



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 121

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Introduction

- This Psalm is the second of the series of Psalms which are titled *A Song of Ascents*
- Jewish tradition claims that God's people sang these pilgrim Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) as they journeyed to the temple for one of the yearly worship festivals; Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles
- Priests and Levites may have sung these Psalms as they ascended the fifteen steps to the temple
- Psalm 121 announces the worshiper's confidence in God to watch over Israel and shelter His people from all harm



Introduction

- At the same time, this Psalm is a general declaration of trust in God as the guardian and protector of life's journey
- The verb "to safeguard, to protect", is repeated six times in this Psalm
- This Psalm directs and encourages us to repose ourselves and our confidence in God, and by faith to put ourselves under His protection and commit ourselves to His care
- It reminds us where our help comes from and fills us with confidence
- Some are of the opinion that it was written by David, at the time of the battle with Absalom



Introduction

- Some take it to be a military Psalm, proper for soldiers engaged with an enemy
- Others call it the traveler's Psalm (for there is nothing in it of military dangers) and think David wrote it when he was traveling
- At the first step, Psalm 120, the psalmist, set in trouble and dared not lift up his eyes to heaven, implored that he might be delivered from unrighteous lips and a deceitful tongue
- But now, on the second step, Psalm 121, he lifted up his eyes unto the hills for help and protection



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- The Creator Is Our Helper 121:1-2
- The God of Israel Is Our Protector 121:3-6
- The Lord Will Keep Us From All Harm 121:7-8

The Creator Is Our Helper

121:1-2



- The Psalm begins with a question to which anyone can relate: Where can I get help? Or better, where can I look for help?
- It begins with the psalmist raising his eyes *to the hills*
- For the Jewish pilgrim, the hills could have meant a few different things, and commentators offer different interpretations here
- Probably, the *holy hills*, that stand round about Jerusalem, are intended (Psalm 87:1,125:2)
- The pilgrims may have to make great effort to reach their home
- So, the hills are an obstacle for them, they will look round for aid
- They will climb them from the valley below, being so high, they will keep searching till they find a pass, and reach the other side

The Creator Is Our Helper

121:1-2



- Or the mountains may be looked at not in the light of obstacles, but refer to the hills of Moriah and Zion; and the verses will then allude indirectly to the Temple, where the ark of God, the symbol of His presence, was
- From up there the help of God will come to the aid of His servant, for there, in His temple, the Lord dwells
- Those who come to Jerusalem, once they see the mountains surrounding their beloved city, they lift up their hearts to the secure divine mountain
- In the Old Covenant, Noah found his comfort to some extent on Mount Ararat where the ark settled

The Creator Is Our Helper

121:1-2



- Moses found his comfort in speaking with the Lord on Mount Sinai
- Elijah dwelt for some time on Mount Carmel
- And the Jews found their temporary happiness on Mount Zion on which Solomon built his temple
- Also, the hills could have been a source of anxiety and fear, since robbers or thieves could be hiding there
- *The hills* can also bring up images of idolatrous shrines in the so-called “high places”, which are frequently condemned in the Old Testament (1 Kings 3:2; 2 Kings 18:4)

The Creator Is Our Helper

121:1-2



- Jeremiah 3:23 points to this, *“Truly, in vain is salvation hoped for from the hills, And from the multitude of mountains; Truly, in the LORD our God Is the salvation of Israel.”*
- In this case, there would have been a contrast: while the pilgrim was advancing towards Zion, his eyes would have lit on pagan temples that were a great temptation to him
- But his faith was steadfast and he was certain of one thing alone: *My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth*
- There are also similar things in our pilgrimage through life
- We see the high places that spread out before us as a promise of life: wealth, power, prestige, the easy life

The Creator Is Our Helper

121:1-2



- These high places are temptations, for they seem like the promise of life
- But true life, true help, comes from the Lord; and we ought to turn our eye, to the true high places, to the true mountain: Christ
- The psalmist does not tell us what he is thinking about the hills, therefore, some think that the tone of the Psalm suggests that it is dangerous and there is a need for God's protection
- Jesus set the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, which people traveled in groups because of the threat from robbers; so the psalmist would have seen the hills as threatening

The Creator Is Our Helper

121:1-2



- But the lifting up of the eyes is a prayer gesture, John 11:41; and is expressive of boldness and confidence in prayer, and of hope and expectation of help and salvation, Job 11:15
- When, on the contrary, persons embarrassed and ashamed, hopeless and helpless, cannot look up, or lift up their eyes or face to God, Ezra 9:6
- St Jerome believes that the mountains here refer to the prophets of the Old Covenant who prophesied about the coming of the Savior, and the apostles, and the disciples who preached Him in the New Covenant
- One of the church father takes the mountains in two senses

The Creator Is Our Helper

121:1-2



- First the two Testaments, with their magnificent and difficult mysteries, fitted to raise the soul from earth
- Second the holy angels, as subjects for thought and imitation in their purity and obedience
- But he adds that not even from these, as mere ministers of another's will, does our help come, but from the Lord Himself
- St. Augustine, takes the mountains as the Apostles, "The Son of righteousness has already risen, the Gospel has been already preached by the Apostles, the Scriptures have been preached, all the mysteries have been laid open, the veil has been rent ...: let them now lift their eyes up to the hills, whence their help comes."

