

Psalm 121

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[0 : 0 0] Three decades have come and gone since the year that serves as the title of George Orwell's novel, 1984. Now one phrase from the novel that has entered into common English usage, I imagine often without an understanding or a knowledge of its origin, is this phrase, Big Brother is watching you. I'm sure you've heard the phrase used on multiple occasions. Big Brother is watching you. Now what for George Orwell was a fictional projection into an unknown future has become in many ways our current reality. Big Brother is watching you, he's watching us. Every like on Facebook, every purchase on Amazon, every text message sent, every CCTV image captured, all recording your moods and thoughts, your preferences, your actions. Now in the novel, the state apparatus of Oceania that created Big Brother presents him as the benevolent protector of all the citizens, but the reality of course is very different. But what about the possibility of a benevolent protector who is over us and who can watch over us? Is it possible that there could be one who is bigger than you and me and who can watch over us for our own good? There is a world of difference between somebody watching you and somebody watching over you. Certainly in terms of the way we tend to use those expressions, even if literally there isn't a world of difference. And I think that many people, be they religious or not, many people warm to the possibility that there could be someone who watches over us, someone who is above us and is looking out for us and watching over us. And I think many, perhaps if only in a naively superstitious way, cling to that possibility. Even in our very modern, or so we think, age, it's not uncommon to hear folks speak of their guardian angel or of some departed loved one, their nana or dad who still watches over them from above. And people will speak in that way, and presumably they mean something by it. There's something in us as human beings that craves for a powerful and benevolent protector, guardian, someone to watch over us.

But I wonder, is the reality in this big, bad world that it's a case of everyone having to fend for himself or herself? That it's simply not the reality that we can look for or turn to one who is greater than us to watch over us? Well, this morning I want us to return to Psalm 127.

As I commented as we were about to read the psalm, we did give some thought to the first two verses of the psalm last Sunday morning as we were thinking about what the children had sung. They'd praised God in song, making use of the first two verses of this psalm, and we were trying to help them, and indeed all of us, to sing these words with understanding. But we limited ourselves to those first two verses, and did so for obvious reasons. And this morning we want to take a bigger or broader look at the whole psalm and see what we can discover in this matter of one who can watch over us, and who he might be, and how he might do so. The psalm is dominated by this concept, by this theme, by this personality, the one who watches over the psalmist.

The words that are used to describe the word that is used in the original are different, to watch over, to keep, to protect, to guard, but the same theme is there and is very dominant.

Indeed, the one word, the one verb that perhaps is best translated to watch over is repeated on five occasions in the psalm. It's a brief psalm, and yet time and time again the psalmist returns to this word, to this reality, he who watches over his own. Let's just notice as we skim through the psalm how this this verb and this reality repeats itself. In verse 3, he who watches over you will not slumber. In the following verse, he who watches over Israel. In the following verse, the Lord watches over you.

[5 : 39] In verse 7, where we have it translated, the word will keep you, is actually the same word. The Lord will watch over you, keeping you from harm if you wish. He will watch over your life. There in that same verse, and then in the final verse, the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

This then is what dominates the psalm, and that is the way in which we are going to consider the psalm. Study the psalm to discover what is said about the one who watches over his own.

Now let's make up a noun, because we want to identify the one who watches over. So let's make one up in preference to the alternatives. We could use words that already exist to identify this one, a guardian, a protector, a keeper, but let's call him a watcher over, the one who watches over his own.

And let's ask three questions that revolve around this theme that dominates the psalm. The first question, where is the watcher over to be found? Where is the one who can watch over you, who can watch over me, who can watch over and protect us? Where is he to be found? But then, and this is where we will spend most of our time, ask the question. It may even seem a little bit irreverent, the manner in which the question is posed. How good is he at watching over? What does the psalmist say about the manner in which he watches over us? And then finally, and very briefly, but perhaps, and I hope very significantly, another question, could he possibly watch over me? Could I be the one who is the focus of his care and protection? So let's think about this psalm using these questions as our guide. First of all, then, where is the watcher over to be found? In the first verse, the psalmist poses a question in our version of the Bible that we've read from. It is indeed presented as a question, I think rightly so. If we're familiar with the psalm as we sing it from the Scottish Psalter, as we've already done this morning, it's not posed as a question, so it gives it a slightly different sense. But I think there is indeed a question there. In verse 1, I lift up my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from?

