

Psalm 121 - A song of ascents.

¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from?

² My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber;

⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵ The LORD watches over you – the LORD is your shade at your right hand;

⁶ the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.

⁷ The LORD will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life;

⁸ the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and for evermore.

Last week Jonathan outlined the psalms, divided into 5 Books, composed over a 700 year period from Moses 1400 BC to the time of the return to Israel in the days of Ezra about 650 BC. Many psalms were written by David, but there are other known authors like Moses, Solomon and Asaph and many unknown authors. Psalm 121 is one of the 15 psalms of ascent, meaning they start on a low note and end on a high note, but also that they start on the lower ground and lead up to the higher ground as worshippers approach Zion, the hill on which Jerusalem is built. They might start their walk from just outside the city or from much further away.

Last week's psalm 120 was pretty bleak, but this week's is much more encouraging. Psalms are songs of praise, inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, and cover almost all the emotional and physical states of mankind, coupled with revelation of the nature of God. This psalm is really is two parts: the first two verses the pilgrim's or worshipper's question and confession of faith, and the last six verses the response of the Lord God with His promises of blessing.

Verse 1 is a question, though in Hebrew, like English, a question is often the same as a statement, but just said in a questioning manner, and there is no punctuation in the Hebrew and Greek scrolls copied a thousand years ago. The Hebrew says in the second half of the verse "from where comes my help" and the Greek Septuagint "from where shall come my help".- the Greek uses future tense while the Hebrew the present tense. The first part "I will lift my eyes to the mountains" is future tense in Hebrew and past tense (I lifted my eyes) in Greek. One of the stories about the translation of the Hebrew into Greek in Alexandria in the reign of King Ptolemy II Philadelphus in around 270BC is that 72 scholars were put in separate rooms and got the identical result for the 5 books of Moses translated from each scholar's memory, as then as now, memorising the Torah was part of every boy's education.

"King Ptolemy once gathered 72 Elders. He placed them in 72 chambers, each of them in a separate one, without revealing to them why they were summoned. He entered each one's room and said: "Write for me the Torah of Moses, your teacher". God put it in the heart of each one to translate identically as all the others did."

Yet here we see that the first verse of Psalm 121 doesn't match the Hebrew when it comes to verb tenses! However, the meaning is pretty much the same. "From whence comes my help?" or "from where shall my help come?" gets the same answer. Help comes or will come from the Lord, the creator of heaven and earth. The psalmist makes a truthful statement of fact based on both knowledge and faith: the Lord helps those who turn towards Him, and God made the universe. Truthful facts are based on evidence, and every Israelite boy who knew the Torah, knew that the God of Israel made the heavens and earth because He said so. The escape from Egypt into the

promised land demonstrated the supernatural reality of God – a pillar of smoke by day and pillar of fire by night, which for decades guided the people in the wilderness; God also fed them for almost forty years with manna. While many will find the supernatural nature of God hard to believe, the witness evidence of those who told each generation what happened is reliable evidence when 72 Jews could each memorise exactly the first five books of the Bible.

The Lord is our helper, and this theme runs through the next six verses. The promise of help is amplified with the reason why help is always available.

³ *He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber;*

⁴ *indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*

Our God is outside time and alert to all His creation. It is a mind boggling concept to be conscious of all that goes on all the time. We have a God who protects us night and day. Elijah taunted the worshippers of Baal who implored Baal to send fire from heaven: “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.”²⁸ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.²⁹ Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention. (1 Kings 18:27-29) It is common for many who believe in other gods that they may be asleep and need to be awakened with special ceremonies. All through Israel’s existence from the time of Moses, there were worshippers of other gods which the Israelites would be aware of... sometimes too aware; because many times they turned away from God to worship Baal or other gods. The difference between these false gods and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was and still is, that He is always watching, guarding and is never asleep. Part of the nature of God is to protect, keep watch, and guard those He loves. This continues in the next two verses:

⁵ *The LORD watches over you – the LORD is your shade at your right hand;*

⁶ *the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.*

Common in much of the Bible and especially in the psalms is repetition to emphasise something. “The Lord watches” or “He who watches” is repeated five times. Other translations have “The Lord is your keeper” or “He who keeps you”. These two verses contain what may seem to us an odd concept, but for those living 2,500 years ago in a hotter land, it was not so odd. Shade is important as the sun is hot, especially for a traveller on his way to Zion. Reference to shade and the pillar of cloud and fire are made in Isaiah 4:3-6 ³ *Those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem, will be called holy, all who are recorded among the living in Jerusalem.* ⁴ *The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire.* ⁵ *Then the LORD will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory will be a canopy.* ⁶ *It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding-place from the storm and rain.* The promise of being in the protective shadow of the Lord is mentioned in Psalm 91, as is the fear of the night, the fear of disease and attack.