The Creator Is Our Helper

121:1-2



- *From whence comes my help?* A rhetorical question, not expecting a reply
- This is simply a lead-in to the answer, which the Psalmist gives next
- The psalmist does not look to nature for help
- His help comes from the very one who made *the hills, the heavens and the earth*: God
- It is not from hills and mountains; not from men, for vain is the help of man; not from kings and princes, the great men of the earth, nor from the most powerful nations; but from the Lord

The Creator Is Our Helper

121:1-2



- Literally, his help is from the Lord
- He alone has both the power and the will to assist the Psalmist
- The Creator of all can defend all
- When the idolater, pointing to his visible god, mocked the Israelite with having no god, the reply, that He *made heaven and earth*, and all things, these were the proofs of His being, was most natural
- As we read in Jeremiah 10:11, *“Thus you shall say to them: ‘The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under these heavens.’”*

The Creator Is Our Helper

121:1-2



- God made the world out of nothing, Himself alone, by a word, *“Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.”* (Genesis 1:31)
- Very excellent and beautiful; and therefore, no matter how great people difficulties are, He has power sufficient for their help and relief
- He that *made heaven and earth* is sovereign Lord of all who has unlimited power, wisdom and understanding and can make use of anything as He pleases for the help of His people, and restrain anything when He pleases from hurting His people

The God of Israel Is Our Protector 121:3-6



- The psalmist addresses himself with comforting assurances
- God will not allow any evil to approach him, so as to do him hurt
- God would help His people by establishing them in a firm place, allowing them to stand and not allowing their *foot to be moved*
- This is an important promise for pilgrims traveling on foot on a road which is unpaved pathway
- God's infinite power and goodness which is the foundation, cannot be moved; and so long as one stands on this basis, his foot cannot be moved

The God of Israel Is Our Protector 121:3-6



- St. John Chrysostom says, “Now, who are they that allow their foot to slip? Those venturing into slippery matters, with no firm footing, such as the love of possessions, such as the longing for things of this life. That is the reason they constantly trip and fall, and expose themselves to the utmost risk. Those things are never firm, never immovable, but ever shifting and changing.”
- *He who keeps you will not slumber*, God does not sleep - His vigilance is unceasing, “*I, the Lord, keep it, I water it every moment; Lest any hurt it, I keep it night and day.*” (Isaiah 27:3)
- *keeps*: This is the first of six times in this short Psalm that the Hebrew word *shamar* (translated *keeps* and *preserve*) is used

The God of Israel Is Our Protector 121:3-6



- The theme is that God will watch over His people
- The psalmist here as if he corrects himself saying, “No, there is no need for such a prayer, for Israel’s keeper never sleeps’
- Israel’s guard is not like a human patrol, liable to be overcome by sleep upon his watch
- He is not such as the heathen suppose their gods to be (1 Kings 18:27), but unceasing in His vigilance
- The psalmist promises that God is a powerful, trustworthy protector

The God of Israel Is Our Protector 121:3-6



- Spiritually, God sleeps in the heart of His servants when their faith grows cold
- *He who keeps you will not slumber*, But here there is the promise of the Holy Spirit that no such calamity shall come upon the steadfast pilgrim
- *Behold, He who keeps Israel Shall neither slumber*, The idea is repeated in verse 4 for emphasis
- The assurance rises from the particular to the general
- It is not one person alone over whom God will watch unceasingly, but the whole people of Israel

The God of Israel Is Our Protector 121:3-6



- God's watchful eye is always open, looking with love and care upon His people
- In his confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, Elijah mocked the idol prophets when Baal did not respond, saying of Baal "*perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened*" (1 Kings 18:27)
- We have the great comfort in knowing that *He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep*
- *The Lord is your shade*, The brutal rays of the sun could strike the traveler, such as the pilgrim on the way to one of Israel's feasts in Jerusalem

The God of Israel Is Our Protector 121:3-6



- God promised care for the traveler, with a reference that goes back to the cloud by day that followed Israel in the wilderness from Egypt and shielded them from the sun
- St. John Chrysostom says, “If the Lord has granted Peter to heal infirmities by his shadow, How much more would be the shadow of the Lord Himself, who stretched His hands on the cross to cast His shadow on all mankind?!”
- God is at the right hand of His people, to hold their right hand; to teach and lead them into communion with Himself, and hold them up safe; and to assist them in working, without whom they can do nothing; and to counsel and direct them

The God of Israel Is Our Protector 121:3-6



- According to St. Augustine, *your right hand*, is *one's* faith, the power that is given men, to be among the sons of God
- St. Augustine says, "*The Lord is your shade at your right hand...*It seems to me to have a hidden sense: otherwise, he would have simply said, '*The Lord will keep you,*' without adding, '*at your right hand*' For how? Does God keep our right hand, and not our left? Did He not create the whole of us?...By our left hand is meant all that we have in a temporal way; by our right hand is meant, whatever our Lord promises us that is eternal. But if He who will give everlasting life, Himself also comforts our present life by these temporal blessings."

