

HELPER AND KEEPER

Psalms 121:1–8

Key Verse: 121:5a

“The LORD is your keeper...”

What do you do when you are scared, or discouraged, or without hope? These moments are really hard to endure. We all have ways of coping. But whatever we try, it doesn't solve the problem. We just go through it and hope it goes away soon. At times we just want to give up. Today we're looking at one of the most beloved Psalms in the Bible. It expresses beautifully how God shepherds us. It says that in this harsh world he is our helper and keeper. It sounds nice. But in fact, God doesn't always keep us from every harm or tragedy. So how can we understand this Psalm? How can we live life believing that the LORD is our helper and keeper? We can understand it only as we see how it points us to our Lord Jesus. As we reflect on his words may God speak to us.

Psalms 121 is part of Psalms 120–134, called “the Song of Ascents” or “the Pilgrim Songs.” Believers scattered around the world would sing these songs on their way to the annual feasts in Jerusalem. The last part of the trip was uphill, and not easy, but they did it regularly. While families sang these songs together, they came to know and understand God better. The Pilgrim Songs foreshadowed Christian life, which is also a pilgrimage. The Bible says we who believe in Jesus are strangers and exiles in this world, on our way to the heavenly kingdom, our true home.¹ But our Christian pilgrimage may be even harder than these Pilgrims', because we're living in such a hostile world, which has a completely different worldview and values, and is full of hatred, lies, curses, and darkness. Living in this world, many become scared, discouraged, or sad. The first Pilgrim Song, Psalm 120, is a raw lament by someone who's been slandered. He feels trapped and abused among foreign people who are hostile and longing for war. From that place, Psalm 121 helps a pilgrim begin a new journey back to God.

Let's read verses 1–2. This is not a peaceful gaze at distant mountains; it's the eyes of someone looking up from a desperate situation. This Psalmist is in real danger. There's no last-minute team racing down the hills to rescue him, like in the movies. So he asks, “From where does my help come?” (1b) At first, he

¹ Heb.11:13–16; 1 Pet.1:3–4; 2 Pet.3:13.

sees there is none. Then he remembers, “My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (2). This summer, in the Psalms we’ve repeatedly heard that God is our “helper” (22:19; 27:9; 86:17b). We’ve heard he’s “an ever-present help in trouble” (46:1). We need to believe he really is ever-present to help us. Now in these Pilgrim Songs the theme of God our helper appears again. It’s here in verse 2. And Psalm 123:1 exclaims, “To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!” Psalm 124:8 repeats it: “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” The phrase “who made heaven and earth” is powerful. It isn’t just words; he’s the living, almighty Creator God, and he’s still there. What a helper he is! We may be so discouraged, utterly helpless, and hopeless. But he who made heaven and earth is more than able to help us, if we would just lift up our eyes to him.

To really turn to him as our helper, we need faith. At the beginning of his redemptive history, the LORD told a man named Abram to “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen.12:1). It was to help this fatalistic old man, even in his old age, to stop depending on all that seemed familiar and secure, and start depending on God. Soon, Abram left the promised land for Egypt, to solve a financial crisis on his own. But God graciously intervened and called him back to himself and to a life of faith (Gen.12:10–13:4). Eventually Abram learned this faith, to look up to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth (Gen.14:22–23), and depend only on him. Like him we need training in faith until we can say with deep conviction, “My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (2).

Verses 3–8 describes specific ways God helps us. The word “keep” is repeated here six times. The LORD’s keeping us is his blessing (Num.6:24). “Keeps” is a beautiful word that means “watches over,” “guards,” or “protects.” How does God “keep” us? Read verses 3–4. It begins, “He will not let your foot be moved...” “Moved” literally means to “totter, shake, or slip.” In hiking, we lose our footing when we’re not paying attention to what’s under our feet. The Bible, especially the Psalms, mentions feet that slip.² Proverbs 25:19 says, “Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips.” But the Psalmist wrote, “When I thought, ‘My foot slips,’ your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up” (Ps.94:18). Our foot is not moved, and does not slip, if we remember God’s steadfast love. Without his love, as we go through life we’re

² Deut.32:35; 2 Sam.22:37; Job 12:5; Ps.17:5; 18:36; 37:31; 38:16; 66:9; 73:2.

“slip sliding” all over the place. But if we hold onto his steadfast love, God helps us each step of the way, step by step, day by day, all the way.

And it’s a most beautiful image in the Bible that God our keeper “will neither slumber nor sleep” (4b). In the Ancient Near East, people thought their gods deserved to take undisturbed naps. A God who never slumbers or sleeps was considered weird.³ But our God never sleeps because he cares so much for us. He’s like the security guard, the shepherd, or the night nurse who never falls asleep on the job. He’s alert and watching all that we’re going through, and he’s right there for us. We may be under attack, or wandering and confused, or becoming so spiritually sick we can’t see him and are near death. But it’s God who “will neither slumber nor sleep” in order to “keep” us.

Verse 4a calls him “he who keeps Israel.” It reminds us of what God did for his people in all their weaknesses. When Jacob was young and had to leave home due to his brother Esau’s anger at him, God promised to “keep” Jacob wherever he went and to bring him safely home someday (Gen.28:15). Then Jacob experienced many years of abuse and manipulation from his uncle Laban. But God watched over him, and while “keeping” him he also changed his name to “Israel.” God helped Jacob learn the sojourning life of faith of his fathers, which led him out of this world back to God himself.⁴ When Jacob’s descendants eventually fled Egypt, the Bible says God “preserved” or “kept” that large multitude in all the ways that they went, and among all the peoples through whom they passed (Josh.24:17). While keeping them through their wilderness wanderings and all their failures, God was molding them into people of faith who could love God more than a place in the promised land. In all their stories, God’s “keeping” them included his care, provision, providence, leading, and training.

