

THE WORSHIPPER'S HOPE
PSALM 121

The older I get, the more I realize I am prone to forgetfulness. I don't usually lose my keys or glasses, but I often forget things like appointments (which is why I am thankful for my Google calendar), tasks that I need to do, what I need to buy at the grocery store, and why I might be in a particular room (I have been known to do multiple circle/spins in a room, hoping to spot the reason why I walked into the room).

I'm forgetful, but at least at this point I'm thankful that I remember that I'm forgetful. I'm worried about the day that I don't remember that I don't remember very well.

You and I are also prone to spiritual forgetfulness. And I suppose it has always been that way. For instance, the apostle Peter says several times in his second letter that his purpose is to remind his readers of the reality of who they are and what they have in Christ:

- ✓ Therefore I intend always to *remind* you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of *reminder*... (2 Pt. 2:12-13; my emphasis)
- ✓ This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of *reminder*, that you should *remember* the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles... (2 Pt. 3:1-2; my emphasis)

You and I need those reminders. And this morning as we come to the communion table, we need a reminder of the greatness of our God. And this week as our church body has experienced a great tragedy, we need to be reminded of the greatness and power and care of our God.

To remind myself, and you, of the provision and protection of our God, I want to draw your attention to one of the ascent psalms — in fact, it is my favorite of those psalms, and perhaps one of my favorites of all the psalms — Psalm 121.

In this song that the Israelite pilgrims would sing as they went to worship in Jerusalem, the psalmist simply reminds those worshipers that,

GOD PRESERVES HIS PEOPLE IN ALL THEIR TRIALS.

This psalm points us to the character of God and four ways that He preserves His people. Where is our hope in our trials? Our hope is in God. Specifically...

1. God is the Creator Who SUSTAINS His People (vv. 1-2)
2. God is the Keeper Who PROTECTS His People (vv. 3-4)
3. God is the Keeper Who COMFORTS His People (vv. 5-6)
4. God is the Keeper ALWAYS Watches Over His People (vv. 7-8)

1. God is the Creator Who SUSTAINS His People (vv. 1-2)

- As this song begins, the psalmist asks a question. We do well to remember the setting of that question.
 - ✓ He is on his way to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the three annual festivals. And to get to Jerusalem he will have to travel through the mountains and as he approaches the mountains he says, ***I will lift up my eyes to the mountains.*** He looks to the mountains and he sees trouble.
 - ✓ He is not worried about the problem of climbing over the mountains as they are not that high (for instance, the Mt. of Olives outside Jerusalem is only about 2700 ft. above sea level and only about 100 ft. higher than Jerusalem). The problem is not topographical.
 - ✓ The problem he anticipates is from those who seek to do harm to him. The mountains were places where thieves hid to rob travelers and where evil people stayed to do physical harm to pilgrims.
 - ✓ You and I might think of the mountains as places of refuge and peace; he sees the mountains as places where trouble awaits him. They make him fearful.
 - ✓ In fact, the trouble of the traveler is a common theme in these ascent psalms: 120:1a, 2; 123:3-4; 124:2-5; 126:1, 4; 129:1-3; 130:1. These verses speak of contempt and ridicule, imprisonment and bondage, persecution, and near death experiences. And while we are prone to exaggerate our problems, these things all exist in our fallen world. People hate us and there are troubles and trials that are the result of our own sin, the sins of others against us, and the fallenness of creation. We live in a difficult world and we will have trouble in it.
- And the problem of the mountains is also that there appears to be no help for him to make it safely through the mountains on his journey. That's why he asks the question, ***From where shall my help come?*** There was no police force or sheriff's department to guide and protect him. There were no emergency services to call if he was injured by accident or by attack. There was no AAA to call. His point is that he was *alone*.
 - ✓ In fact, the word **help** is sometimes used to refer to military help. In the Psalms, it is usually used for personal assistance (72:12). But neither of those kinds of help exist for him.
 - ✓ As the psalmist surveys the mountains, he doesn't see anyone to help him.
 - ✓ You know what this is like, don't you? We grieve over broken relationships and unsaved loved ones and too much month and not enough money and another car repair (and house repair) and rebellious teenagers and prolonged illness and untimely death. We are surrounded by mountains of trouble just like the worshippers of Israel were surrounded by literal trouble in the mountains.
 - ✓ One preacher said, "There are only three types of people in the world: those who were in serious trouble yesterday, or those who are in serious trouble today, or those who will get a phone call tonight."
 - ✓ Jonathan Edwards spoke for all of us when he said, "As to my own circumstances, I still meet with trouble and expect no other as long as I live in this world."

