foot slips.

[22 : 50] He has preserved me, preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping. Our God, our covenant God, will protect us in even the smallest and most idiosyncratic of problems.

Even when they appear too trite or too embarrassing or too personal to bring to God in prayer. It's almost as if we think that God doesn't know how foolish we are.

But this high and lifted up God, maker of heaven and earth, is personal. And He sees and He knows. But notice also about this God.

Is He certain to help? Oh yes, because you know something else. Not only will He not let your foot go, He doesn't sleep. He doesn't slumber. He doesn't catnap.

Remember the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal? When He looks at the prophets doing all the rituals and all the actions and crying louder and louder.

[24 : 02] And there's nothing there. No response. And Elijah is being sarcastic and saying, is your God busy? Perhaps He's on another call.

Has He got a voicemail? Belittling. Our God does not slumber nor sleep.

He doesn't take 40 winks. Nothing comes to Him as a surprise. Oh, I was just out the office when this happened.

He needs no rest. He watches over you and me. There's this protective nature of God taking care, keeping watch over us.

Our sheath at our right hand. He will protect us by day or by night. We are always in His loving care.

[25 : 11] Nothing happens by surprise. He's always on duty. And He will protect you, the psalmist said, even from the heat. His hand is going to protect you.

You will get to the promised city. You will be with Him in His abode. You will worship Him there with the covenant people because His hand, His protection is all encompassing.

the sun will not strike you, nor will the moon rays harm you. Sunstroke, heatstroke, is a reality in warm countries.

You don't want to sit out too much in the sun, even in days like this here in Aberdeen. Far less in Israel and in warmer climes where the sun is ferocious, but the hand of God shades His people.

So they are protected and even at night, even when the sun goes down, God will protect us from the moon and for all the dangers of the night. The people thought, well, when the moon comes out, that's a time where there's an effect on our psychological condition.

[26 : 33] There was a belief that people could become lunatics. There would be lunacy because of the moon's rays. But no, God will protect you even then.

And when the wolves circle around the camp where the robbers are eyeing you up from the rocks, don't you worry about that in the middle of the night. I'm there with you.

I will give you rest. I will look after you. I will take care of you. Our God protects day and night. He does not work nine to five.

He is there. He protects his loved ones from the physical harm, the evil. And evil is often hidden from us.

We do not see it round about, but there will come a time when we will see something of what God has done around about us that we are blissfully unaware of, how he has protected us from dangers and evil that we never knew about.

[27 : 38] Our God is big enough. Our God is able. He does not sleep. He certainly helps. And the third assurance that this passage gives us is found in verses seven and eight.

The Lord will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life. The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

This passage, Psalm 121, I think has echoes in the passage in Romans 8, which we also read this evening. What can separate us from the love of Christ?

There's nothing in this earth or under the earth, there is nothing in the realm of Satan and evil that is too powerful for our God.

There's nothing out of God's reach. We cannot be separated from Christ's love.

[28 : 46] And that's the same that the psalmist is saying here today. Through the psalm, God's help is limitless.

Here is the loving protection and loving evidence of God's continued careful protection. And it can be seen if we open our eyes.

Our keeper watches over us from the time we close our eyes to the time we open our eyes because his eye upon us never closes.

He is our keeper. He is the one who keeps us from all harm. keeps us when we go in and go out.

The commentator Derek Kidner writes this and I think it's worth quoting. It would be hard to decide which half of verse 8 is more encouraging.

[30 : 01] The fact that it, God's help and keeping starts from now or that it runs on not to the end of time but without end.

What a glorious passage this is. God's help starts now and never ends. There is not going to be a time when God receives a watch to mark His retirement from looking after us.

God's care is without end. And it doesn't start in the future. It can start now.

For those who trust in Christ it has started. But for those who do not trust Christ yet it can start from now. And it will continue.

because God guarantees it. The Hebraic expression talks about your coming and going. And it denotes all the circumstances and all the occupations of life.

[31 : 18] It includes everything. It's another Hebrew way of saying everything. Nothing left out. Our trips from home, our times with the family, at home, our time at work or in the office, wherever we go into the college, into the lecture theatre, into the student union, wherever we go, He goes with us.

As we enter into debate, as we share our faith, He is with us, He takes care in our comings and our goings.

What a fabulous, fabulous Lord we have, who continues to look after His people with such minute care and deliberation.

all the things that are going on at this moment, in your life, my life, the people round about, the community here, the city here, the county, and on and on and on throughout the world.

God knows these people. God knows what they're going through. And He will keep them, He will help them, He will save them. Therefore, we can be assured, that He is limitless in His help towards His people.

[32 : 58] All wonderful news. He takes care of us. So, this night, we need to learn to cast our fears upon Him.

In an anxious day, in a day of deadlines, in a world longing for security and purpose and meaning in life, we have a God who gives all of that.

A God who cares. We ask for His protection. Individually, yes, but remember this psalm is a covenant psalm for the people.

So, for the people of Bonacord, make it your own, that wherever the Lord leads, He will be with us. He will be with us as a people as we go out, as we come back.

Why should we be afraid if our God knows it all? I think it was General Lee who paraded in front of his men in the battles during this American Civil War and was asked, are you not afraid of being shot and dying?

[34 : 19] He said, my Lord knows the day I will die. He knows the very moment. Why should I worry about it? It's all in His hands anyway.

The loving goodness of God whose eyes never leave us or His loved ones. We could lessen our anxiety in this anxious filled world by remembering that He does not let your foot slip without Him being there.

Whatever experience is yours in life, He is there with you in the midst of it. He brings comfort. He brings security, real security that lasts.

The car rusts, the airbags deflate, our God does not rust. Our God cannot be deflated.

There is more comfort and security in our Lord Jesus Christ than all the side impact bars, pension plans, insurance policies combined to eternity.

[35 : 38] God is our defender and our shield. So if we are weary on the way, if we are heading as pilgrim people of God, keep on marching.

Life is a journey for the people of God. We are marching to Zion. There's a hymn that often burst out in little gatherings in South Africa.

Marching to Zion. But we are. We are going to our heavenly abode. He will keep us safe in the journey.

And he will take his people there. Help us. Oh Lord God. So remember that life is indeed a journey. A journey that may indeed be short.

But if we want to enjoy life's journey, we need to do it. with him and in him. Amen. Let's pray.

[36 : 46] Oh Lord God, there are many things that press upon us. Many things that rob us of our joy and of our disassurance that you are with your people.

That rob us of the comfort of knowing that we have a God who helps. That make us cast doubts whether you would help us.

Lord God, as you have sent your son to die for us, will you not also take us home? And help us also to realize that your power is without limit.

your care is without limit. And that you will go with your people. The passage is true where it says, God, Emmanuel, God with us.

Our Christ, he is with us. May we go forward in his strength. and may we, when we gather together one day, be aware of how you have protected us in the past from dangers we were unaware of.

[38 : 04] And there, together, in Jerusalem, our heavenly Jerusalem, may we praise you and bless you, for you have kept us for yourself.

Amen.