

**YAHWEH IS YOUR KEEPER:
A SERMON ON PSALM 121**

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BIG IDEA: Yahweh is your Keeper/Protector

MAIN VERSE: 121:5 – “YHWH is your keeper; YHWH is your shade on your right hand.”

OUTLINE: YHWH IS MY PROTECTOR

- I. The Expression of Confidence in YHWH
 - a. YHWH as the source of the psalmist’s help (vv. 1–2)
 - b. YHWH as the source of the audience’s help (v. 3–4)
- II. The Basis of Confidence in YHWH (v. 5)
- III. The Lasting Scope of YHWH’s Protection (vv. 6–8)

Listen to the Susan Ashton song, “Psalm 121.”

Introduction

Anxiety.... It can choke us to death if we let it. Stress.... It comes from all different directions and takes so many different forms. We opened yesterday’s class in OT History & Lit by filling the board with weighty matters of life my students were walking through. Moms and Dads with marital strife, friends attempting suicide, drug and sexual addictions, the death of a relative, cancer eating away a parent, Dads with job troubles, brothers in rebellion—all this plus tests, and papers, and mission trip preparations, and job interviews, and roommate conflict, and relational tensions with your boyfriend or girlfriend, and the list goes on and on. By day and by night we are loaded with burdens. We come and we go, and they stay with us. To our friends at school we might act like all is well, but inside we are hurting, crying out for release, for comfort, for help.

This is real life... joys and sorrows all mixed together.... Not just the news that your brother and sister-in-law are pregnant but that your Dad just lost his job. Real life, real pain. Is there any relief?

In Psalm 121, the psalmist opens with this expression of trust: “Let me lift my eyes to the hills from where my help comes.” He calls himself, he challenges himself to

look up to the mountains. To look up means one thing.... He is down. Yet his relief, his comfort, his help is to be found up ... where the maker of heaven and earth resides.

Psalm 121 occurs in Book 5 of the Psalter (Ps 107–150), a section that appears to offer reflections on the return to the land after exile and that presents God as one who restores and renews his people. Psalm 107:1–3 begins Book 5 by praising God for answering the prayer for return from exile offered in Ps 106:47. Then the remaining parts of the psalm, along with Ps 108–109 emphasize Yahweh’s unrelenting affection for all who trust him (cf. Ps 107:33–43; 108:11). Psalm 110 stresses that the Davidic covenant has not been set aside, and Pss 111–118 stress that the God who works on behalf of his people deserves wholehearted worship and loyalty at all times and in all circumstances. Such a call necessitates the centrality of both God’s Word (Ps 119) and Jerusalem in Israel’s life. It is this latter focus that drives what are known as the Songs of Ascent in Pss 120–134. The Jewish book the Mishnah links the fifteen “Songs of Ascents” with the fifteen steps up to the temple precinct (*Middoth* 2.5), but most scholars believe they were sung during the festival processions during the three annual feasts (Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles), as the pilgrims ascended the southern and central hill country to Jerusalem (cf. Exod 23:14–17; Deut 16:16).

The Expression of Confidence in YHWH (vv. 1–4)

Yahweh as the source of the psalmists help

Within this context we are told the psalmist lifts his eyes to the hills from where his help comes. Look at Psalm 125:1–2 with me: “Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, abides forever. AS the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.” Psalm 121:1–2: “Let me lift my eyes to the hills from where my help comes. My help is from YHWH, maker of heaven and earth.”

References to God dominate this psalm. Yahweh, whose very name is a reminder of his active presence and power for his people, is named 5 in the psalm, and the first is in the poet’s assertive statement regarding the source of his own help (v. 2a). This reference to Yahweh is immediately followed by a descriptive participle clause that describes God as the “Maker” of all things (v. 2b), a fact that naturally suggests that the psalmist’s God is indeed able to meet his need.

Yahweh's as the source of the audience's help

In v. 3 we see a shift from 1st to 2nd person, where the expression shifts from “I” to “you”: “I lift my eyes to the hills.... He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.” In the context of temple worship, we could have had antiphonal singing, where the psalmist spoke on his own behalf in vv. 1–2 and a choir/congregation affirmed or expounded on his statements in vv. 3–8. It is also possible that in v. 3 ff. the psalmist engages in internal dialogue, so that he states, “I need to lift my eyes to the hills” in v. 1 and then challenges himself to grasp the truths he is proclaiming, “Self, the LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your hand.” While possible, within the context of these psalms of ascent, it seems most likely the psalmist himself recalls YHWH’s presence and power with him in trouble and then exhorts his fellows, who are or may soon experience great adversity, to trust in God as their great protector and keeper. The images of looking up to the hills, the need for sure footing, exposure to the elements by day and night, coming and going may all point to a shepherd who has made his way to Jerusalem and is not exhorting pilgrims en route back home.