Psalm 91 ¹ *Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.*

² *I will say of the LORD, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’* ³ *Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence.* ⁴ *He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.* ⁵ *You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,* ⁶ *nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.*

Nothing that is visible during the day and less visible at night can harm those under the God's protection. References to sun and moon again relate to the gods of the land which were worshipped by so many Israelites resulting in the loss of protection of God, the deportations of Israel and then Judah into exile. The warnings in Deuteronomy 4:19 and 17:2-7

¹⁹ And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars – all the heavenly array – do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshipping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven.

² If a man or woman living among you in one of the towns the LORD gives you is found doing evil in the eyes of the LORD your God in violation of his covenant, ³ and contrary to my command has worshipped other gods, bowing down to them or to the sun or the moon or the stars in the sky, ⁴ and this has been brought to your attention, then you must investigate it thoroughly. If it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, ⁵ take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and stone that person to death. ⁶ On the testimony of two or three witnesses a person is to be put to death, but no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness. ⁷ The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting that person to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you.

I've added the extra verses to show how common sense justice (even if severe) should be administered... there must be two or more witnesses and they must be made to execute the punishment. In land without any prisons or police, the punishments were a beating (minor crimes), restitution (theft) or death (anything that was an abomination, wicked or evil), with life long exile in a city of refuge possible to avoid a sentence (self funded imprisonment!). The psalmist reminds us of God's requirements not to worship the stars, sun and moon, but God alone.

⁷ The LORD will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life;

⁸ the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and for evermore.

While we trust that God will keep us from harm, sometimes bad things happen, and the blame for that cannot be laid at God's door. Job was commended for never blaming God for anything. The friends of Job asserted that God will send calamities on the wicked and therefore if you suffer, you must have done something wicked. Too often we can blame ourselves for why things went wrong which might well be outside of our control. This may make the promise that the Lord watches unceasingly and keeps us from harm sound a little hollow after some calamity has struck. The big BUT here is that we have a life on earth and life with God after physical death. Whatever horrors our earthly life may have to endure or even succumb to, our security lies in our salvation and that we have the assurance of God's everlasting love and protection now in this life and for evermore in the next. Job's friends were wrong to blame Job for losing his family, his herds, his reputation and everything he had, except his wife, and were rebuked for doing so. Accusing and blaming, doing something wrong and making mistakes come to us all naturally but God remains faithful, watchful, and loving.

We should have the desire and inclination not to do anything wrong, and be an example of doing what is right even when it may seem that we have failed. In 2 Corinthians 13:5-7 Paul writes:

⁵ Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test? ⁶ And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. ⁷ Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong – not so that people will see that we have stood the test but so that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed.

Someone called Derek Kidner (1913-2008) a theologian who wrote a number of commentaries, said this about Psalm 121.. "In the light of other scriptures, to be kept from all evil does not imply a cushioned life, but a well-armed one." And perhaps that is the best we can hope for! However

the promise in verse 8 of Psalm 121 is much like the one given to Jacob in Genesis 28:15 ¹⁵ *I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.*

This psalm is one of encouragement. We can place our trust in God. God has made us to have a relationship with Him. He has given us assurance that His ways, revealed in His Word, are the ways in which we should walk during our journey through life. Job 23:10-12 says:

But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. ¹¹ My feet have closely followed his steps; I have kept to his way without turning aside. ¹² I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.

Job was afflicted but was faithful, and blessed for being faithful. In walking with Jesus, we will not let our feet slip, because His Spirit will be our guide. Being under observation may seem daunting to some, but not to those with nothing to hide. Whatever we do that is not pleasing to God is seen by Him, but we can always ask for forgiveness and the strength not to repeat what we have done wrong. **1 John 1:9** *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."* **Isaiah 43:25** *"I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more ..."*

Let's pray