

Psalm 121

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[0 : 00] Psalm 121, very well known Psalm. Let's jump right into it. We're gonna see the fact of the ascent and then the peril of the ascent and then finally the keeper of the ascent.

So those three things, so let's think about that. First, the fact of the ascent here in the Psalm. So one of the things to notice in your Bible is at the very beginning there's a superscript and it says a song of ascent.

And there are 15 songs of ascent. So 120 to 134. And so we're just looking at one of these tonight. And the fact is that this whole group of Psalms, the Psalms of the Ascent, are part of a metaphor, a reality in the Bible where the Bible is very regularly putting the Christian life, the life toward God in the metaphor of traveling, in the metaphor of a journeyman, in the metaphor of a pilgrimage, an ascent.

So that's exactly what these Psalms are about. Psalms of ascent towards God. And so that happens all across the Bible. And it does that not because we ascend to God in order to reach Him by our own works and by our own merit, but once God has come down into your life, God comes down, God comes condescends to you first, then He puts you on the path of the ascent, of then walking towards Him, because He's already found you.

And the ascent is a guaranteed victory. It's a definite win in the Christian life. You will reach the mountain of the Lord because He came down first. But at the same time, and we should say at the same time, there is an ascent to this life, a growth, and it's hard.

[1 : 42] It's really difficult. The Christian life is not easy, and there's this metaphor of going up to the mountain of the Lord that happens all across the Bible. And so that's what these Psalms of ascent, the group of Psalms are all about.

Songs for the journey. So what these Psalms are is they are songs that people sing on the ascent, on the pilgrimage, on the journey. And one of the simple things to say about this before you think about the details of the Psalm is just that we need this.

We need songs for the journey, songs for the ascent, songs for the going up, songs throughout our life for heading towards the mountain of the Lord. And we have these 15, this group that God's given us right here.

And we need to be able to go up, because there are dangers and perils on every side. You lift your eyes to the hills and you say, where does my help come from? Where does my help come from in this life?

You go out your door, you're going out and you're coming in, and there are dangers all around you. The world, the flesh and the devil, and all sorts of things. And we need help. And one of the things God, I think, is just simply saying to you tonight is that singing is a really, really important thing to do to keep you on your path, to take you along the way.

[2 : 51] Music, poetry is elevated prose, right? And music is sung poetry. It's elevated poetry. It's the highest form of language.

And that means that God has given us this great gift in these Psalms and singing to keep us on our path, to keep us along the way. We will encounter the dangers.

What are the songs here for? The songs are not for getting you out of hard circumstances. No, singing doesn't do that. The songs are there to keep your heart afloat when you are in the midst of the dangers, the midst of the hard times, the midst of the really difficult circumstances.

And so that's what they're here for. Now, what is this exactly referring to? A song of ascent, the ascent. What is this ascent in the Old Testament, in the context here?

There's a few possibilities. One of the things I want to note is that in the superscription, a song of ascent, this Hebrew preposition of a song of ascent can be translated in tons of ways.

[3 : 57] And so not like in English where we have, what is it, 40-some-odd prepositions, but in Hebrew you don't have that many. And so we translate it contextually. And so a lot of commentators will say that this could be a song of ascent, but it can also be a song for the ascent.

And I think that second translation really gives it the flavor of exactly what the songs are there for. They're for the ascent. They are the types of songs that you sing when you are on the ascent, traveling, when you're going up.

And so what is this going up that's happening here? The commentators will say that there's a few instances. One is ceremonial songs. So if you're a king, if you're a mighty army, and you win a great battle, you're headed back to your hometown.

You sing songs of ascent. If your hometown is up on a fortress like Edinburgh Castle, the army, you can picture this, is marching, and people are singing, right? A song of ascent.

We're going home, we won. That's sort of a deal. Another instance is we know we've learned tradition. It's not in the scriptures, but it seems to be the case that quite often the priest would sing the songs of ascent on their walk up to the temple in Jerusalem.

[5 : 14] So that they would even, there's a place around the temple in Jerusalem, the second temple, where there's 15 steps near the gate called beautiful. And so the tradition is that they would sing a psalm, one of the psalms of ascent, every step, entering into the workplace to make sacrifices.

But that's clearly not the context of this Old Testament passage. And instead, everybody pretty much is very agreed that what this is, is this is a psalm. These are psalms for the ascent to Jerusalem when you are called into Jerusalem for one of the three great feasts in the Old Testament.

