

## **The Sole Keeper of Souls**

(Psalm 121)

12/28/16; Wed PM Pine Grove

### **Introduction**

Many of us made pilgrimages to see family over the past few days at Christmas...

We were in Clinton, Greenwood, and Greenville over the past week..

We got a meal and a present at every place, but part of the adventure was being in the car together on the way...

An hour or two filled with managing the kids in the backseat, taking bathroom breaks and stopping for snacks..

That is simply a part of it, and though we complain about it, we have it good...

Nice roads and highways and reliable cars allow us to journey 100s of miles in a day in relative comfort..

Where we can have heat if its cold outside and cool air if its hot outside while listening to music in comfortable seats..

Though many of us dread travel, we have a great advantage over our ancestors who didn't have those luxuries in their cars...

And we hold a great advantage over the people who traveled before the automobile was even invented..

Where the main form of transportation was your feet...

It is estimated that people in ancient civilizations walked 12-15 per day as part of daily life..

Israel was no stranger to walking in the OT..

The nation walked out Egypt and eventually made it to the Promised Land which was a journey of 250 miles or so..

Daily life for most Jews required foot travel from place to place.

It was part of their culture...

Also a part of their culture were 3 festivals that every Jews celebrated each year..

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

Another festival was Pentecost or Festival of First Fruits, where Jews celebrated the first harvest each year...

And the third festival was the Feast of Booths, where Jews celebrated to remind themselves of God's faithfulness as they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years...

Now, all of these festivals took place in Jerusalem, and if you know anything about the geography of Israel...

You know that Jerusalem is almost 2700 feet above sea level...

Therefore, 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..

And since you had to walk it, the 3 trips up to Jerusalem each year were a family affair and even a national road trip for most of the Jews in Israel...

And as the people journeyed up to Jerusalem, they often sang songs...

And these songs were mostly written by anonymous people who were moved by the Holy Spirit to write them...

And they were recorded for us toward the end of the book of Psalms from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134...

And they are called the psalms of ascent, which simply means songs of climbing...

And that is exactly what happened as these Jews made their way to these 3 festivals each year..

They climbed the hills that led to Jerusalem...

They ascended them and they sang and prayed to the Lord as they went..

And 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...

Tonight, we are going to look at one of these psalms of ascent in Psalm 121, which would be the second psalm in this smaller section of the book of Psalms...

And I chose this psalm for us to look at as we go into a new year...

On Saturday night, we will go into a new year as the clock strikes midnight and we enter 2017...

And though we all go there with hope of a better year, we also go into knowing that our world is probably not getting any safer...

I don't go out on a limb when I tell you that there will be more terror attacks in 2017...

And some may even be closer to home than others as the US becomes a better target for evil people...

I don't go out on a limb when I tell you that there will be devastating floods, hurricanes, storms and fires in 2017...

We all know these things will happen...

And I didn't bring you here to rain on your parade...

I truly hope that 2017 will be a great year for us all as we grow in our walk with the Lord....

I pray that our church will grow spiritually and numerically in 2017.

But we all know that the world is not getting any better...

And we all know that the world is fallen and accidents happen and disasters and acts of violence occur...

So, I thought it best to go into 2017 with what I consider to be a psalm of great comfort and hope in a world that is filled with pain and tragedy...

So, let's look at Psalm 121 tonight as we prepare to enter 2017 and Israel prepared to enter Jerusalem for the celebrations...

And let's remind ourselves that we can go nowhere without the Lord going with us..

And guiding us and leading us and watching over us...

And we can do nothing in the new year without the Lord's help and blessing, no matter how great we think our plans are..

I have divided this psalm into two parts...

I. The God Who Helps (1-2)

II. The God Who Keeps (3-8)

So, let's read this whole psalms and then we will look at each individual part...

*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 heaven 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's begin in verses 1-2 with...

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

In verses 1-2, it seems as if the Jewish traveler hasn't quite made it to Jerusalem yet...

But he is able to see it in the distance and he simply says that he lifts his eyes to the mountains to remind him that his help is found there...

This is a reference to a idol on a mountain....

It is simply the Israeli seeing the city of Jerusalem in the distance and the temple there as a sign of the presence of the Lord...

Obviously, the Lord is everywhere at all times...

He is omnipresent, but from a human perspective, they saw Jerusalem and specifically the temple as the the dwelling place of God..

The temple mount symbolized the help of the Most High God to the Jew...



We do that in some ways as we see church buildings and even people in our lives as symbols of God's presence with us...

We know that God is as much in this building as He is in your home or at the mall or the grocery store, but even we associate the presence of the Lord with a church building at times...

The Jews were very similar to us as they associated God with the temple in Jerusalem...

Now, the question is...

Why did the Jewish traveler need help?

If you go back to Psalm 120, you will see that some Jews lived among their enemies and traveled through enemy lands as they walked to Jerusalem....

In Psalm 120, the traveller is in need of help from the enemies who surrounded them as they walked, and in Psalm 121, they are reminded of who is there to help them...

It is the Lord who made heavens and earth...

And that fact alone was source of comfort because it reminded them that their God was powerful...

He was powerful enough to create everything out of nothing, so surely, he had the power to keep them safe as they travelled to Jerusalem...

And that same power is what keeps us safe as we travel in the world and live out our lives in a very evil age

Not just road trips and family vacations but as we drive in our cars to work...

As we visit crowded shopping malls and interact with people in restaurants and grocery stores...

We don't know who may be our enemy in those places, yet we trust the Lord in those situations...

Now, the obvious question is this?

Is this a promise 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?

And the answer to that is clearly no..

Christians die at the hands of evil people...

The disciples were all killed for their preaching and teaching about Christ..

The simple principle of this psalm and other verses like this in the Bible 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...

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 not only our helper, but also our keeper...

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

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

And that is important because what good is help if it doesn't have the ability to protect and keep you safe...

That's like a fire truck that is first to the scene of fire but has no water...

Or a life boat that has a hole in it...

God is first on the scene to rescue His people, and He comes with the ability to keep them safe....

Look at verses 3-4...

**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 real meaning to the Jews making their way up to Jerusalem...

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

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 ben 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 the 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...

We 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 we end ourselves in as 2017 approaches..

## **Conclusion**

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

**#1 - 2017 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 2017...

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..