

May 19, 2024

THE GOD WHO KEEPS AND PROTECTS HIS PEOPLE

Psalm 121

(5 of 5 in a series of selected Psalms)

This past Sunday, Pastor Nathan and I gathered with the Ortizes and Kagarukis, whom we sent to New York, and told them goodbye as we headed back to Jackson. It was both a rewarding and tiring visit. We stayed up late, got up early, worked through difficult matters, prayed, and dreamed. I do believe the Lord used our time there and will use it going forward. But as we were there the reality of what those whom we sent out are doing really hit me.

Whether it is to some church up the road, or to New York, Utah, or Peru, we've asked these families to pick up and leave their homes, their friends, and this church in order to go and do what the Lord is burdening them to do. For some, it means living in a difficult place. For the Ortizes and Kagarukis, it means raising their kids in a place where having a yard to play in is quite difficult to come by. It means stepping away from a dependable paycheck in order to ask and depend on others for contributions simply to stay in the area and carry out the ministry—things that very, very few get excited about doing. And as Nathan and I left, we left these families with ideas and a vision that will cost them more, ask them to trust more, and will require them to walk in greater faith.

So what if that were you? What if today the Lord burdened your heart for some difficult task that looked to be quite costly? What if he led you to pick up and go somewhere that felt fraught with all kinds of dangers and challenges to any vision of a peaceful life? What would you do? Where would you find your strength? For that matter, how should those whom we send out or will send out find their faith bolstered? Well, one answer for us in those moments is to read and meditate on Psalm 121.

Psalm 121 is one of the Psalms identified as "A Song of Ascents." You can see it right there in the superscript. These songs of ascents are Psalms 120-134, and they are psalms that the people of God could sing together on their way to Jerusalem for their annual feasts. This explains why many of these psalms mention arriving at Jerusalem. Psalm 122, for example is all about Jerusalem. And Psalm 134—the last of the songs of ascent—speaks of being at the temple, which would have been in Jerusalem. So, Psalm 121, which comes at the beginning of these songs revolves around the concept of the Lord protecting the people of God as they set out on this journey toward Jerusalem. You can see the theme in the word "keep," which means to guard or protect. It occurs in some form six times in the psalm, as the Lord is described as our "keeper," "he who keeps," and the one who "will keep" his people. It is, thus, a psalm in which the people of God remind themselves that God will protect and care for them on their journey to Jerusalem.

After all, the trek to Jerusalem could be fraught with danger. First, it could be quite a distance. Also, you'd be traveling with your entire family. So the difficulty of keeping everyone safe when you factor in little children can be challenging, especially when the kids are wandering within the

caravan, which we know they did because Joseph and Mary didn't realize Jesus wasn't with them for an entire day when he was twelve, assuming he was somewhere in the caravan. Finally, you'd have thieves ready to pounce, and the terrain itself could be quite challenging as you approached the hills of Jerusalem. And so this psalm is about the people of God reminding themselves that the Lord would protect them as they made this journey.

But we'll see that the truths that they hold to in order to comfort themselves with God's protection and care for them are truths that would easily be applied to God caring for his people in the present as well. Therefore, if you are in a place where you feel that the Lord has called you to a difficult task, and you're feeling yourself tempted to doubt his care along this path, take the truths that we're going to see from Psalm 121 as to why the Lord will be your protector and care for you as you go. Why were the Israelites confident in God's protection and care for them as they traveled to Jerusalem? Let me give you four reasons. First, the Lord created all things.

The Lord created all things

Notice how the argument of verses 1-2 goes. First, the psalmist considers his journey to Jerusalem and the hills that surround the city. He gets Jerusalem in his mind's eye, looks up to the hills, and asks where his help will come from for this to be a safe journey. He writes, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?" (v. 1). But then he instantly answers himself, saying, "My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth" (v. 2). That is, the psalmist is saying that obviously he can trust in the Lord to protect and care for him because our God is the creator and ruler of all things.

Why wouldn't the psalmist trust that the Lord can sustain his family making this journey when the Lord made the very dirt they will walk on, the mountains over which they will climb, and the valleys through which they will travel? The idea seems to be that if the Lord made something, then he can control it, can't he?

What should be obvious to us is that this reality that God is the maker of heaven and earth and therefore controls all that he made is equally true now, for us. Perhaps it's not thievery or your foot slipping off the side of a cliff on a journey to Jerusalem you're worried about. Maybe it's financial provision as you set out to obey the Lord in a difficult task or for the Lord's sustaining grace as you seek to work through a difficult matter he has set before you. Why would you be gripped with anxiety when the Lord is the maker of heaven and earth and controls all of it? Do you not think he could provide for you from all that he owns? Can you not give you whatever resource you need to endure? What would stop him? He's the maker of heaven and earth, and what he made, he controls. That's where the psalmist starts, by reminding himself that God is the creator and controller of all things. Second, he reminds himself that God is continually watchful over his people.