- ✓ This has always been the way it is for people — and seemingly even more for God’s people. Read through Hebrews 11 and you find God’s most able and faithful servants afflicted by trouble. They weren’t spared trouble because of their faithfulness, but they seemed to have even more of it. And the writer concludes the chapter with these words: **Heb. 11:36-40**.
- ✓ Because of passages like that, John Piper has written:

“Existence in this fallen world will not be pain-free and trouble-free. There will be groaning because of our finitude and fallenness, and many afflictions because of our calling...Frustration is normal, disappointment is normal, sickness is normal. Conflict, persecution, danger, stress — they are all normal. The mindset that moves away from these will move away from reality and away from Christ.” [*Roots of Endurance*, 19.]

- So where will one turn in such affliction? I want you to notice that the psalmist answers himself in v. 2 — **My help comes from the Lord**. He knows the answer to his despair and he tells himself (and the other travelers with him) that his only help is YAHWEH. Only YHWH is God and only He can help.
 - ✓ The name YHWH is the name God uses to establish His covenant with Israel. It denotes His particular love for His people and His trustworthiness. And it is worth noting that this name is used of God 5x in this psalm (vv. 2, 5 [2x], 7, 8), and it is the only name used for God in this psalm.
 - ✓ This is the same truth that the psalmist affirms in **86:17**.
 - ✓ And to affirm that God is adequate to help, the pilgrim points the other worshippers to the creative power of God — YHWH is the one **who made Heaven and earth**. His point is really quite simple: if God could create the universe, He is also adequate to sustain the universe. He didn’t create the world and all people in it and then throw His own hands up in question and despair and ask, “What have I done...what will I do?...” If He made the world and He made us, He has ability to care for us and He has love and desire to care for us.
 - ✓ “The one who is sovereign over every realm is my helper!” The Creator is the comforter!
 - ✓ “Here is living help: primary, personal, wise, immeasurable” [Kidner] (Is. 44:6f)
 - ✓ What the psalmist has done in these opening two verses is he has addressed his soul. He is tempted to despondency and despair and he has commanded himself to look to God, much as another psalmist did in **42:5**. I find what Martyn Lloyd-Jones says about this to be so helpful:

I say that we must talk to ourselves instead of allowing ‘ourselves’ to talk to us! Do you realize what that means? I suggest that the main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual depression in a sense is this, that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self...Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man’s treatment was this; instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. ‘Why art thou cast down, O my soul?’ he asks. His soul had been depressing him,

crushing him. So he stands up and says: 'Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you'. Do you know what I mean? If you do not, you have had but little experience.

The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: 'Why art thou cast down' — what business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, say to yourself: 'Hope thou in God' — instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: 'I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance, who is also the health of my countenance and my God'. [*Spiritual Depression*, 20-21.]

- ✓ What the psalmist particularly is reminded himself of in both Ps. 42 and this psalm is the power, love, and sufficiency of God to care for the psalmist — and all God's people.
- ✓ From where will our help come? It comes from YHWH, the faithful covenant God and Creator!
- ✓ When we are in the valley of despair we need a reminder of God's great power and ability. And that's just where the rest of this psalm goes.