Regardless, the psalmist’s confidence in God is sure. For the maker of heaven and earth is YHWH, our covenant God. He who holds the stars in place, who promised world-wide restoration through Abraham, who redeemed Israel through the 10 plagues and the Red Sea, who sustained them and forgave them, who in the fullness of time sent his Son to satisfy the wrath of God and to forgive our sins—this God who gave his son for us all, will he not with him keep you in your hour of need? “He does not make your foot to slip; your keeper does not slumber. Look, the keeper of Israel will neither slumber or sleep.”

When the day turns into night, and you continue to work on that paper that is due tomorrow, know this.... Your God is still awake as well, working on your behalf. When the time comes for you to make that tough phone call, you can be assured that God is there. He is not like the so-called gods of the nations that were not always available to help individuals in need (cf. “Prayer to the God’s of the Night” and 1 Kgs 18:27). Rather, YHWH is awake, always aware, and always watching over his children (cf. Gen 26:3; Josh 1:5; Isa 43:2–3; Ps 91:11–12; Matt 28:20). As God declared to Joshua: “No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you.” And through Isaiah: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I

am YHWH your God.” And through Jesus: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.... And lo, I am with you always to the end of the age.”

The Basis of Confidence in YHWH (v. 5)

The psalmist is confident that God is for both him and his audience. The expression of this confidence in vv. 1–4 is then followed by a declaration of the basis of this confidence in v. 5. With no conditions attached, the psalmist simply declares, “YHWH is your keeper/protector; YHWH is your shade on your right hand.”

As most of you recognize, the psalms open the third division of the Hebrew Bible known as the Writings, which focus on Life in the Old Covenant. How did the faithful remnant of God make it when everything and everyone around them was crashing down. This psalm of trust declares that their persevering trust was grounded in an every present, ever powerful God, maker of heaven and earth, who was protecting them. The Writings in the OT are paralleled by the Epistolary literature in the NT, and whereas the OT Writings focus on Life in the Old Covenant, the Epistles focus on how to enjoy life in the New Covenant. In this light, some statements of Paul to the Romans are pertinent here. I read from Rom 8:31–39. Speaking in the context about persevering for God through suffering, the apostle declares:

If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ... ³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ... ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come nor powers, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The Scope of YHWH’s Protection (vv. 6–8)

The LORD is our keeper. Six times the verb “to keep/protect” shows up in the passage: 3b, 4b, 5a, 7a, 7b, 8a. That he is able to keep us is sure, for he is the maker of heaven and earth. If he can do that, he can take care of his own. His protection spans both present and future, and it relates to all circumstances that life brings. In the heat of the day, the cool of the night (v. 6), from the gravest evil (v.

7), in our coming, in our going, now and forevermore—YHWH is our keeper. Take comfort in this! In this you can be sure.

In v. 7, the psalmist likely pleads to his audience as I do now to you, “YHWH will keep you from all evil. *Let him keep your life!*” Don’t give in to the anxiety. Rather, know that God is there. He is here! Remind yourself of that today if you are experiencing significant anxieties. Choose this day that you will, in the words of Paul (Phil 4:6–7), “Be anxious about nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication make your requests known to God,” being confident that he who promised is faithful: “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus.”

Conclusion

I think it important to recognize that the psalmists confidence in God is one that assumes there will be times of need, times of help. How can God be called a helper unless there is a trial in which we need such help. The child of God is not promised freedom from tribulation or challenge or storm. What is promised is that for all whose hope is God, none of these trials will separate us from him. In the storm he is there ... always there.

What I am picturing here is Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (v. 1). Now listen to psalmist’s situation: “Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling” (vv. 2–3). How can he find such peace? The psalm continues, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved.” Where God is there is no pain, no fear, no tears. And somehow, though the psalmist’s life is caving in, he finds rest when he looks to God. The peace of heaven comes down and satisfies his soul.

Do you long for peace today? The LORD is your keeper; he will keep your life.

Isa 64:4 – “From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.”

Isaiah 40:26–31 – “Lift up your eyes on high and see: who create these? He who bring out their host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power not one is missing. Why do you say, O

Jacob, and speak, O Israel, my way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God? Have you not known? Have you not heard? YHWH is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for YHWH shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

The LORD is our keeper, our protector. May you find hope and rest in him.