

Psalm 121

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Preacher: Jonny Gibson

[0 : 00] Please turn in your Bibles to Psalm 121, Psalm 121, Psalm 121, Psalm 121, Psalm 121, Psalm 121, Psalm 121, Psalm 121, and boys and girls as promised there will be a number of times I'll refer to you in this sermon so you can listen and follow along as well.

Let's read the psalm again. A song of ascents. I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. 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.

The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun will not strike you by day nor the moon by night. 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. Father God, our help is in you, the maker of heaven and earth.

[1 : 22] And so we pray that you would come now and by your spirit illuminate our minds, conform our wills, and stir our affections for your Son, our Saviour, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever praised, world without end.

Amen. Life is tough, but so are you. Life is tough, but so are you.

That's a quote I came across. I think it was a tweet. Life is tough, but so are you. I thought the first part was refreshingly honest. Life is tough.

Sure, there are happy moments and fun moments, but there are also sad moments and hard moments. Life is tough. Just think about your daily routine or just think about the things you need to do each day.

It's hard work, isn't it? But then add to that the daily experiences of life. The relational problem with that colleague at work. The longing for companionship in marriage.

[2 : 31] The hidden pain of infertility month after month. The worry over a particular child or a strained relationship with a parent. The boredom of an uninspiring job.

The financial constraints of a lack of a job or money. The hassle involved in moving house. The physical pains of old age or a chronic illness.

That issue in your marriage you keep arguing over. The heaviness of depression. Or the panic of anxiety. The daily experiences of life make life hard going at times, don't they?

Life is tough. And then there are the unforeseen crises of life. The sad news of some terrible illness. The breakdown in a relationship.

The sudden shock of the death of a loved one. The daily routine of life is hard work. The daily experiences of life are hard work.

[3 : 33] And the unforeseen crises of life can be heartbreaking. Life is tough. I think the first part of that quote is refreshingly honest.

Life is tough. Wouldn't you agree? But the question is, what do we think of the second part of the quote? Life is tough, but so are you. Life is tough, but so are you.

If the first part is refreshingly honest, the second part is incredibly telling. Not because I think it's true, but because I think it captures an underlying attitude in our secular culture.

And that is that you have the resources within yourself to deal with whatever life throws at you. Life is tough, sure. But so are you.

It's like that classic song by Billy Ocean. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. Right? Or that Chumbawamba song.

[4 : 31] I get knocked down, but I get up again. Okay? And boys and girls, have you seen the Trolls movie? Remember it? Or you're a very sanctified lot.

It's got that great song, Get Back Up Again. Hey, I'm not giving up today. There's nothing getting in my way. And if you knock, knock me over, I will get back up again.

And if something goes a little wrong, well, you can go ahead and bring it on. Because if you knock, knock me over, I will get back up again. That is what our culture teaches us.

Life is tough, but so are you. And when you get knocked over, you just get yourself back up again.

Tweets like that, and song lyrics like that, reveal one of the great pillars of our secular culture.

Another word, self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency. Boys and girls, that just means that you have the power to do whatever you want to do, whenever you want to do it.

[5 : 32] There's two pillars of our secular culture. Autonomy. Do what you want, when you want. Because you're the master of your fate, the captain of your soul.

And the second pillar is self-sufficiency. You have everything within yourself to be who you want to be, to do what you want to do, and to overcome whatever life throws at you.

Autonomy. Self-sufficiency. And when the going gets tough, the tough get going. When you get knocked down, you just get back up again. Well, there's one thing this psalm does for us this evening.

It's that it affirms the first part, and it denies the second part. Life is tough, yes. But so are you. Well, no, says this psalm.

It says, no, our help is in the Lord. Psalm 1-2-1 concerns normal life. Everyday life. It affirms that first part. Life is tough.

[6 : 35] You see in verse 3, the reference to our foot. It speaks of a journey we're on. Verse 8 speaks of comings and goings. That's our life, our normal life. And the psalm affirms that normal life is tough.

Verse 3, our foot sometimes slips along the journey. Verse 6, the sun and the moon can strike us. Verse 7, there is evil all around us.

So this normal life, life under the sun and moon life, everyday life is tough. Life is difficult. It's dangerous. It's tough. That's what this psalm affirms.