2. God is the Keeper Who **PROTECTS** His People (vv. 3-4)

- Notice that in vv. 1-2 the psalmist speaks in the first person — ***I...my...my***. But in vv. 3-8 he speaks in the second and third person — ***He...your...your...***. The question is whether the psalmist is in conversation with someone else: are vv. 3-8 the response of the priest to the psalmist's question? Or is the psalmist himself continuing to speak, applying v. 2 to the other worshippers and giving them something to sing in response to his declaration in v. 2? I believe it is probably best to see this all as one person speaking: he has made the declaration in v. 2 and now he applies it broadly.
- And what the psalmist particularly wants the worshippers to see is that the God who is omnipotent and sovereign is our **keeper**. This word means to exercise care over someone; he is the guardian of their souls. The word is sometimes used in military settings and means that God is the sentry that is always on duty over the one who belongs to Him. He is the security guard of the worshipper's soul.
- And notice that this word is used 6x in this psalm (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7 [2x], 8); God's ability and delight in keeping His people is the theme of the psalm.
- Notice how God protects His people:
 - ✓ ***He will not allow your foot to slip*** — Here he is speaking of protection from calamities related to living in the natural world. It would be easy for a traveler to slip on a rock, fall, and break an ankle or leg — a potentially crippling accident in that day. And the psalmist says that God is caring for the traveling pilgrim to keep him from suffering such disasters.

- ✓ But God keeps in another way as well — ***He who keeps you will not slumber*** (vv. 3 and 4). Here he is not referring to physical ailments; he is talking about harm that can come from others who seek to hurt us. And we are most vulnerable when we are asleep — we cannot see or hear the attacker and we do not have the strength to fend them off. But God is awake and watching.
- ✓ Some guards have slept on duty. Pagan gods were allowed to sleep (1 Kg. 18:27). Not God. The One who is infinite in power does not need sleep, does not sleep and cannot sleep.
- ✓ Have you ever wondered why you need to sleep? Isn't it odd that God, who created us, didn't create us to function 24 hours a day? He could have made us able to work without sleep. But he didn't. He made us dependent on sleep (very regularly!). In fact, it seems almost "unwise:" we sleep almost 1/3 of our lives — wouldn't we be much more productive for Him if we were awake all those hours? Wouldn't it be better to be sleepless? No — God makes us to sleep (and similarly, dependent on food) so that every 24 hours we are reminded that we are not God. We need sleep and He does not. We cannot protect ourselves but He can protect us. We are fallible, but He is trustworthy. He designed sleep to remind us of our dependence and His provision.
- ✓ I want you to notice one more thing about this God who protects His people:
 - In v. 3 it says, "he who watches over you," leaving the pronoun "he" undefined.
 - In v. 4 it defines "him" more — he is the one ***who keeps Israel***. In other words, this One not only watches over the individual worshipper, but He is also powerful enough to keep the entire nation of Israel (all of His people are preserved by Him).
 - In v. 5 the psalmist completes the picture — ***The Lord is your keeper!*** It is the covenant keeping God of Israel (YHWH) who is the keeper of the individual worshipper. He is attentive to and guarding him (and us) as if he was the only individual on the planet.
- Listen friends to the great truth of this psalm — God not only does not sleep, but He is always vigilant and on duty guarding and protecting you and your life from all influences of evil.
- God is the Creator who sustains His people and He is the keeper who protects His people, and...

3. God is the Keeper Who **COMFORTS** His People (vv. 5-6)

- The Lord doesn't only create us and sustain us. He also protects us. And he also provides us with the blessing of comfort in our troubles.
 - ✓ Again in v. 5 the psalmist says God is the worshipper's keeper, and here he says the benefit of God keeping us is that He gives ***shade on our right hand***.
 - ✓ The shade is not only a form of protection, but it is also comforting. And it comforts in two ways:
 - It is a shield against the heat of the day that is refreshing. When we need relief from the burning heat of the ***sun*** we find it in the shade, and the Lord provides that.
 - But the ***moon*** can also cause problems. At night the temperature might plummet and at night various terrors — real and imagined — can arrive; and the Lord comforts us in those.

- You know what this is like — a child calls out to his parents at 2:00 a.m. — “I’m afraid — there’s a monster under my bed!” And the Christian parent says, “Be still. Calm down. Let’s pray. God is here. God is watching. God is taking care of you. You can trust Him...” The presence of God as the keeper provides comfort to the unsettled child. And for us.
- Whatever your affliction today: a relational problem, a financial problem, or a health problem. A personal failure or a sin or an unfulfilled longing, hear what the psalmist is saying in this verse: the Lord is keeping you, guarding and protecting and watching so that you will not only be protected, but so that you will know His peace and comfort. Listen to some of His promises of comfort:

- *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (Jn. 14:27)*
 - *“...be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5b-6)*
 - *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.” (2 Cor. 1:3-5)*
- It is tempting when in these trials to assume God is dispassionate and uncaring: friend, this God who is the eternal sentry guarding our souls is also a compassionate father who comforts us in our weakness. The world will offer many substitutes to provide comfort (you know the list), but as the psalmist heads into the dangers of the mountains wants his fellow worshippers and us to know of the care of God who is tender towards His people and provides the protection and shade they need in each moment.
- God is the Creator who sustains His people and He is the keeper who protects His people, and He is the keeper who comforts His people, and...

