

Third Sunday in End Time; November 19, 2023

Psalm 121

“Help Comes from the Lord”

I lift up my eyes to the mountains.

Where does my help come from?

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

He will not let your foot stumble.

He who watches over you will not slumber.

Yes, he who watches over Israel will not slumber.

He will not sleep.

The LORD watches over you.

The LORD is your shade at your right hand.

**The sun will not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.**

The LORD will watch to keep you from all harm.

He will watch over your life.

The LORD will watch over your coming and your going from now to eternity.

Two weeks ago on Reformation Sunday, we learned about the headings of the Psalms. That’s good, because this week I don’t need to explain them to you, and only need to tell you that this Psalm 121 is also equipped with a heading. But it’s very short, just one bit of information before the Psalm itself: “a song of ascents.” There are different theories for what exactly that means. The two most common are that these psalms were sung in the temple as the priest ascended the steps to the altar, or that they were songs sung by travelers.

I think the second is probably right: these psalms were likely sung by travelers on their way up to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is Israel’s highpoint, so traveling there is always an ascent. I think that’s the best explanation because many of these fifteen Psalms of Ascent are about going to worship, and Jerusalem was the place to worship in the temple. And many of these psalms are filled with traveling language, including this Psalm 121. And that makes Psalm 121 very practical and relevant for all people of all time, because we’re all travelers.

As the psalm opens, it is easy to picture a weary traveler making his way uphill to Jerusalem. He seems well along on his journey when his eyes turn up to see yet another range of mountains. And he asks the natural question of a tired-legged journeyman at the base of the mountain: **Where does my help come from?** How will I get over this? How will I get to the other side? It was an important question to answer because walking over mountains was risky business. Do you remember the story of the Good Samaritan? Where did he get robbed and left for dead? The mountains. They are full of nooks and crannies for bad guys to hide in. They’re also full of wild predators and uneven paths to sprain ankles and wrench knees.

Usually, travelers walked in groups to reduce these dangers. But this one is alone. He does not ask where “our” help comes from. It’s “my” help. He’s on his own. No cell phone, either, to call for help if he needs it, for the authorities to ping if he disappears. Just himself. Where does my help come from?

Every one of us is a traveler, too. And every one of us comes to mountains on our journey. Your mountain may be looking at schedule that simply has too much on it. It may be a challenging child or an impossible coworker. It may be bills piled as high as a mountain, or fading health. Every mountain is a challenge, but the most intimidating are those we face alone. And we all do that, do. We come up to challenges at times when family and friends are not there, or there but distracted. Or we stand at the base of a mountain that no one in our circles can really understand because they have climbed no such mountain themselves.

Those are the really hard ones. When you're alone, or you might as well be. And it is only natural, when lifting up your eyes to those hills, to ask, "Where does my help come from?"

And there are a lot of possible answers. One is: nowhere. But I'm tough. I'm the real deal, son. I climb mountains on my own. I eat mountains for breakfast! Because me. Another is: nowhere. So I might as well give up and turn around. Why try anymore? This mountain's too high for these tired old legs. If your answer is "nowhere," there's only two places to go from there: proud self-reliance or wimpy despair.

There are other answers, too. Maybe just think about one more: "I don't know where my help comes from, but I'm sure I'll get help somewhere. Eventually my parents will notice this crisis I'm in and help me. Sooner or later my boss will see me slumping in my chair and give me relief. Some human will eventually come and pick me up and carry me over this mountain. I don't know who, or when, but some person will help me over...I hope." But a wise man told me recently: hope is not a strategy. Specifically, in the context he said it, hoping that people will come through for you is not a strategy. Because they might. And it's great when they do. But they often don't.

And so the answer, "My help comes from nowhere," will only lead you to pride or despair, and the answer, "I don't know," may leave you abandoned on the side of the road. But there is another answer, one the psalmist gives not once or twice, but five times in this short psalm. God, right? Sort of, but that's not specific enough. **My help comes from the LORD.** The Lord is identified five times over as the source of help, a name that specified the God of Israel and distinguished him from all the other gods around. The other gods needed help from humans, needed their sacrifices and prayers and self-harm and dances. The Lord is different. He is I Am. He is perfectly independent and needs no one ever and nothing from anyone.