But then here's the thing the psalm denies. Our culture says, life is tough, but so are you. And this psalm says, life is tough, but our help is in the name of the Lord.

Life is tough, but our help is in the Lord. Our world tells us to be self-sufficient. This psalm tells us to be God-dependent.

[7 : 37] And the psalm communicates that truth in two ways. Number one, life is tough, but the Lord is our helper. Life is tough, but the Lord is our helper.

Verses 1 and 2. I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Now this verse 1, I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come from? That's been interpreted in different ways. Some people think, I lift up my eyes to the hills. It carries an ominous tone.

Hills were places of danger, where thieves and robbers would lie in wait in the mountain passages. Or hills were places of idolatry, where idols were worshipped on high places.

So some people think this has got a negative connotation. But I don't think that's the case. In the Psalms, the hills of Israel, especially Jerusalem, has a positive connotation.

[8 : 39] John Calvin thought that the hills symbolize might and strength. And so the logic here is contrastive. I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?

Well, not even from something so great and mighty as the hills. But from the Lord, the maker, not only of the hills, but of heaven and earth.

And that's definitely a possible reading. But I don't think the hills are meant here in a contrastive sense. I think they're meant in a complementary sense. Just look, if you just take a look at the heading of the psalm.

A psalm of ascents. And Psalm 120 to 134. These are 15 psalms of ascents. There's some debate what that means.

The psalms of ascents. But I think the most sensible explanation is that it's a reference to the psalms they would sing as they made their way up to Jerusalem. Which was on a hill, on a mountain.

[9 : 38] And they would sing these psalms as they went up. And if you've ever been to Israel, you know that Jerusalem is on the top of this mountain range. When you fly into Tel Aviv, you're down by the sea.

You get on the bus and you just slowly make your way up to Jerusalem. And you just keep going up and up and up and up. Jerusalem was set up in the hills.

Your eyes as you drive up to Jerusalem are lifted up to these hills. Now think of what that eye lifting up experience signified for an Old Testament Israelite.

As they walked up to Mount Zion, what were they looking at? God's home. His temple. It was situated on the top of the hills in Jerusalem.

And so this psalmist is saying, I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the God who lives in those hills. The God who lives in his temple.

[10:36] The hills of Jerusalem have a positive sense here. I think they're complementary. Our help is in the hills. In the God who lives in the hills. But in order to make sure we don't just domesticate God to the hills of Jerusalem, the psalmist adds, Who made heaven and earth.

My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. The God of the hills of Jerusalem is the maker of heaven and earth. He is not a domestic deity.

Heaven and earth is what's called a mayorism. It's two parts that make a whole and everything in between. My help comes from the Lord who made everything.

And this is the reason why God can help us with anything. Because he made everything. God can help us with anything. Because he made everything.

Our God is our helper. Because he is first our creator. The reason why the gods of all other religions cannot help us is first and foremost because they have never created anything in their life.

[11:44] Never mind the heavens and the earth. The gods of the nations are created, not creator. They are made, not maker. And that is why they cannot help people. Because they were made by people.

But the great claim of this psalm is that the God of Israel, the Christian God, the God whose name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is able to help people for this one basic fundamental reason.

He made everything. He created everything. And that's why he can help us with anything. God is our helper because he is first our creator.

And that is what we need to remember. Whatever happens in our lives, whatever life throws at us, whenever life gets tough, our help is in the Lord who made everything.

When life gets tough, it's so easy to look into ourselves or around to others. It's so easy to experience a difficulty in your life and to turn to Google before you turn to God.

[12:48] But what this psalm says to us this evening is don't look in, don't look around, but look up to God. When life gets tough, the Lord is our helper.

That's the first thing this psalm shows us. And then second, life is tough, but the Lord is our keeper. Life is tough, but the Lord is our helper.

Verses 1 and 2. And now, life is tough, but the Lord is our keeper. Verses 3 to 8. Now it's important to note that verses 3 to 8 are not a prayer for protection.

Did you notice that? Psalm 1 to 1 is not a prayer for protection, it's a promise of protection. And the promise is made sure by the Lord, who is our keeper, our guard, our protector.

That's the key word through these verses. It occurs six times. The word keep or keeper. Verse 3, verse 4, verse 5, verse 7, verse 8, six times, the word keeper, keeper is used.