The psalmist himself poses the question. We're just borrowing his own question and wanting to think about it and answer it. Where is this help to be found? Where is the one who can watch over us?

[8 : 35] Indeed, the very question that is posed by the psalmist is a question that reveals something of his own condition as well as introducing the answer that he has discovered. It speaks of his own condition as one who stands in need of help, as one who stands in need of protection, as one who stands in need of being watched over. Life is way too difficult and way too dangerous to be faced alone. The psalmist needs help, and in posing the question and throwing out this question, he's acknowledging his need of help.

Where does my help come from? And it's maybe a very obvious thing to identify, but is this not where we must begin? Is this not where each of us must begin with an acknowledgement of our need of help? We do need help, and it's only when we recognize our need of help will we begin to even consider the question, well, where could that help possibly come from? So, the question itself reveals something of the psalmist's condition and indeed of his own self-perception of his condition. But there's also an answer that he gives to the question, and the answer that he gives to the question I think we could identify as a two-fold answer.

One answer that we will describe as somewhat enigmatic, but then another answer that is resounding and unequivocal. I think the psalm begins with what we might call an enigmatic answer to the question that he then immediately poses, where does my help come from? At least enigmatic for us. The psalm begins, I will lift up my eyes to the hills. And the words are so familiar. We sing them so often, but I wonder if we pause for a moment and say, well, what does that mean? What did the psalmist mean by expressing himself in this way? I lift up my eyes to the hills. What does he mean by speaking of the hills as the place to which he lifts his eyes? Does he see the hills as a place of refuge from his enemies? You could maybe imagine the psalmist in a position of danger, and the hills could provide a place of escape and refuge from those who were seeking his harm. Or I wonder if there is some subtle polemical edge where the hills are to be seen as the high places where the worship of false gods and protectors was practiced. We know how in the history of the people of Israel there was this constant and repeated temptation. And not only temptation, but a temptation that was so often succumbed to, where they would turn to false gods and they would lift up altars in the high places, imagining foolishly that from such gods and such places they could secure the help that they needed. I wonder if the psalmist is thinking along those lines. And in a moment we'll see how he contrasts such folly, if indeed that is in his mind.

Or are the hills simply a poetic expression that speaks of looking upwards, looking upwards to the one who is above and beyond the hills? I think that's maybe how we would ordinarily understand what is being said. We look upwards. And in looking upwards, we're looking to the one who is above us. We're looking indeed to the God who is on high. We look up. It's not unlike the footballers at the World Cup.

I'm sure we've seen them and they score a goal, or some of them do. They score a goal and they lift up their fingers to the skies and they look upwards. Now I don't know, maybe they're looking up to Nana or Dad or whoever it is, but I imagine that for many this is just a visual way of describing how they're looking up to God, the one who has given them the talent that they're displaying. I imagine that that is what is going on. I do notice that they only generally gaze upwards after scoring a goal, not so common after missing a penalty. Maybe they should do that as well. Anyway, I leave that for you to consider as to whether it would be appropriate. Well, if the first answer to the question, where does my help come from, is enigmatic, the second certainly is resounding and unequivocal because there in verse 2, the psalmist gives his definitive answer. Where does my help come from? Well, how does he respond?

[13:19] My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. This is a resounding answer to the question posed. Not the hills, but the maker of the hills, not the stars for those who would turn to the stars, but the creator of the stars and the firmament. Isn't there such a sad and tragic irony that in our enlightened generation, people still turn to the stars for direction instead of turning to the creator of the stars? And this is what the psalmist says, I turn to the one who has made everything, the creator of all. My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

Notice that even the manner God is identified by the psalmist in this resounding answer draws together two truths concerning God that are so crucial to this matter of securing help. He describes God as the maker of heaven and earth, a Hebrew way of simply saying of everything that exists, of heaven and earth, of the universe, of the cosmos, of everything. And in describing God in this way, He is recognizing and drawing encouragement from the reality that such a God has the power to help. You see, when we turn to somebody for help, a necessary condition is that that person, the one we turn to, has the capacity and the power to help. And here the psalmist is without any doubt on the matter. The one that I turn to is the maker of heaven and earth. He has power enough to help me whatever my circumstances or need might be. So at that level, He identifies God as having the power needed. But He does more than that because He also identifies the one He turns to as the Lord. My help comes from the Lord, from Yahweh, from the one who has identified Himself and revealed Himself as the personal God, the covenant God of

Israel, a covenant keeping God, a God who loves His people with a fatherly love and whose commitment to them is eternally unshakable. And so the one who helps Him not only is the one who is able to help Him, no problem too great, no circumstance too fraught, nothing beyond His capacity. He's the maker of heaven and earth. But not only that, but He's the Lord, the one who is committed to His people, the one who loves His people, the one who is able and willing to help. And of course, these are the two great truths that we cling on to because they're true in this matter of seeking help. We seek help from the one who is both able to help, but also the one who is willing to help, the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. And so we answer that first question, or the psalm answers the first question, where is the watcher over to be found?