The God of Israel Is Our Protector 121:3-6



- *The sun and the moon* were the chief dangers of travelers, whether pilgrims or others
- *The sun shall not strike you by day*, The allusion here is to "sun-stroke" - the effect of the burning sun on the brain
- Such effects of the sun are often fatal
- *Nor the moon by night*, The psalmist here refers to some common opinion about the influence of the moon, as endangering life or health
- There are some who say that temporary blindness is caused by moonlight

The God of Israel Is Our Protector 121:3-6



- The true idea may seem to be that there were effects to be dreaded from the sudden changes from the heat of day to the cold of night, Jacob complained, *“There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night,”* (Genesis 31:40)
- The meaning is, that God would be a Protector alike in the dangers of the day and of the night
- It may be understood figuratively: one shall not be hurt either by the open assaults of the enemy which are as visible as the burning beams of the sun
- Or by his secret deceitful attempts, which are like the invisible effects of the cold by night

The Lord Will Keep Us From All Harm 121:7-8



- The psalmist had in the previous verses specified some particular evils from which he says God would keep those who put their trust in Him
- He now makes the remark general, and says that God would not only preserve from these particular evils, but would keep those who trusted in Him from all evil: He would be their Protector in all the dangers of life
- *Evil* men may come and afflict the child of God, but the Lord *shall preserve your soul*
- It is no promise of guarding from the common evils of the body, needs, weakness, death, otherwise we should not read of Abel's slaughter, of Job's sufferings, of Peter's lack of silver and gold

The Lord Will Keep Us From All Harm 121:7-8



- These are no real evils, and it is the faithful *soul* which the Lord *will keep* that the moth of the evil one may not corrupt it
- *The Lord shall preserve you*, From the evil of sin; from its dominion and damning power
- And from the evil of the world; not from tribulation in it, nor from the reproach or persecution of it; but from the wickedness and lusts that are in it
- From the evil one, Satan; not from his temptations, but from sinking under them, and perishing by them; John 17:12
- It is against evils such as these that we are to look for defense from God

The Lord Will Keep Us From All Harm 121:7-8



- And God's ways of keeping are multiple
- As a watchman, seeing that no enemy approaches the city which He guards
- As a defender, standing with shield and sword in the battle at the right hand of His warriors
- As a physician, tending and binding up the wounds of a sufferer
- *The Lord shall preserve*, was repeated three times within these two verses as if the Holy Trinity thus sealed the word to make it sure
- The promise is comprehensive

The Lord Will Keep Us From All Harm 121:7-8



- God's people may trust in His preserving power for all of one's activity summed up in two opposite verbs, *going out* and *coming in*, and at all times, *from this time forth, and even forevermore*
- This is the gracious assurance which is made to all who put their trust in God
- Some say that the meaning is that God keeps the *going out* of His Saints from sin, or from bondage, in an enemy's country, as He kept Abraham in his leaving the heathen land of Haran, and Abraham's distant posterity in their exodus from Egypt
- And also keeps their *coming in* to the Land of Promise

The Lord Will Keep Us From All Harm 121:7-8



- And therefore, the words may be most truly taken of His protection of the soul in its hour of departure from the prison of this world, and in its happy entrance into the Paradise of rest
- Yet another sense of *going out and coming in*, is God's aid in enabling us to overcome temptations boldly, and to avoid the sins of pride or dangerous security after the victory and the quiet which follows
- The Vulgate translation reverses the order of the words, putting *coming in* first and *going out* last, and this has caused some difference in the mode of interpretation
- *Coming in*, is entering into battle in the Church Militant, *going out*, returning from it into the Church Triumphant

The Lord Will Keep Us From All Harm 121:7-8



- And God keeps our *coming in* when He takes care that we are not exposed to a temptation too powerful for us to overcome, and our *going out* by granting us perseverance and means of escape
- St. Augustine explains, “Not your body; for the Martyrs were consumed in the body; but ‘the Lord preserve your soul;’ for the Martyrs yielded not up their souls.”
- God will continue His care over us *From this time forth, and even forevermore*
- It is a protection for life, God will protect His church and His children always, *even to the end of the world*



Discussion

- What does this Psalm reveal about God's character and God's ways?
- How does God's role Covenant Lord and Creator assure us that He is able and willing to help His people?
- What does it mean that God wants to help us?
- How would you describe the promises of verses 3-6?



Discussion

- Psalm 121, can be divided into 4 stanzas each containing two verses, 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, and 7-8. If you could give a title to each stanza that would summarize the main thought of each, what would they be?
- What does the word “keep” mean? What are the various ways God keeps us?