

## **The Sole Keeper of Souls**

(Psalm 121)

12/28/16; Wed PM Pine Grove

### **Introduction**

Take your Bibles out tonight and turn to Psalm 121.

As we gather for the final time as a church in 2021,  
I thought it appropriate to look to new year in the  
book of Psalms.

So let's read Psalm 121 together.

Psalm 121

A Song of Ascents.

***1 I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; From  
where shall my help come?***

***2 My help comes from the Lord, Who made heav-  
en and earth.***

***3 He will not allow your foot to slip;  
He who keeps you will not slumber.***

***4 Behold, He who keeps Israel  
Will neither slumber nor sleep.***

***5 The Lord is your keeper;  
The Lord is your shade on your right hand.***

***6 The sun will not smite you by day,  
Nor the moon by night.***

***7 The Lord will [a]protect you from all evil;  
He will keep your soul.***

## 8

*The Lord will [b]guard your going out and your coming in  
From this time forth and forever.*

Let us pray.

The next time we gather will be January 2 of 2022.

It is amazing when I consider another year come and gone in my life.

As the old saying goes, “the days are long but the years are short.”

And I can testify to the apparent shortness of time as I am set to turn 48 in this new year.

Yet while I am old man to some of y’all, I am a young man to others.

Some of you have seen many more New Year’s Day than I have.

Yet each passing year brings a sense of joy to our hearts.

Some will shoot fireworks at night to express their excitement of a new year.

Some will eat black-eyed peas and collard in hopes a new year filled with financial prosperity.

While others will go into the new year with great anxiety over what lies ahead.

I think back to to New Year's Day 2020 which began with such promise but ended with a world world covered in masks and governments mandating vaccinations.

So we truly live in interesting times, and who knows what 2022 holds.

So in light of such uncertainty around us in terms of a new year, it is wise to turn to the certainty of God's word as we look forward to a new year.

Therefore, we come to the book of Psalms, the hymnbook of the nation Israel.

Yet it was a hymnbook of absolute truth to be trusted in the shadow of an uncertain world.

Israel sang these hymns unto the Lord as they lived in fallen world.

And our hearts can find comfort and truth in these psalms as we live in the same fallen world of the 21st century.

Psalms 121 is a unique psalm within the Psalter, which in another name for this collection of 150 psalms.

It is unique due to its inspired title of a Song of Ascents.

We have talked about these psalms before, but they are the songs that Israel sang as they climbed up to Jerusalem for the 3 annual festivals of the Jews.

As they ascended the mountain to the city of Jerusalem, they would sing as they went.

For starters, it was a festive occasion.

The first festival was the Passover, where Israel celebrated and feasted in order to remember the Lord's deliverance of them from the land of Egypt.

That trip up to Jerusalem would occur in the spring.

The second pilgrimage to Jerusalem occurred in late spring of early summer for the festival of Pentecost, where Jews celebrated the first harvest each year by giving praise to the Lord.

And then the third festival was the Feast of Booths in the fall, where Israel would go to Jerusalem to remember God's goodness in protecting their ancestors in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land.

So as they traveled and climbed and approached Jerusalem, the people would sing to Lord.

In my childhood, we played games in the car.

We played Spud, where you got a point for every Volkswagen Beetle that you could spot.

We played games where you pick a color of a car, and then counted how many of that color you passed in the next 2 miles.

We played board games because you didn't have to buckle in.

Today, we are often entertained by our phones as we travelled.

But Israel used the time to sing to Lord, which kept their minds distracted from the difficult walking nad climbing but also filled their heart with love of the Lord as they prepared to enter His city and offer praise to Him in a weeklong festival.

Now, Jerusalem is almost 2700 feet above sea level...

So, it didn't matter where you were coming from in Israel for these festivals, it required you to go "up" to Jerusalem to celebrate them..

Therefore, these “songs of ascent” would be sung by Jews coming from the north, south, east, and west as they approached the holy city.

And all of these songs are recoded for us in Psalm 120 - 134.

Furthermore, these psalms of ascent followed a clear pattern...

There would be trouble in one psalm, then a call to trust in the next psalm followed by a scene of triumph in the third psalm...

Since Psalm 121 is the second Song of Ascent, it is call to trust in the Lord, and that is a very appropriate theme for a new year.

While we aren't sure what the new year will bring specifically, I can assure you that something in the new year will test your trust in the Lord.

So let's prepare our hearts for the new year by affirming our utmost trust in the Lord of all creation and the Lord of our soul.