Where is the one who can watch over me? Well, He is the very same. He is the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. But let's just move on and think about that second question. How good is He at watching over? What can we say about the manner in which He watches over His people? It's been already established in the way that the psalmist describes Him, that He has the power, that He has the willingness to do so.

But now the psalm goes on, and we have described from the experience of the psalmist how God has, in the real world, in the here and now, in His own experience, watched over Him and watched over God's people. And in verses 3 through to the end of the psalm, we have this very full description of how God watches over His people. And one commentator helpfully describes what we find in these verses as an ever-expanding circle of promise. It's a vivid and, I think, a helpful way of thinking of what we find in these following verses. We've identified who He is, but how does He help us?

[17:52] Well, what we have is this ever-expanding circle of promise. And the psalmist identifies seven ways in which the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, watches over His people. I say seven, and really the number's somewhat arbitrary and depends on how we divide up what He says, but we'll stick with seven as the perfect number. Seven ways in which God watches over His people. Let's move swiftly on and think of them briefly, one by one. First of all, we can say that He watches over us with meticulous care, with meticulous care. In verse 3, He will not let your foot slip. He'll not let your foot slip. The picture, it seems, is of a pilgrim making his way to Jerusalem. This is one of the songs of ascent.

That will be sung by the worshipers as they made their way to the festivals in Jerusalem. And the picture, perhaps, is of that pilgrim making his way to Jerusalem. And the promise is that every step of the way, every single step of the way is guided and directed by the Lord. This is meticulous care of His own. Now, many of you will know, if you have to endure me preaching week by week, that any musical reference I might make is unlikely to venture out of the 1980s. I'm kind of stuck there musically. And as evidence of that, I'm reminded of the lyrics of a song by the police.

Every breath you take, every move you make, every step you take, I'll be watching you. But unlike the slightly menacing tone of Sting's lyrics, the believer is assured that every single step taken is watched over by the meticulous care of the Lord. And I want you to take that with you as you leave this place and as you take steps from here to the pavement and to your home today. And as you think about what the week ahead holds for you, every single step, the Lord watches over His own.

He watches over us with meticulous care. But we can also say that He watches over us with ever-attentive care. Now, many of these things, there's a great deal of overlap, but we can distinguish them to some degree. And let's notice this second characteristic of God watching over us. He watches over us with ever-attentive care. We continue reading verse 3, 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. Maybe if you could visualize this picture that I'm going to paint to help maybe capture some of what the psalmist is saying. Think of a small child going to sleep or trying to get to sleep under the attentive and tender gaze of his mother or father. And the small child is, even as he's falling asleep, he's looking up to see if mommy is still there.

He's looking up to see if daddy is still there at the side of his cot or at the side of his bed. And sleep is just about to conquer him. But every so often he opens his eyes just to see if daddy's there, to see if mommy's there, until eventually sleep overtakes the wee one.

[21 : 34] And he can sleep secure. Every time he looks up as he falls asleep, daddy's there, mommy's there. But of course, we know the reality that mommy or daddy won't always be there by the cot or by the bed.

The moment the child is well asleep, they're gone. And some of you know all about that. You're just waiting. Are they asleep? Yes! And you can go and watch telly. And you can do something else and you can leave them. Obviously not abandon them. But you go away. You don't watch over them right through the night. That's beyond your responsibility and certainly capacity. But what does the psalmist say of the one who watches over him? He says the one who watches over his own people, the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, he is the one who never slumbers nor sleeps. He doesn't wait until you're asleep and then goes off to do his own thing. No, he continues to watch over you as you sleep. And he looks over you with that tender and protective gaze. Even in your deepest sleep, he's there watching over you, for he neither slumbers nor sleeps. It's interesting to note that the verse can be understood as first voicing a prayer or blessing. And if that's the case, what you have at the beginning of verse three, following he will not let your foot slip, is may he who watches over you not slumber. It's possible that this is what the psalmist has in mind. He's expressing a blessing or even a prayer. May he who watches over you not slumber. But then that aspiration, if you wish, of that prayer is responded to by this declaration. He who watches over you or he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. There's this ringing confidence on the part of the psalmist that this is so. And notice that the care that is described and promised is for both Israel, for the people of God and communally, but also for the Israelites. He who watches over you. Yes, you. Yes, over the whole of the nation, over the whole of the people, but also for each and every individual within it. And what I would encourage you is to know and enjoy this security and with the psalmist, if indeed this is what's happening in the psalm, pray for others that they too may discover the ever-attentive protection of the one who neither slumbers nor sleeps.