4. God is the Keeper **ALWAYS** Watches Over His People (vv. 7-8)

- Not only *does* God keep/protect His own; there is a promise of His *future* provision as well. Notice that the psalmist says **the Lord will protect (keep)...** So God is presently keeping (vv. 4-6), but He will also protect us in the future. And notice the kind of protection He will provide —
 - ✓ God will protect from **all evil** — from all sorts of calamity: evil (sin), distress, misery, and injury.
 - ✓ And notice very carefully how he will keep us from evil — the psalmist says **He will keep your soul**. That means that the spiritual life of the follower of God is protected.
 - David says it this way: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...” (Ps. 23:4).

- Peter says it this way: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pt. 1:3-5).
- Jesus says it this way: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28).
- ✓ So when our psalmist says that God will keep us **from all evil**, he does not mean that we will not experience hardship. But he does mean that evil will never prove victorious against God’s people for evil can never take life from the one who is made alive by God.
- ✓ As one writer says, this phrase does not imply a cushioned life, but a well-armed one.
- ✓ And notice where He will watch over and protect His people:
 - **YHWH will guard your going out and your coming in.** I think that the psalmist would have us think of Dt. 6:5-7. Where does God protect His people? Wherever they are!
 - In every activity of life (from time one leaves house until he returns) God watches over him.
 - This means God is concerned about and involved in every single activity of your life. There is nothing that happens to you that has escaped His notice and care. He is immersed in every activity of your life. And every circumstance of your life, in some way, demonstrates His compassionate watch-care and keeping and protecting of you.
- ✓ And notice also *when* He will watch over and protect His people:
 - **YHWH [will guard] from this time forth and forever.** His watch over you is unceasing.
 - No matter what your circumstance, your burden, or your mountain, if you are His, He is keeping you. He will not let you fall.
 - The only other thing we might note about this psalm is that it is only for genuine worshippers of God. The protective hand of God is only for those who belong to God. And the only way to belong to God is to believe in the Messiah promised in the Old Testament and revealed in the New Testament.
- ... This psalmist worshipped, trusting that the promises of the feasts he was traveling to Jerusalem to participate in, would ultimately be fulfilled in the Messiah.
- ... And we worship looking back at the fulfillment of Christ of all these promises. And the greatest way that Christ has cared for us is in taking care of the evil and sin in our lives by dying on the cross as the payment for our sin. Of all our problems, our sin is our greatest problem — and Christ absorbed the wrath of God against our sin so that when we believe in Him, asking Him to take away the penalty of sin against us and power of sin over us, he will do just that. That’s what it means to be a believer in Christ — to believe that Jesus is greater than our sin and that it’s better to want Him than to want our sin.
- ... If you do not believe in Him, then I urge you today to trust Him alone to save you from His wrath against you and your sin.

CONCLUSION: I like the way Warren Wiersbe has summarized the four sections of this psalm:

- ✓ My Father's creation is before me (vv. 1-2)
- ✓ My Father's eyes are on me (vv. 3-4)
- ✓ My Father's presence is beside me (vv. 5-6)
- ✓ My Father's care is around me (vv. 7-8)

Whatever your burden today, the Father's care is over you and with you. Don't despair. Run to Him.

In the foyer there is a framed wall hanging from David and Kerry Gibson from their time in Dimsisi, PNG. It is a quotation of Lk. 12:32 in Tok Pisin. In that passage, Jesus tells His followers of His care for His people (Lk. 12:27-31). And then He concludes in v. 32 — "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen to gladly give you the kingdom." He has granted eternal life to you who believe, so we need not fear anything else.

Wherever you are today and whatever your burdens are, God is keeping you and protecting you. As you look at the mountains of your life, do not despair, but see the Maker of the mountains and look to Him for your care. He will guard and keep you.

BENEDICTION: Jude 24-25.