And we will affirm that trust in the Lord by traveling with Israel up to Jerusalem singing a Song of Ascents.

I have divided this psalm into two parts., The God Who Helps and the God Who Keeps.

Let's begin in verses 1 and 2 with..

### **I. The God Who Helps (1-2)**

***1 I will lift up my eyes to the mountains;  
From where shall my help come?***

Now as this psalm begins, it is apparent that the one traveling to Jerusalem is in some kind of trouble.

In fact, he is looking for help.

And the obvious question is what does he need help with?

Well for starters, the travel up to Jerusalem was no walk in the park.

There would be the threat of wild animal attacks.

There would be the threat of robbers along the way.

The fact that all Jews were required to come up to Jerusalem 3 times a year made life easier for criminals.

They simply hid among the hills knowing that multiple people would be passing by each day on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Then as we get deeper in this psalm, there are also the physical dangers of climbing up a mountain.

Though paths would be well traveled, many were narrow or near the edge of cliffs and all that would be made worse by rainy weather.

So there is a real need for the Lord's help as the Jews set out from all over Israel to head to Jerusalem.

If you remember, I mentioned that the the pattern of the psalms of ascent is the first psalm is a trouble, followed by a psalm of trust, followed by a psalm of triumph.

So look back at Psalm 120 for a minute.

***1 In my trouble I cried to the Lord,  
And He answered me.***

***2 Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips,  
From a deceitful tongue.***

***3 What shall be given to you, and what more shall  
be done to you,  
You deceitful tongue?***

***4 Sharp arrows of the warrior,  
With the burning coals of the broom tree.***

***5 Woe is me, for I sojourn in Meshech,  
For I dwell among the tents of Kedar!***

***6 Too long has my soul had its dwelling  
With those who hate peace.***



***7 I am for peace, but when I speak,  
They are for war.***

You see two areas mentioned there.

Meshech and Kedar.

Let me show you 2 maps of their location in the ancient world.

Kedar would be in modern day Jordan or Saudi Arabia and Meshech would be modern day Turkey.

And the point of Psalm 120 is that the psalmist is headed to Jerusalem but he first has to survive getting out of his native land.

The people of Kedar and Meshech liked to fight, but all the psalmist wanted a peaceful trip to Jerusalem.

So Psalm simply says there is trouble in travel if you live among sinful people.

And look, this is true today.

There is trouble in simply traveling because there are sinful people out there.

So getting back to Psalm 121, there is help needed in just up the mountain into Jerusalem.

But that help is found as the psalmist looks up to Jerusalem.

Now to be clear, this is not teaching that creation is a source of help or that the city of Jerusalem is a source of help.

Or even that the temple in Jerusalem is a source of help.

All of those things, the city, the temple are symbols of the true source of help and that help is named outright in verse 2.

***2 My help comes from the Lord,  
Who made heaven and earth.***

To make it even more clear that the psalmist is not superstitious about the hill of Jerusalem as the source of his help, he writes that the LORD is the maker of the heaven and earth.

The One who had the power to make the hills and set Jerusalem on the hill is the One who has the power to help the Jewish pilgrim make up that hill safely.

So what you see in verse 2 is an affirmation of the psalmist's trust.

The Lord is his help.

The Lord of all creation is his protector and defender and protector as he leaves home and sets out for Jerusalem.

In other words, God helps as we live in a world surrounded by unbelievers, in world where animal attacks and natural disasters are possible, in a world where evil people commit crimes.

And let me tell you the church seems to have forgotten that in the past 2 years as COVID has been described as something unprecedented in our world.

But let me tell you that it is not.

Imagine living in a world where your neighbors would love to catch you outside to kill you for sport.

Imagine living in a world where you walked everywhere, sometimes in total wilderness and sometimes in total darkness.

Imagine living in a world where you took your family, everyone one of them including the infants and toddlers up a mountain on tiny paths to worship the Lord 3 times a year.

These people would laugh at our culture today where every new virus is a reason to stay at home.

Look, no matter the form of the danger, our help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

This is the cry of God's people in every age.

The threats and risks may change every year, but the source of help is the same in every age.

Our help comes from the Lord.

Now does this mean that God will protect His people in every situation of life?

Are you promised that you will be safe from a terrorist bomb or a criminal's gun or a the latest virus?

And the answer to that is clearly no..

Believers die at the hands of evil people...

Believers die from viral illnesses.

It is highly likely that some Israelites died on their annual trips up to Jerusalem.

But does that mean that God failed to help them?

Absolutely not.

God is our help, and death for the believer is simply entrance into His presence.