So the three, there's five feasts. The three big feasts that happen in the Old Testament are the Passover Feast, celebrating the flight out of Egypt, the Pentecost Feast, celebrating the arrival at Sinai and the law, and then the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths for remembering the journey in the wilderness.

And so three times a year, most Israelites were coming into Jerusalem from wherever they lived, and you would ascend, Jerusalem's elevated, so you would ascend toward Jerusalem and you would sing the psalms of ascent.

So it's less like army, military connotation, marching, and it's more in my mind like the hobbits and the dwarves on the way to the Misty Mountain, you know. Singing the songs that keep them out of trouble, that get them on their way to the holy mountain, to the place that they long to be, right, the home.

[6 : 35] And that's exactly the picture, I think, that we have here. We have this actually in other places in the Old Testament. Isaiah 30, verse 29 says, You shall have a song as in the night when a holy feast is kept, and gladness of heart will be yours, as when one sets out, sets out on the journey to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of the Lord to the rock of Israel.

So there's a direct reference. You will sing on your way to the mountain of the Lord, and that's exactly what we have here. And so ancient peoples did this all the time. They sang in their traveling. We do it too, but we do it in the car, right?

But they did it in groups moving together, caravans up through the mountains and the valleys.

William Johnson, one writer, he says, The idea of this metaphor, this metaphor of life, the Christian life as a pilgrimage, as a journey, as an ascent towards the mountain of God, it's not one, or it is increasingly one, that is remote in the Western Christians' mindset.

And so in some ways this psalm causes to recover that, that we are on a path, and it's not easy, but we're moving towards something, towards the mountain of God, towards the Lord, and there's a call there to grow and to sing, and to be committed to it, and to say, I want to be different than I was yesterday.

It's the call to the journey, it's the call to the pilgrim. We have this in Hebrews 3 and 4. How does the New Testament put it? The Psalms of Ascent are quoted six times in the New Testament.

[8 : 05] And I think that means that the Psalms of Ascent are a shadow of the ascent that we, as New Testament Christians, are walking along. And in Hebrews 3 and 4 we're told that we are pilgrims.

That's exactly the language. We're wandering exiles, journeying toward the city that we have not yet reached. We are on the ascent. We're going to the great city of God, Hebrews 12-22.

We are traveling to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the city of the living God. Are you on the journey? Are you singing the songs? Are you walking along the way?

It really is. The pilgrim's progress. The progress we are making as pilgrims. And so the pilgrimage is very real, if you've been called by God, if you've been found by God. And we need music to get us all the way there.

That's what we're being told here. That's the fact, secondly, let's get the details for a few minutes, the peril that we face on the ascent. Now, this is a Psalm that is singing about the dangers that you face on the journey to the mountain of God.

[9 : 13] And we know from the New Testament and the Old Testament that the Christian, that all of us in this life, we've got three great enemies. That's kind of the summation. The world, the flesh, and the devil.

The world is the word for everything that is wrong outside of you. What's wrong with the objective world outside of you? The flesh is everything that's wrong inside of you. Everything that comes from you that's wrong.

And the devil is personal, conscious, evil, that hates you and wants to destroy you. And so these are the three great enemies. There's an objective enemy, the world, a subjective enemy, the flesh, and a personal enemy.

Satan and the principalities and powers. And all three of those dangers show up in this Psalm, actually. Those dangers are what this Psalm is fundamentally about. And when you look down, if you look with me at the first verse, I lift up my eyes to the hills from where does my help come from? From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord. So here, I think like an ancient Near Eastern Israelite, I lift up my eyes to the hills. They are outside. They are traveling.

[10 : 17] There are no cars. They are traveling through Glenco, just them and their pack. And they lift up their eyes and they see the mountains. They see the hills. They see the rain.

They see the weather, all sorts of things. And they say, where does my help come from? Right? And so there's a few different ways to take this. Sometimes people have said, well, let's stick with Glenco.

You're in Glenco and you lift up your eyes to those hills. Boy. And you say, where does my help come from? The Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. And one of the things that it could mean is that you're saying, this place is unbelievable.

And I can't believe these mountains, these moon rows, they exist. And you say, wow, look at our God. He does great things. He makes great things. And that is very true.

But that is not exactly, I think, the tone of what's going on in this question. I lift up my eyes to the hills and I wonder where my help is going to come from. Because in the ancient Near East, the hills absolutely the theater of God's glory.

[11 : 22] But you go into Glenco without equipment. And you go into Glenco without a car in an ancient world. And it is a very different experience than driving through.