Instead, he gives help to his people. He can help them through anything, over any challenge, because he is **the Maker of heaven and earth.** He made the universe, including this speck where mountains rise in front of us. Our hills are no challenge to the one who said, "Let there be," and called into existence from nothing our universe. If he has the power to do that, is he strong enough to get you through a packed day? An illness? Financial stress? **He will not let your foot stumble.**

But the Lord is more than strong. His name, I Am, tells he is eternal and powerful, but also that he is here. The Lord is here. And he is alert. **He who watches over you will not slumber. He will not sleep. Yes, he who watches over Israel will not slumber.** You are told this three times in a row: God is at your side, awake and ready to help you. When are things repeated three times in a row? When they are extremely important, or when they are easily forgotten...or both. We may not accuse the Lord of sleeping, but we may think he's unaware or uninterested in our challenges. Here is one mistake Christians often make in their thinking when they stand at the foot of a mountain: "To me it's a mountain. But what could God care about me and my difficulties? He is so big; the world is so big with so many problems for so many people. What could this matter to him?"

We may mistake that kind of thinking for humility, but it's not. It's not humility. It's dead wrong. What could the Lord care about your mountains? Why would he be awake to your danger? You are Israel. Even in the Old Testament, Gentiles were allowed to join the nation of Israel. They had to put their faith in the Lord God of Israel and follow his commands. When they did, they joined up with God's chosen people. Not by blood, of course, but by faith. The New Testament teaches with precision that all who trust in the Lord are spiritual Israel, too. We are his chosen people, St. Peter writes. St. Paul writes that all who trust in the promise are Abraham's family, Israel.

Yes, being the true spiritual Israel is having faith in the Lord and his promises. That starts with his greatest promise. To Israel of the Old Testament the Lord promised a saving Messiah, who suffers for the sins of his people and takes the burden of their sins on himself. He promised a Messiah who would be abandoned to the grave, but live and reign on David's throne forever. This is how much the Lord cares about you and your life: he promised and sent his Son to walk perfectly in his law in your place, to suffer for your sins in your place, and to rise so that you will rise behind him.

You are Israel, the one he chose to believe in his salvation promise. Of course, he cares about you enough to be on the ball when you're struggling, to pay attention and help you. And he will: **The LORD watches over you. The LORD is your shade at your right hand. The sun will not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will watch to keep you from all harm.** I often wondered when I read this Psalm: who ever got struck by the moon at night? I understand, especially in the Middle East, how the sun could hurt you and why you'd need shade from it. But the moon? But that's the point! We see things in our path that we recognize as dangerous, and like a little child we run to the Lord's leg and hold on tight for protection. That's the sun by day: clearly dangerous. But then there are things we think could never hurt us. We see them as no threat at all; that's the moon at night. But the Lord, who made the heavens and earth, who watches over Israel, knows perfectly what could hurt us. He will always protect us, whether we see the need for help or not.

But if all this is true, how can we explain the harm that does come to us? How can we explain the attacks of sun and moon that do hurt us? They come because the Lord has in view protection for more than just this life in this world. We see only this world with our eyes, and easily fall into the trap of thinking that our seventy or eighty years here is everything there is to our life. But again, the Lord knows better. He watches over us in this world with our whole life in view: the seven or eight decades here and the eternity to follow. **The LORD will watch over your life. The LORD will watch over your coming and going from now to eternity.** There is one mountain we're all going to come to, unless Jesus comes back first. And the only one going over that mountain with you is the Lord. Even if loved ones are surrounding your bed, even if you go down in jumbo jet with three hundred other people, your death is your own and no one else's. Except the Lord. He takes you over the top of that ultimate mountain. He goes with you and takes you to his side.

The Lord is going with you over the mountain of death because Jesus' death is yours. On the other side of the mountain of your death is life for eternity, because Jesus' life is yours. On the other side is resurrection, because Jesus' resurrection is yours. But in order to get there, you have to go over that mountain holding the Lord's hand. You have to believe in Jesus to the end, all the way over the top. And Satan will not quit until it's over. Neither will the doubts of your own sinful self, or the unbelief of the world around you. You need a faith in your Savior, in your loving God, that is bulletproof.

It's with that ultimate view of life and death that the Lord watches over us in this world. He spares us much harm altogether, and we don't even know how much he's spared us from. He lets some come so

we'll hold on to him tighter and tighter, looking to his love in Jesus more and more. And it's all so that when we get to last mountain, we hold on to him all the way home.

Today we celebrate the victory of all the saints in heaven who have already reached it. We remember the ones we love who are already there and thank God with all our hearts that they have climbed their last mountain. And we look forward with happy hearts to the day we'll get there, too.

Psalm 121 was most likely sung by travelers headed to Jerusalem to worship God in his temple. That's exactly where we're traveling too. We are headed to the New Jerusalem, to the city of God, to worship him day and night in his temple. This is the exact language that St. John uses throughout his Revelation, and there's no doubt he does it with Psalm 121 in mind.

So, at the foot of every mountain look up to the Lord for help. He who made heaven and earth will watch over his Israel perfectly. He will protect us from harm and hold on to us over every mountain, including the last. Then we reach our home. Then we reach our Jerusalem, his temple, where we join all Israel – all the saints – in triumph. Amen.