So he watches over us with meticulous care and he watches over us with an ever-attentive care, but he watches over us also with immediate and intimate care. We move on to verse 5, the Lord watches over you. The Lord is your shade at your right hand. The Lord is your shade at your right hand. And the language points in two related directions, both the immediacy and the intimacy of God's care.

Perhaps no picture portrays closeness or immediacy more eloquently than our shade or shadow. But also, and perhaps more significantly, this points to the intimacy of God's care.

The word translated shade and the picture being painted by the use of the word is very possibly a shortened form of the expression that we find and that we've already sung, the shadow of your wings.

[25 : 13] For God speaks of his care of his people as the care that is provided by the shadow of his almighty wings. It's not our own shadow that protects us, but his shadow, the shadow of his overarching, and we might even say maternal wings, as he cares for and protects his own. He watches over us with immediate and intimate care. But we can move on and notice another aspect or characteristic of this care, of this watching over us. He watches over us with comprehensive care. In verse 6, he goes on, the sun will not harm you by day nor the moon by night. The use of day and night, indeed sun and moon, and what we've already seen at the beginning of the psalm, heaven and earth. This is quite a common Hebrew idiom that uses a pair of opposites to include everything in between. And the idea is to express totality. So heaven and earth, the picture being painted or the truth being described is everything.

So day and night is to describe everything or all time, every moment. And so what has been described is a care that we can enjoy that is, to use the word, comprehensive, the totality of daily life under the comprehensive care of the Lord. Day and night, dangers known and unknown, visible and invisible, anticipated and sudden. They're all covered. They're all covered by His watching over us with comprehensive care. We've got two more things we want to say. And the penultimate involves us, I think it's three actually, but let's get this right, fifth and sixth before we get to the last one, involve us jumping to verse 8. We'll come back to verse 7. But bear with me as we just jump to verse 8. And notice, first of all, one further characteristic of His care is that He watches over us with an all-encompassing care.

There in verse 8 we read, the Lord will watch over your coming and going. This language of coming and going does, of course, speak of travel. Sometimes the psalm is described as the traveler's psalm.

Perhaps in particular, the psalmist has in mind, as we've suggested already, the journey of the pilgrim as he makes his way to Jerusalem and indeed returns to his home. Perhaps there's a bigger picture in mind, and perhaps not only one. Perhaps the picture of the exile of God's people being exiled to Babylon and then returning to Jerusalem. Perhaps this also is in mind, depending on when the psalm was written. For us, it certainly covers the mundane daily commute, our comings and goings day by day. It covers the more significant journeys and changes that life brings. But the phrase, our coming and going, as in English, can be understood more broadly of all the comings and goings of life itself. All are under the watchful and encompassing care of the Lord. But then the psalmist ends with one final characteristic of the one who watches over us or the nature of his care, and that is that he watches over us with everlasting care. The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. Both now and forevermore. And I won't dwell on that or develop that. I'll simply ask you one question to ponder on. I wonder which of the two aspects referred to there bring you more comfort.

The evermore that he watches over you forevermore or the now part? I think depending on where we are and what our circumstances are, perhaps one or other is particularly comforting. Forevermore, there will never be a time when he won't watch over us. But for many of us, maybe the now is what we cling on to.

[29 : 35] It's not just something in the dim and distant future to look forward to, that in the future, then we will be under his care. No, both now and forevermore.

We jumped over verse 7, and we're going to return to verse 7, and with that kind of draw things to a close. And in verse 7, we're going to identify one further characteristic of this care that the Lord provides, the manner in which he watches over us. And the way I'm describing it is as follows. He watches over us with ultimate and purposeful care. Let's just read verse 7.

The Lord will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life. The Lord will keep you from all harm. Now, if we just pause for a moment and just think about what is being said there. I wonder if we're being honest with ourselves and with our life experience.