And so actually what's going on here is he's talking about the real, at first, the first level, the objective world, the enemy is that there is a real issue of the vulnerability of the flesh that's being talked about here.

And you can see that as it goes on. If you just look at the next couple verses, he will not let your foot be moved. Right? So he won't let your foot fall, your foot slip. Because you're a traveler in the mountains and he doesn't slumber, he doesn't sleep.

He'll keep you in the day and in the night. Why? Because there are dangers all around you as an ancient Near Eastern traveler. And so the commentators will talk about this. They say, in the ancient Near East, the hills are consistently the place of real danger.

Hills and the valleys are where the thieves most often do their work. And so there's all sorts of threats, all sorts of vulnerabilities that come out here. We don't know exactly when, but somewhere along the way, in the Second Temple period, in the last 400 or so years before Christ came, a tradition developed in the pilgrimage to the feast of Jerusalem where the expectation is that you would not sleep in a tent because you were experiencing what the Israelites experienced in the wilderness.

[12 : 49] So there was a kind of choice to suffer a little bit more openly, to be more vulnerable. And that's exactly the sort of thing I think that's being talked about here. And so you can see that this Psalm is antiphonal, meaning the first person sings and asks the question, where does my help come from?

And then somebody answers. Somebody sings back. So he says, where does my help come from? And the person still talking about this says, my help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. And then somebody else says, he will not let your foot be moved.

So somebody in the journey, you can imagine, you're traveling two sides, two aisles, and you guys, let's try it. No, you guys, I don't know.

You guys say, where does my help come from? You guys say, he will not let your foot slip. You sing it back to them. That's actually what's probably taking place here. It's an antiphonal Psalm, right? And so they're saying, they're saying, let me encourage you, let me remind you of how much God will take care of you.

Now, here's what do we learn first? We learn the Bible here addresses our vulnerability as physical beings. That's very important to say, because one of the things we know is that in all sorts of religious traditions and philosophical traditions, there's been a neglect, a rejection of the importance of the human body.

[14:09] And what we have here is saying, no, God made your body. He made you exactly as you are. Male and female, he made them in the image of God, he did it.

And the physical is part of the image, he cares about that. And boy, just lift up your eyes and look at the resurrection and say, we know God cares about the human body.

So much so that the Son of God will have a human body forever. His human body will never go away into all of eternity. And we see here just that good news that Jesus, that the Lord really does care about the broken body that we experience.

The vulnerability that we face, the anxieties that we have about our physicality. I don't know if you do this. Do you ever get that pain, you know, that pain here and there and everywhere?

And you say, boy, I think this is it. I know I've got this disease and this disease and this disease and we do it, you know, because we're vulnerable and we're anxious about it. And someday it's going to be real.

[15:12] It's going to be true. And Jesus, the Lord, he comes in a physical body and he dies in a physical body and he's raised in a physical body and he cares about the physical body.

God cares about our bodies. Isaiah 49 verse 10 talks about the totality of hope that we can have in the resurrection and the glory of the new creation.

It says, the hope of all peoples is this, on all the bare hills shall be your pastor. No one will hunger. No one will thirst. There will be neither scorching wind nor sun that will strike you, that will cut you down.

He will make every mountain into a road. That's the physical promises. Those are physical promises. And so we'll move on to the second enemy here, but what is the help that's being offered here?

And what he says, if you go down, the Lord is your keeper, verse five. The Lord is your shade on your right hand. So he's literally talking about a shade, like a giant palm branch that you can hold in the middle of the scorching heat there.

[16:18] It could remind you of Jonah, who was in the very end of the book of Jonah, was under the scorching sun and God raised up a plant to cover him. It's the same image as that.

It's the same idea. We have a similar idea in Psalm three. It says that the Lord will be for you a shield all around you, which the commentator say is the seed shield. So it's a shield that you use when you're going against an enemy.

And so it's over your head at your front and at your back in case somebody throws something down on top of you. And that means that the shade and the shield, what are they for?

They're not promises. They're not guarantees that you won't have heart circumstances. Not at all. You know, the shade comes in the midst of the scorching sun. The shield, the seed shield, where do you use it when you're at the gate of the enemy and they're throwing rocks down upon your head, right?

It's not a promise in this life that there won't be broken bodies. And instead, the help that's being offered here, the shield is the promise that when you walk on the path, when God has found you and you're walking towards him, towards the mountain of the Lord, that he will keep you in your heart, lifted up to the point where you will be okay no matter what happens.