The Lord is continually watchful over his people

As the psalmist continues with his answers as to why he can trust the Lord to be his protector and to care for him, he proclaims in verses 3-4, “He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”

Think about what the psalmist is saying here. He’s trusting the Lord to give him and his family safe travel to Jerusalem as they seek to go there in obedience to the Lord’s commands. And we say, “Of course.” But think about what is involved here when the psalmist declares that the Lord will not let one’s foot to be moved (that is, to slip). I don’t know how many steps it takes for the psalmist and his family to walk from wherever they were to Jerusalem, but I imagine it’s a pretty high number. And the psalmist is saying that not one of their steps would slip. Their feet would not be moved.

Okay, so I did some research and a little math. Let’s say the trip was fifty miles. According to my quick online search, it takes about 132,000 steps to walk fifty miles. Now, let’s say it’s a family of five. That’s 660,000 steps, which you account for all the steps each individual has to take. And what the psalmist is saying is that the Lord is making sure each one of those 660,000 steps don’t slip. Each time each foot plants itself on the ground, it will not be moved.

We might respond by asking, “Do we really think he’s paying that much attention?” And the psalmist answers, “Yes.” That’s the very point he’s making. He reminds us that the one who keeps us does not slumber or sleep. There’s never a second he’s not paying attention. With great vigilance he’s watching over us, never turning away and never distracted. This is how God is toward his children. That’s what the psalmist is saying in verses 3-4.

This is what the Lord wants you and me to know this morning. It may well be that as you think through the path in front of you or simply things going on in your life, what weighs on you are the thousands of details that need to be accounted for. Perhaps it’s not just this bill or that need but dozens of them. Or maybe it’s not only tasks that need to be carried out but sustaining you emotionally through the details of what you’re walking through in obedience to the Lord. And the Lord is saying to you in Psalm 121, “I see you. I see the details. I watch your every step and account for every pebble in the road. I’m not distracted. I know your every need—even the ones you’ve not thought of.”

That is our God toward his children. He will not let your foot be moved apart from his perfect plan for your life. He who keeps you will not slumber or sleep. He is continually watchful over his people. Third, we see that our Lord protects and cares for us in all that we do, at all times.

The Lord protects and cares for his people in all that we do, at all times

Let me show you why we can draw this conclusion from verses 5-6. First, in verse 5 the psalmist reiterates that the Lord is the keeper (i.e. protector and caretaker) of his people, and then he declares, “The LORD is your shade on your right hand.”

Now the idea of being shade to one is to be a protector from the scorching heat. Imagine if you found yourself in the middle of the desert in the heat of the day. Shade would be required for your survival. If the sun is able to bear down on you for too long, it will bring unreversible damage and perhaps cause death. You would need to find something to give you shade. And the psalmist says that the Lord is our shade. That's why in verse 6 he's going to tell us that "the sun shall not strike you by day." Our Lord protects us.

But I want you to note one detail of how he describes the Lord as our shade in verse 5. He tells us that the Lord is your shade "on your right hand." What does that mean? Well, not unlike our current world, most people then were right-handed, and, therefore, would swing a hammer, throw a ball, etc. with that hand. Therefore, the idea is that whatever one set his hand to do, he would find that the Lord is providing shade for him in that task. In other words, in whatever we do, we'll find the Lord providing protection and care. He provides protection and care for us in all that we do.

And you'd think it'd be enough—after seeing that the Lord is our protector as the ruler over all and with watchfulness over all our tasks—to note that he provides divine protection and care in everything that we set out to do, and yet the psalmist doesn't stop there. He continues in verse 6, saying, "The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night."

Now, I don't think he's saying this so that we might understand the danger of the moon on our health if we're outside at night. The moon simply doesn't scorch us the way the sun does, and the man who gets some kind of moon burn and dies from it will be the first, as far as I know. So, the psalmist isn't writing this so that we might think that the moon is a literal danger to us. Rather, he's mentioning the sun and the moon because he's stressing both day and night. In other words, he's saying that the Lord is our divine protector and caretaker in all that we do, *at all times*. Therefore, when we put verses 5-6 together, we're told that the Lord cares for us and protects us in all that we do, at all times.

Again, you can imagine the comfort this would be as the people of God set out to go to Jerusalem. Not only is the Lord able to control everything they'll encounter and will watch over their every step so that they do not slip, but he will protect them in everything they do, every moment of the day. After all, they're simply setting out to do what God commands them to do. The reason they're going to Jerusalem is because they're seeking to obey the Lord.