The simple principle of this psalm is that our trust is in the Lord and not in ourselves in times of danger.

If God has purposed for us to live through times of attack and persecution, we will...

If God has purposed for us to survive a pandemic, we will.

Our trust is in Him whether we live or suffer or die..

The unbeliever has one source of trust and that is in himself..

Believers trust in the Lord...

The Jew traveling to Jerusalem for these 3 festivals had every reason to believe that the journey would be too difficult...

There was the danger of injury or the attack of robbers or health concerns brought on by such long distances...

They had every reason to think they wouldn't make it, but they had one reason to believe they would and that was the protection of the Lord...

And we have every reason to think that we won't have the help to make it through each day, but we know where our help comes from and that is the Lord, maker of heaven and earth...

Charles Spurgeon said that the Lord would rather watch the heavens and earth be left without help than to leave one of his children without help..

The Lord is our help, but He is not only our helper, He is also our keeper...

Let's look at verses 3-8...

## **II. The God Who Keeps (3-8)**

Verse 3

**3**

***He will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps  
you will not slumber.***

**4**

***Behold, He who keeps Israel  
Will neither slumber nor sleep.***

The first part of verse 3 had a very literal meaning to the Jews making their way up to Jerusalem...

Because the foot paths up to the city were often very narrow and treacherous...

Here is a modern day picture of the road from Jericho up to Jerusalem.

This is treacherous land.

Here is another picture of the side of a mountain outside of Jerusalem.

Literally, one slip of your foot could very well mean death for the ancient Jewish traveller..

Along the narrow mountain paths, every step must be protected by the Lord..

Every time a foot was placed on the ground, the Lord must put in there...

Reminds us of Psalm 23, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear not evil for you are with me...

The same is true of our life...

We can go and do and live to serve the Lord because he goes with us, guiding our steps and protecting our footing...

He won't let our feet slip even on slippery places...

That is why you can have confidence wherever the Lord sends you in life...

If the Lord keeps your foot in place, you will be as safe on the high and narrow mountaintop path as you are in the flat green grass of the valley below...

Your footing is sure because the Lord is your non-slip grip...

And on top of that promise is the comfort of the second part of verse 3....

God never rests in His protection of others because He never sleeps nor slumbers...

You may remember the Exxon Valdez crash of 1989 where 250,000 barrels of oil were spilled into the ocean when an oil super tanker ship crashed into an Alaskan coastline..

After months of investigation, it was determined that the man responsible for steering the ship away from the coastline had actually fallen asleep at the wheel allowing the ship to crash into the rocky coast....

His name was Gregory Cousins, and he had just worked a 22 hour shift...

As they left port, Cousins fell asleep behind the wheel and the ship crashed spilling up to 38 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound that killed an incredible amount of wildlife and fish...

Though he was cleared of charges, Cousins error led to more stringent regulations on shift length and sleep deprivation..

Clearly, falling asleep has led to numerous accidents and deaths over the years...

Humans need sleep, but when they sleep on the job or sleep at times they need to be awake, problems occur and sometimes death is the outcome...

Our God never sleeps at the wheel or on the job...



In fact, we can go to sleep because He never does...

In fact, we can sleep well because God never sleeps at all...

The story is told of a cruise ship captain that was taking his family on a trip with him in the 1940s..

It was right before school started back, and the family was gonna get a little rest and time with dad before regular schedule resumed...

Well, once out to sea, the ship was surrounded by a strong hurricane...

And it was being tossed and turned all over the place...

The captain's family was awoken during the night with by the huge waves....

The captain's wife was panicking and grabbing all her children around her....

The youngest daughter asked her mom....

"Where's Daddy? the daughter asked her mom.

"Sweetie, he's on deck holding the wheel of the ship" her terrified mother responded...

"Ok, mom. Then I am going back to bed." And that is exactly what she did...

Where she slept calmly through the night and woke  
to calm seas the next morning....

That is the comfort we have as we lay our heads  
down in a troubled world...

If our Father is at the wheel, what do we really have  
to fear?

He will never sleep or slumber, and he will keep  
those safe in his care...

In verse 5, the psalmist calls God shade for His  
children...

## 5

***The Lord is your keeper;***

***The Lord is your shade on your right hand.***

The land of Israel is largely desert, and the sun only  
adds to the misery of traveling in the desert...

Walking to Jerusalem during the day would be brutal  
on the body...

The sun drains the life out of a person and can even  
lead to death from sunstroke and exhaustion, yet  
God is the traveller's shade...