[14:01] Life is tough, but the Lord is our keeper. And we can see that in four ways. Number one, the Lord is our personal keeper. The Lord is our personal keeper.

Did you notice how the psalm shifts from the first person, in verses 1 and 2, to the second person, you or your, in verses 3 to 8.

Now some think that this is antiphonal singing. Verse 1 and 2 would have been sung by one group of pilgrims, and then verse 3 to 8 would be sung by another group. I think that's possible.

I think a better way to think of it is that verses 1 and 2 is sung by the king of Israel, and then verses 3 to 8 is sung by the priest, or by the people, to the king.

And I'll come back to that at the end of the sermon. But notice, for now, how deeply personal this sermon is. The words your, or you, are repeated over and over.

[14:57] Alright, boys and girls, perhaps you can help me here. I'm going to read out these verses, and as I do so, I want you to count on your hand, okay, with your fingers, how many times you hear the word your, or your, you say in England, or you.

Okay, so listen very carefully. He will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber. The Lord is your keeper.

The Lord is your shield on your right hand. The sun will not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil.

He will keep your life. The Lord will keep you going out, and your coming in, from this time forth, and forevermore. How many did you get?

Ten. Very good. Ten times in six verses. Ten times in six verses. The psalmist is saying, the Lord is your keeper. He will keep you.

[15:59] You see how personal it is? Boys and girls, it's a bit like that kid's song you sing, you know, he's got the whole world in his hands. You know that song? He's got the whole wide world in his hands.

That's like verses one and two. God is the maker of everything. He's got the whole world in his hands. And then the second verse, he's got you and me, brother, sister, in his hands.

He's got you and me in his hands. That's like verses three to eight. God's got the whole world in his hands, verses one and two, because he made everything. And he's got you and me in his hands, verses three to eight, because he's our keeper.

He's looking after us. The creator of the universe is our personal bodyguard. He's got us in his hands.

So that's the first way we see that he's our keeper. He's our personal keeper. Second, he's our persistent keeper. Verses three to four, our persistent keeper.

[17:00] 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. The foot slipping here is not merely referring to tripping up on a path.

That would suggest that Christians are not exposed to the normal accidents and tragedies of life. And we know from experience that we are as Christians. Rather, the foot slipping imagery in the Old Testament speaks of someone falling off the path to eternal ruin.

So for example, Psalm 73 speaks of God setting the wicked in slippery places so that they are swept away and utterly destroyed. And the promise here is that that will never happen to the Christian.

And the reason why it will never happen is because the Lord is our persistent keeper. He does not slumber or sleep. There's perhaps a progression here in those verbs.

Slumbering is like dropping off for a wee nap after a heavy meal. I had a wee slumber this afternoon. Or a sleep. It's like a deep sleep at the end of the day.

[18:09] So the verbs may just be a slight progression from a micro nap to a deep sleep. Or, they might just be saying the same thing. In either case, we get the point God's protective care of us never stops.

It covers day and night. God never nods off. He never has a micro sleep while he's looking after us. The reference to Israel here in verse 4 indicates that God is not just our creator but also our redeemer.

He redeemed his son Israel out of Egypt. But the reference to corporate Israel doesn't take away the personal nature of God's protection. If he's the keeper of corporate Israel, that means he's the keeper of individual Israelite.

He is the keeper of the church as well as the Christian. So this is the second thing we see. The Lord is our persistent keeper.

And this is why as a church and as a Christian we can enjoy our sleep just like Jesus did. Have you ever noticed that? Jesus enjoyed his sleep even in the midst of a storm.

[19:20] Why did he sleep in the storm? Because he knew that his father neither slept nor slumbered over him. Our sleep can be sweet because God does not sleep.

Alexander the Great, the king of ancient Greece, was once asked why he slept so well while he was on his military campaign. In those days for a king to sleep in his tent in the midst of a war was a great risk.

His own men could come in and kill him or the enemy could come in and kill him. But Alexander the Great was asked why do you sleep so well in your military campaigns and he replied because Parmenion does not sleep.

Parmenion was his bodyguard and that's why he slept so well because he knew that Parmenion never slept when he looked after him and that is what God is like to us.