And this reminds us that as we seek to walk in obedience to the Lord, we have our watchful God, providing for us, protecting us, and caring for us at all times, in all that we do. Don't you hear the echoes of what this Psalm teaches us in Matthew 6:33 where after being told not to worry about all the things that we need for life because our Father knows we have need of them, we're told, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." That is, seek first the kingdom. Set out to walk in obedience to Christ. And the Lord who made all things and controls all things, who vigilantly keeps watch over your every step, and who provides care for you in all things, at all times, will meet your needs. In other words, as we come to the New Testament, our Lord doesn't back off of his heart toward his people that we see

reflected in Psalm 121. He doubles down on his commitment to his people. But there's one final statement the psalmist makes for us, namely, that our Lord will preserve his people forever.

The Lord will preserve his people forever

To this point, we may feel like there's nothing more to say. To say that we can look to the Lord, who made and controls all things, who keeps an ever-watchful eye on our every step, and will protect us and care for us in all that we do at all times feels pretty exhaustive. But the psalmist is not done, and in verses 7-8 he adds one more facet, saying, "The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."

With that, we're introduced to two more aspects of the Lord's care for his people. First, he will keep us from "all evil." By saying "all evil," the psalmist is referring to "any kind of calamity or misfortune in life."¹ But this can be confusing to us because we know that we do indeed suffer calamity and misfortune. There are all kinds of things that come into our lives and bring us pain and distress. Moreover, the psalms testify to this. I mentioned just a few weeks ago that the largest single category of a psalm in the Psalter is lament, where the psalmist cries out in the midst of his pain as he's enduring suffering. Surely that would speak against the Lord keeping his people from "all evil." So what do we do with this?

I think our answer is to see this as being protection from *ultimate* evil. In other words, the Lord is not here saying you'll not get sick or persecuted or the like. Again, these things are actually promised to us in this age. But he is saying that these things will not bring about your ultimate destruction. They won't lead you to make shipwreck of your faith. You may encounter great pain, but it will not tear you away from Christ. Even as the psalmist says in the second half of verse 7, "He will keep your life," we should hear him saying something like, "He'll keep your eternal life." Again, that is to say, he'll allow no evil to separate you from the love your Father has for you in Jesus Christ, as we're reminded in the latter half of Romans 8. No evil will completely overcome you, but the Lord will sustain you in faith through all of it.

But not only does the psalmist add that the Lord will keep us from "all evil," he also adds that he'll do this forever. In verse 8 he declares, "The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."

The psalmist, considering his journey to Jerusalem (his "coming in") and then from Jerusalem back home (his "going out"), did not recite this psalm so that he might suggest this particular journey was exceptional. That is, he didn't think the Lord would protect his people on this particular journey, but who knows about all the future journeys they would take for their annual feasts and festivals? Rather, he's stressing that what he's declaring is both true now and forever

¹ Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 3 (90-150) (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2016), 619.

("from this time forth and forevermore"). God would not let his people be ultimately destroyed, and this is a promise they could count on forever.

I believe our Lord Jesus Christ is saying nothing less to his church today when he told us to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that he commands. Do you remember his last words in that charge? It's a promise that he'll be with us till the end of the age.

What are ramifications of that glorious promise from our Lord? I think it's a declaration that he's in control of all that we'll encounter since he's the maker of heaven and earth. It's a declaration that he'll be vigilant, watchful over our every step so that our foot will not slip apart from his plan for us. It's a promise that in all things we do, at all times, he's there to protect us, provide for us, and care for us, giving us all that we need as we seek his kingdom, just as the Israelites reminded themselves as they went to Jerusalem with Psalm 121.

And so, this is something we can hold to as well—as a church and as children of God. It's another reminder to us of why we can trust the Lord as we live our lives, seeking to obey him. Do you wonder how you'll endure the lot in life that he's laid out for you? Well, he's the maker of heaven and earth, controlling all things. He can care for, provide for, and protect you. Are you overcome by fear and anxiety? Your Father is watching over your every step, and he won't let anything come your way that is outside of his plan for you, a plan that will lead to you being made more like Christ? Do you wonder if you're walking an exceptional path that perhaps the Lord didn't account for? He is at your side in all you do, at all times. And he won't let anything overtake you so that you are plucked from his hand. Nor are these promises temporary but are for this time forth and forevermore. And why shouldn't we trust the God who made these promises while also meeting our deepest need in sending his Son to live, die, and be raised for us? So let's declare our confident trust in him now as we come to the table. Amen.