He is their protection from the elements...

He is the umbrella of protection...

When it rains, he keeps His people dry and when the sun bears down, he gives much needed shade and protection...

And He is a shade to his people in every situation as well...

Look what the psalmist writes in verse 6...

## **6**

***The sun will not smite you by day, Nor the moon by night.***

The language of verse 6 even suggests that God is a shade from the harmful effects of the sun and moon...

WE all understand the harmful effects of the sun...

Exhaustion, heat stroke, blindness, skin problems...

But it has even been show that sleeping under the moon can lead to eyesight problems as well...

It can hinder sleep cycles....

It can even create facial distortions...

Ship captains often reported that sailors who slept on deck all night under a full moon would wake up with the faces paralyzed for a time...

Long story short, there are dangers from the sun and moon at all hours of the day, but there are also dangers in the world 24 hours a day...

Evil never sleeps, but God is our shade of protection and He never sleeps either...

To the one who was walking up to Jerusalem at all hours of the day and night, verse 5 and 6 was the source of comfort whether they were standing on the side of a slippery mountain at high noon....

Or sleeping out in the open at midnight with predators all around...

God was their shade of protection...

The psalmist then adds this line in verse 7...

***7 The Lord will [a]protect you from all evil;***

In case there were dangers not listed in the psalm that go beyond dangerous travel and and problems from the sun and moon,....

The psalmist simply adds this line to calm our fears...

Whatever is evil is out there that I have failed to mention, this is a guarantee that God will protect you from it...

This is like the little disclaimer at the bottom of a warranty that simply reads...

If you have ANY problems with this product that haven't been mentioned above, please return for a full refund...

And then the best assurance of the entire psalm...

***He will keep your soul.***

**8**

***The Lord will [b]guard your going out and your coming in***

***From this time forth and forever..***

It is a man or woman's soul that is clearly the most valuable to keep...

You can harm our bodies..

You can take our lives...

But God is the keeper of our souls...

Our flesh and our body are dying anyway, but our soul is eternal...

Everybody has smart phones these days and the first accessory purchased is usually a hard case since the phone is so fragile..

I even bought a screen made of glass to stick on the actual phone screen...

And the purpose is this...

If the phone falls, it will only break the first layer of glass, which i can peel off and replace for \$6...

If it falls without a protector, I will have to replace the actual phone glass which will be \$100 or more...

Our bodies are not that valuable in their fallen state...

Yes, we want to keep them working their best because life is more enjoyable and ministry is less hindered by a healthy body...

But we realize that we aren't trying to hold onto our bodies in this life....

They are going away very fast...

They are fragile and breakable..

But what we really need protected is what is under our bodies of flesh and bone and that is our soul...

And the truth is that our souls are under the protection of God Himself...

He does work to protect us physically... He works to keep our feet from slipping...

He works to protect us from the sun and moon and all sorts of evil....

He works to protect us as we go out into the world and back from the world..

Yet, we know that Christians can fall to the evil actions or natural disasters in the world...

However, we find our peace in that God keeps our soul in His hands...

The part of us that is truly irreplaceable is in the hands of the maker of it...

And that is a source of comfort for the traveller on dangerous roads up to Jerusalem....

And that is a source of comfort to us in the dangerous world even as new year approaches.

## **Conclusion**

Let's end tonight with a few thoughts on this psalm for our lives..

***#1 - 2022 may not be a good year for you, but God is a good God to you.***

Over the next few days, you will be hearing about the hope of a new year..

Nearly everyone looks with anticipation to a fresh start....

And though I am not here to be the new year downer, we all know that not everyone will have a great 2022...

There will be pain in the year ahead because the world is broken and awaits the return of Christ to fix it all...

Yet, even though we aren't guaranteed a better year as believers, we are guaranteed that our Lord will never leave us helpless or unprotected....

He is our helper and keeper whether we are walking up to Jerusalem or riding down I-20...

***#2 - The keeping of your soul is the only guarantee you have, but also the only guarantee you need.***



In a world where I can't guarantee any of you much of anything in a new year, I can guarantee you that your soul is in perfect hands if you are saved tonight...

Your world may be turned upside down in the next year...

Neither you nor I have any idea what is ahead...

But your soul won't be lost if you are in Christ...

The fallen world and evil people can pretty take anything we have, but they can't touch our souls and they can't take our salvation...

My prayer is that your new year is a year of blessing and growing in the Lord...

But my only guarantee is that this time next year, your soul will still be in the hands of God regardless of where you are...

Let us pray..