[17:37] That's the promise. That's the help. That's the help being offered. Now, the second enemy here is, and very briefly on this, is the other enemies, the flesh and the devil, the temptations that go on inside of us and the personal conscious evil that is all around us.

We're being asked here to pray our fears, to take our vulnerability straight to God. Whenever you feel anxious, what do you do? You go straight to the Father with it. You pray.

You pray your anxieties. You're really the first takeaway. And then here, we read in verse 7, the Lord will also keep you and here it is from all evil. So, he's been talking about the vulnerability of physical life and then in verse 7 he says, and the Lord will keep you from all the evil.

Meaning, the world, the flesh, and the devil, all the evils. And that's not as obvious to see on the surface of the text. but he is talking here about the principalities and the powers of darkness, forces of evil that want to destroy the people of God.

How? When you read through the Old Testament, this takes some work here and study, but one of the things that you start to notice is that the hills, the word hill, often stands not only as a place of physical vulnerability, but the place where pagan idolatry happens most often throughout the Old Testament.

[19:03] And so in verse 1, the hills being referenced in the ancient Erees, the hills, that is where you go and set up worship to pagan idols. That is the hills all over the Bible.

You think about the righteous kings that came along and God said, it's time to bring reform. What did they do? They went out to the hills to cast down all the false gods that have been erected.

That's exactly where the false gods, where it's exactly the domain of principality and power of darkness all over the Bible. So here's a couple of examples. Jeremiah 3.23, for in vain you look for salvation in the hills.

That's a reference towards false deities that are being worshiped in the hills. First Kings 20, 23, the servant of the king of Assyria said to him, their gods are the gods of the hills.

So that was an entire reference point, the gods of the hills that said the principalities and powers of darkness take root, take capture of people's hearts in the hills. That often happens throughout the Old Testament.

[20:04] Jeremiah 10 verse 11, Thus you shall say to them, the gods who did not make the heavens and earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens. Now that's a parallel to Psalm 121.

Psalm 121 says, the Lord, I lift up my eyes to the hills and I see all sorts of dangers, but the Lord, my helper, the maker of heaven and earth. And then Jeremiah 10, you shall say to the gods who did not make the heaven and earth, they're going to perish, the gods of the hills.

So he's saying the gods of the hills did not make heaven and earth, but the Lord did, the God who has his temple in the Old Testament and Jerusalem. Last one, Deuteronomy 4, the sun, the moon and the stars are treated or seen by people in the ancient areas as gods or mediums, a fallen divinity.

And Deuteronomy chapter 4, it says this, and beware lest you raise your eyes to the heaven. And when you see the sun and the moon and the stars and all the hosts of heaven, you be drawn away to bow down to them and to serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heavens.

Now we are modern people, so it is very difficult, very difficult for us to see Psalm 121 like that. But in Psalm 21, underneath, there is a reality that the danger is falling prey to worshiping false gods as you travel through the hills.

[21:27] There are dangers and perils on every side in the Christian life. You face the anxiety of physical vulnerability, you face the danger of being driven away, not by the rocks that people are worshiping on top of the hills, but by money, sex, and power, and all the gods that are all around you every day when you go out your door and come home again.

It's the same exact problem, the same exact prayer is for us as well. And the point here is that God protects your life when you have your eyes on the holy mountain, and we'll come to a close, when you have your eyes on the holy mountain, the Lord will protect your life, He will keep you from all evil.

Meaning no matter what circumstances come your way, you will not lose your soul. And He will give you your body back. He cares about both your body and your soul. He's holistic.

Salvation is holistic in that way. That's the point I think of Psalm 121, He is your protector of body and soul. Now let's close with this, the keeper of the Ascent, finally.

What does all this mean? How can you bring it all together? And I think the best way to do that is to just look at one little word as we close, and that's the word keep.

[22 : 39] So if you just scan your eyes across the passage, verse 3, he who keeps you will not slumber, he doesn't sleep. Verse 4, he who keeps Israel will not slumber or sleep.

Verse 5, the Lord is your keeper. Right, so in verse 7 and 8, sorry, the Lord will keep you from all evil, He will keep your life, the Lord will keep your going out and your coming in.

It's all over the place, right? Keep, keep, keep, keep, keep. It's everywhere. And some of the scholars will talk about how if you look across the Psalms of Ascent very carefully, one thing you see is that it seems that one word or concept has been taken from Numbers chapter 6, the Aaronic benediction, and put as the centerpiece of every one of the songs of Ascent.