I wonder if our response to that might be something along the lines of, well, this sounds great, but is it really true? It sounds wonderful. The Lord will keep you from all harm. You think, well, that's great. And then you think, well, hang on a minute. That's not what's happening in my life.

That's not my experience. That's not what I see around about me with other Christians. Oh, it sounds wonderful. But is that really what happens? Is that my experience?

[31 : 09] The experience of God's people as recorded for us in the Bible and in our own personal experience is one of not being spared the harm that is part and parcel of the human experience. We get sick. We get sad. We know rejection and frustration. We lose our jobs and fail exams and ultimately we die.

These are things that we all experience. We're not spared any of these things. So what do we make of what the psalmist says? Are they just soothing words to misquote Shakespeare, a tale told by a fool, full of flight and fancy, signifying nothing? Is that the reality? Fine, soothing words, but in the real world, they just don't echo with experience. Well, by no means.

And the reason why we can say by no means is that we can recognize or we need to recognize that in saying what he's saying, the psalmist is talking about what we might call our ultimate well-being.

And that's why I've described this as he watches over us with ultimate or purposeful care. His concern, the one who watches over us, his concern is our life in the deepest and broadest sense.

Some translations opt for the word soul there rather than life at the end of verse 7. A life that encompasses more than our immediate physical circumstances, not that these are unimportant. What we can say with confidence, not only on the grounds of what the psalm says, but as we enrich what the psalm says with the broader teaching of the Bible, what we can say with confidence is that we will suffer no harm that is random or purposeless.

[33 : 03] All is part of a bigger picture with a bigger purpose. But even in the harm, if we want to use the word or the hurt that we do endure, the Lord is still watching over us and will continue watching over us till we are brought home. In speaking about this very psalm, the reformer, John Calvin, says the following, the prophet does not, identifying the author of the psalm, the prophet does not, however, promise to the faithful a condition of such felicity and comfort as implies exemption from all trouble. He only for the purpose of assuaging or relieving their sorrows, sets before them this consolation that being interested in the divine favor, being in a right relationship with God, if you wish, they shall be secure from all deadly harm, from all deadly harm. Indeed, Jude commends believers to such a God and to such keeping, to such watching over in his doxology with which he ends his letter. To him who is able to keep you, to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy, the only God our Savior, be glory, majesty, power, and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord before all ages now and forevermore.

Amen. And so we have all these multifaceted and overlapping characteristics of this care and protection of the manner in which the Lord watches over his own. But we close with this final question.

Could he watch over me? Will he watch over me? Can he watch over you? Where can you sign up for this quality of care? What way has been opened up for the likes of us to know and experience God as our heavenly and paternal protector and watcher over? Do we have to ascend to heaven to secure his ear and his help? Rather, he has come down from heaven to help us, to be our helper and protector and watcher over?

He has come down in the person of his one and only Son. In Jesus, we meet face to face the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, who has come down to help us. He came to provide help and care for the weak, for the vulnerable, for the frightened, for the marginalized, and for the guilty, for sinners others like you and me. He has come down to help us. And what can we do in response? Well, what we need to do is embrace the one who has come to help us. The arms that were outstretched at Calvary to secure your pardon and peace and shalom remain outstretched to receive you and to watch over you. And so what you need to do and what we all need to do is to cry out for help with the Canaanite woman who's spoken of in the New Testament and the Gospels, we can come and kneel and cry out or whisper or mumble or groan, Lord, help me. Lord, help me.

And that cry or whisper secures for us a welcome into the very family of God and the right, yes, even the right to that place of safety and security under the shadow of the Almighty.

[37 : 02] And so may we all cry out in that manner, Lord, help me. Let's pray. Our Lord, we acknowledge you as the maker of heaven and earth. We acknowledge you as the one who tenderly and powerfully watches over his own. And we thank you that we can be counted among your own.

As we are enabled to put our trust in your Son, Jesus, as our Savior. And we pray that that would indeed be true of us, that we would be those who are trusting in Jesus, that we would be enabled day by day and indeed every day to cry out, Lord, help me. I acknowledge my need. I acknowledge that I stand in absolute need of the help that only you can give. And I come seeking it and finding it.

We thank you that you're a God who delights to answer such a prayer. You're a God who immediately responds to all who in faith come seeking your help. And so we come and so we ask, Lord, help me. Amen.

Amen.