On our pilgrim journey God doesn’t hide us from the world; he goes with us. Let’s read verses 5–6. Young people today use the expression “throw shade”; it means to subtly show contempt or disapproval. But in the ancient Middle East, “shade” was seen as a positive power of protection. The “right hand” is used to work and to fight, so if it gets badly burned, the person is disabled. Here, the “shade” comes from the LORD’s own presence, who protects and shields us

³ *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150*, Zenger, Erich et. al (2011); Psalm 121, Second Section (vv.3–4): “Yhwh’s Constantly Watching Care.”

⁴ Gen.32:27–28; 47:9; Heb.11:21.

from the harsh sun or whatever may burn us (cf. Ps.91:1). We're all vulnerable to the daily extremes around us. So the Psalms repeatedly mention "the shadow/shelter of your wings" to point us to God's gracious protection.⁵ We all would like to hide from the spiritual, social, and political chaos and evil burning through this world. But God himself gives us real shelter, through his own living presence with us.

Finally, let's read verses 7–8. Notice the expressions "all evil," "your life," and, "your going out and your coming in." "Your life" is literally "your soul." It's protection on every level, from without, from within, and in all our daily routines. God keeps us in every way. He's that concerned for us. Yet often, we're not feeling it. In fact, sometimes God allows bad things to actually happen. At times, evil really confronts us. Our inner person gets so lonely, so depressed. We have no strength to get on with life, and when we try, we experience one frustration after another. We all live in a sinful, cursed world, filled with problems, illnesses and dangers. Obviously God "keeping" us doesn't mean he makes our lives problem-free. So how can we understand this? How does God keep us? It's by being right there with us, through it all. He told his people in Isaiah 43:2: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

Ultimately, God our keeper is fulfilled in our Lord Jesus. He promises those who believe in him, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt.28:20b). How is he "with us *always*"? He told us it's through the Helper, the Spirit of truth, who dwells in us forever (John 14:16–17). It shows us that our Lord Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He promised that no one can snatch us out of his hand (John 10:28b). He's the door; through him we're saved and can go in and out and find pasture (John 10:9). As we listen to his voice and trust his love each day, he keeps us close to him. Peter called him "the Shepherd and Overseer" of our souls (1 Pet.2:25b). He's watching over us more than anyone else ever could. And he's not just watching. Hebrews 7:25 says, "...he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." Our Risen Lord Jesus is never sleeping, but vigilantly praying for us. As we realize that he is with us, right "at hand," we stop

⁵ Ps.17:8; 36:8; 57:2; 61:5; 63:8.

being anxious, bring all our requests to him in prayer, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guards our hearts and minds in him (Phil.4:5–7).

Jesus is our keeper not just for today, but for our entire pilgrimage. At the end of his last letter Paul wrote, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (2 Tim.4:18). Paul believed Jesus would be his keeper all the way to the kingdom. In Jude’s letter, he described false teachers creeping into the church, perverting the grace of God into sensuality. It was not easy to spiritually survive among such people. But Jude writes, “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy...” (Jude 24). This is our eternal security. We have it because it’s our Lord Jesus who keeps us, so we’re sure of our hope of eternal glory.

But we need to rely on Jesus, our keeper, practically. To do that, we’ve got to repent of our self-reliance. Most of us aren’t even aware of how self-reliant we are. And, we try to rely on other pseudo-helpers and keepers. For example, a good house in a good neighborhood with a good mortgage rate, security system and insurance policy seems to “keep” us in an uncertain world. We allow caregivers to “keep” our little ones. We give all our extra money to an investment broker who says he’ll “keep” it for us. Healthcare providers say they’ll “keep” us alive and healthy, if possible. Still, we don’t feel “kept.” We worry; we’re anxious. Why? Because unpredictable things can happen and ruin everything. In this dangerous, toxic world, no one and nothing seems enough. Real life and Jesus seem like totally different spheres, with no connection. We need to let our false securities come to light so we can repent and start relying on Jesus practically, the only one who can truly help and keep us.

We can come to him in prayer and tell him honestly, “Lord, I don’t know what I’m doing. My own strength, my own plans, my own management, my own resources can’t really help me. Forgive me for relying on myself and other people and things. Show me how to rely on you. Lord, I surrender control of my life to you. Thank you for your presence always with me as a shade in this evil world. Help me to grow in this conviction, that you alone are my helper and keeper. May you be my helper and keeper in every aspect of my life, my comings and goings, my every relationship, and especially of my soul.” We also need to help those we care for to stop relying on themselves and truly rely on Jesus as their helper and

keeper. For this we need to pray, and then, speak the truth in love (Eph.4:15). As we pray for them, we need faith that the Lord is their helper and keeper. The words that he “neither slumbers nor sleeps” urge us to wake up from our spiritual slumber and grow in his image, always watching, keeping, and helping his flock.

So, what do you do when you feel scared, or discouraged, or hopeless? Try harder to rely on yourself? Or on someone else? Or on something that seems secure? Or do you come to our Good Shepherd Jesus? If you do, you’ll find he is with you always, right now, through every trouble, every grief, watching over your soul and keeping you, all the way. Read verse 5a again. “The LORD is your keeper...” Whatever we’re going through, may God help us lift up our eyes to Jesus our helper. And may we experience his living presence that keeps us on our pilgrimage back to his kingdom.