And in Psalm 1 and 21, it is the word keep. May the Lord bless you and keep you, and we'll say it in the benediction in just a little bit. And so this Psalm has the word keep at the center of it, and all the songs of Ascent have one from the Aaronic benediction.

Or at least that's the thought from several of the commentators on it. What's a keeper? Not a position in football. Though it is that, but long before that keeper, what is this keeper?

[23 : 55] This keeper, the word keeper here, this is the Hebrew word for a watchman, a watchman of the night, a guard. So the soldier who stands on the castle wall and rings the bell, you know, when the orcs are coming or whatever, that's the keeper, the watchman, the guard at night.

And it says over and over again, the Lord is your watchman, the Lord is your guard, the Lord is your keeper. That's the very center, and the very, the commentators will say that really the strap line, the signal line is in verse 4.

Behold, he who keeps Israel, the keeper of Israel, he will not slumber nor sleep. He never goes to bed. The Lord never goes to sleep at night. He has no vulnerability.

One of my, I had a friend, I used to study across the street here, and when I was at new college, I was in a little prayer group with some of the students, and one of the guy's friend of mine, he used to always say when we would pray, or he would tell us, every time I put my head down on the pillow at night, I remember I am not God.

Every time you put your head down on the pillow, you can say I am not God. I sleep, he does not. He never gets tired. He never gets that two o'clock, that 6.30, sleepiness.

[25 : 12] He doesn't get that. He neither slumbers nor sleeps. When you see the hills, when you lift up your eyes, when you leave your house, and you face the fears of this life, the temptations, the vulnerabilities, the idolatries, the vulnerability of your physical life, the fact that we face death, what do you do?

You pray your fears, you take your anxieties to the Lord, and you look at the keeper. You look for the keeper. That's what the psalm is calling us to, and where is the keeper? Who is the keeper? Who is the watchman? Who is the guard? Who is the keeper of your life? And remember that Jesus Christ stood outside Jerusalem.

Who took this exact journey? Jesus stood every year with his parents. Jesus walked to this path of ascent to the holy city, Jerusalem. And he sang the psalms of ascent.

And I think over time he knew more and more that this was about him. Because he was outside Jerusalem ascending the hill, and he lifted up his eyes.

[26 : 18] He walked up the worst hill ever, the most unjust hill, that whatever exists, the hill called Golgotha. And when he did that, he lifted up his eyes and he said, what did he say?

He said, where does my help come from? And we can say my help comes from the Lord, my keeper, because he heard absolute silence. He was forsaken, the keeper himself.

He ascended the great hill and he was forsaken. He had no help, utterly vulnerable, totally vulnerable, cast into hell itself wise so that we today, we today could say, do I have help?

Do you have help? Oh yeah, the keeper. He went to the worst of all hills and he died there so that we could lift up our eyes and say, that is my keeper.

The one who went down into death for me in rose and victory, that is my keeper. Jesus is the great keeper. And he marched up that hill for you and he was forsaken for you.

[27 : 18] And every single day this week when you wake up and you, what's the last verse say? When you go out, you're going out and you're coming in, which is just a word for travel, a Hebrew phrase for traveling.

When you leave your home and you come back, don't forget the keeper, the one who died for you, the one who was raised for you. Let me end like this.

Will God keep you afloat in this life and the vulnerabilities, the circumstances that you may be facing right now, this very week? How about this verse? He who did not spare his own son for you, will he not keep you?

He who did not spare his only son for you, will he not keep you to the day of completion? Will he not take you all the way to the mountain? Saint Augustine will give him the last word.

He says it like this. Who is there in your life who will neither slumber nor sleep? If you seek one among men, you will be deceived.

[28 : 15] You will never find one. Trust not in any man. Every man slumbers and sleeps. Seek not a keeper among men. Let us pray.

Father, we give thanks for Christ our keeper, our watchman, our guard, our strong tower, our refuge. And so this week, Lord, I pray for anybody here that may be facing a hill, a disease, a diagnosis, a decision, a deep vulnerability and insecurity, and anxiety, a temptation that's overcome them, a sin pattern they cannot break free from, something from the world, the flesh and the devil that seems to be enclosing upon them.

I pray, Lord, that you would help them now to lift up their eyes and look at the keeper, the one who went down into the grave, who ascended that holy hill but had no help so that we could have every help.

So I pray that power for many, many in this room this week, may we pray in Jesus' name, amen.