He is like our personal bodyguard and he does not sleep. Our anxiety about life in general could be lessened if we would just remind ourselves that God does not sleep or slumber in looking after us. [20 : 36] He is attentive and he is our personal persistent keeper. Well third he is also our present keeper. The Lord is our present keeper.

Verse 5 and 6 the Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night.

Now the reference here to the sun and the moon are intriguing. Obviously the sun and moon are not known for dropping out of the sky like some meteorite. Have you seen that recently boys and girls? Being hit by a star have you recently?

Walking along the street? No. The sun and moon don't really fall out of the heavens do they? So I don't think this is a physical literal meaning. I think it's symbolic.

Just as the hills were symbolic of where God lives, where our health is, just as the foot was symbolic of slipping in an eternal sense, so the sun and the moon here are symbolic of danger.

[21 : 37] Danger by day, danger by night. The daytime dangers and then the nighttime dangers.

Perhaps the moon here could refer to moon stroke, imagined danger by a person's unstable mental state. Perhaps those of us who suffer from anxiety or panic attacks can identify with that.

But whatever it means, this daytime danger or nighttime danger, we get the point that nothing can strike us a deadly blow.

And that's because of what's in verse 5. The Lord is your keeper, the Lord is your shade at your right hand. Notice that. It's not that God sends us an angel, it's that God sends us himself.

He is so close to us that he is our own shade. Now boys and girls, I don't know if you've ever tried to chase someone else's shadow and stand on it.

[22 : 42] Have you ever tried to do that? The sun, yeah? And what do you have to do if you're going to stand on someone else's shadow? How close do you have to be? You've got to be very close.

You can't do it 20 yards away, you've got to get close to them. And if the Lord is our sheath at our right hand, then that means that we are close to God and God is close to us in order for him to be our sheath.

If in verse 2 he's our creator, and if in verse 4 he's our redeemer, here in verse 5 we might say that he's our companion. He's the one who comes and walks close beside us so that we live in his sheath.

The Lord is your sheath on your right hand. So we have those three pictures of God here, creator, redeemer, and companion. Sounds a bit like the Trinity, doesn't it?

God the Father creates, God the Son redeems, and God the Spirit comes alongside us. Psalm 121 is the Holy Trinity incognito.

[23 : 50] And it's this aspect of God's companionship as our ever present help that is highlighted here. Life is tough, but the Lord is our personal keeper, he's our persistent keeper, and he is our present keeper.

He stands beside us and is our shade at our right hand. And then fourth, the Lord is our perpetual keeper. The Lord is our perpetual keeper, or eternal keeper.

But we needed a fourth P, didn't we? The Lord will keep you from all evil, he will keep your life, the Lord will keep your going out, and you're coming in from this time forth, and forever more.

We see the totality of his care in these verses. Do you notice that? The Lord keeps us from all evil, the all encapsulates day and night. Verse 7, our life in all its fullness is kept by God.

Verse 8, he keeps our going out and our coming in, another merism, two parts to communicate the whole of life. God watches over our everyday wanderings, our comings and goings, from womb to tomb.

[25 : 02] God watches over us. His care is total, but also, notice the final words, his care is perpetual, it is eternal, from this time forth and forever more.

God's keeping does not end in this life and in this world, it continues into the next world. When we get to heaven, God's protecting care of us is not over.

You could say it's only just beginning. When our loved ones get to heaven, God does not stop keeping them, he is still keeping them. The Lord is our perpetual keeper from this time forth and forever more.

So those are four aspects of God as our keeper. He's our personal keeper. Remember boys and girls, how many you and yours were there? Ten. He's our personal keeper.

He's our persistent keeper. He doesn't sleep or slumber. He is our present keeper, but he's the shade at our right hand, and he's our perpetual keeper.

[26 : 12] He will keep us forever and ever. And this is the second great truth that this psalm gives us in the midst of life's difficulties. Our culture says life is tough, but so are you.

This psalm says life is tough, yes, for the Lord is our helper. The Lord is our keeper. In closing, I want to ask what does the Lord keeping our goings and comings actually mean?

What does it mean for him to keep us from all evil and to keep our life? What does it mean that the sun and the moon will not strike us? What does it mean that our foot will not slip in verse 3?

Is this some kind of health, wealth, and prosperity gospel? Is it the Christian life is trouble-free?

Well, no. We walk along the same paths in life as unbelievers do.

We live out our lives under the same sun and moon, and we encounter the same evils that they do. Life is tough, whoever you are, wherever you are, and being a Christian doesn't make it less tough.

[27 : 21] So what exactly is this keeping that the psalmist promises us? Because remember, it's a promise, not a prayer, that God will keep us. Well, the answer to what the Lord's keeping means is in those final words, from this time forth and forever more.

Let me unpack those words by telling you about a Vietnamese pastor and translator called Hien. After Vietnam fell in the 1970s, Hien was captured by the Viet Con and imprisoned and tortured. His captors beat him continually, they forced him to clean the toilet latrines, they brainwashed him with communist material, and eventually after some time he cracked and stopped praying and he became an atheist.

But a couple of years later the guard put him on toilet duty, and as he was cleaning out the toilet he saw a piece of paper that had been used as toilet paper.

He noticed some writing on the top corner of it, Romans. He rubbed off the human excrement that was on it, folded it up and put it in his pocket, and that night in the darkness of his cell he switched on his torch and he read these words, And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

[28 : 48] What then shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things?

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any part, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God. He began to cry. And then he said these words, Lord, you would not let me out of your reach for even one day.

You would not let me out of your reach for even one day. That's the kind of keeping that Psalm 121 is talking about. It's the preservation of God's people in relationship with him now and for eternity, come hell or high water.

[30 : 10] The next day, Hien asked if he could do toilet duty again. And would you believe it, he recovered the whole book of Romans from the toilets. And his faith was restored.

He later escaped, became a pastor to Vietnamese people in America. Psalm 121 is to Old Testament saints what Romans 8 is to New Testament saints.

It's the reassurance that nothing in this life or the next life can separate us from the God who has redeemed us in his son, Jesus Christ.

The help and protection promised in Psalm 121 is the promise never to be separated from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

Because that is where Psalm 121 finds its fulfillment. Because every benefit we receive in this life, including protection, comes to us through Christ.

[31 : 11] And only when we're united to Christ do we receive the benefits. And those benefits are only ours because they were first Christ's. Remember earlier I said that one way to read the shift

from the first person in verses 1 and 2 to the second person in verses 3 to 8 is to see verses 1 and 2 sung by the king of Israel and then verses 3 to 8 sung by the people to the king.

And I think that's the best way to read that. Here's the king of Israel saying, I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. And then the people sing to the king, yes, he will not let your foot slip. In other words, Psalm 121, it was sung by Christ.

Remember, he sung the psalms. These experiences were his experience. And the psalm is first for the king, for Christ, and then for the Christian.

Because think about it, Christ sung and experienced what is in this psalm. The Lord was his helper. The Lord did not let his foot slip in battle with the devil.

[32 : 27] The Lord watched over him. The sun did not strike him by day nor the moon by night. The Lord kept him from all evil. He resisted the devil's temptations.

The Lord kept his life. He raised him from the dead. The Lord kept his going out from heaven and his coming back into heaven. Christ experienced Psalm 121 as the faithful Israelite as Israel's faithful representative king.

Verses 1 and 2 may well be a statement of faith with his people then speaking the promise of protection over him in verses 3 to 8. And because Christ was kept by his father, he can now keep us.

He is after all the good shepherd who said, my sheep are in my hands. None shall pluck them from me. because I am in my father's hands.

He was the one who first experienced God his father as helper and keeper. And that is where our trust should lie tonight. Not in ourselves, but in the Lord who made heaven and earth and sent his son to be our savior.

[33 : 42] Life is tough and we are not. Just think of Hien, the Vietnamese pastor. When life got tough, he did not get going.

When he got knocked down, he didn't get back up again. When life got tough, Hien did not get going, but God did. God did not sleep nor slumber over him because God never slept nor slumbered over his son, Jesus Christ, when he was on earth.

It is just as Hien said after he read Romans 8 in the cell that night, Lord, you would not let me out of your reach for even one day. Nothing shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is what it means for God to be our keeper. So brothers and sisters, when life gets tough, and it will get tough, we don't get tough.

When life gets tough, our help is in the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. Let us pray.