

Psalm 121 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

## Psalm 121

### Assurance of God's Protection

**A Song of Ascents.**

<sup>1</sup>I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
from where will my help come?

<sup>2</sup>My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.

<sup>3</sup>He will not let your foot be moved;  
he who keeps you will not slumber.

<sup>4</sup>He who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.

<sup>5</sup>The LORD is your keeper;  
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

<sup>6</sup>The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.

<sup>7</sup>The LORD will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.

<sup>8</sup>The LORD will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and forevermore.

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**Psalm 121, John 9**

**Pilgrimage: From where will my help come?**

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There is, as biblical scholar Eugene Peterson has dubbed it, “a dog-eared songbook” in the middle of your Bible that you may not know about. This song book is a series of 15 Psalms, the ones numbered 120 – 134. If you were to turn to any of those psalms, they will have notes in them that are instructions – not part of the prayers themselves – but something to tell us how they are to be used for worship or personal devotion. Like we learned last week from Jay, a *maskil* is a psalm that is meant to invoke wisdom. These psalms also have a subscript in whatever Bible you happen to use – it will say something like “Psalms of Ascent” or in Peterson’s full Bible translation “The Message,” he calls them *pilgrim* psalms. It turns out they are meant to be songs for the journey. These are the 15 psalms that you would sing in your caravan to go up to Jerusalem for the religious festivals. They are indeed pilgrim psalms and maybe even “climbing” psalms since going UP to Jerusalem is what anyone from the surrounding low country would have to do to get there. They are the car-ride songs, the mix-tape, the playlist that you would have on repeat to help you let go of where you have been and that will take you to where you are going. If you’ve ever had a favorite tape you wore out or a playlist that is your long trip go to – you’ll have exactly the feel for what these psalms are suppose to invoke.

In his devotional book on these psalms called “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction,” Peterson then turns his attention from the songs themselves to connecting to the feel of the road, “We know that our Lord from a very early age *went up* to Jerusalem for the annual feasts.” And then he goes on to say that as the disciples who still follow Jesus “...there is wonder

upon unexpected wonder on this road and there are fearful specters to be met. Singing the fifteen psalms is a way both to express an amazing grace and to quiet the anxious fears.” If only everyone could speak so lovingly about the Bible as Eugene Peterson does, we might have less fractious conversations and disagreements about it, and rather turn to how we can find our own personal playlist in it.

So, if these fifteen psalms are the playlist, Psalm 121 may be the favorite song in the playlist according to how it is still used today by those who travel to Jerusalem in order to be touched and transformed in their spiritual lives. I found myself moved hearing my friend Patrick talk about praying this prayer verse by verse as he ascended the southern steps of the Temple that you can still walk today. Easily, he said, it was the high point of his trip to Israel.

But for those of us NOT making a physical pilgrimage to Jerusalem anytime soon – what can these psalms speak to us? Certainly, they are also meant to be markers of the spiritual journey, the inward journey where we take steps into the unknown with both hope and fear, and ask for God to guide us on the way. This is the journey of Lent. In this season of reflection and growth, we have the opportunity to “go up” to Jerusalem with Jesus. The journey may have the spirit of exuberance – headed into that space where everyone will be connecting with family and friends – preparing for and celebrating a holy festival. But the journey may also have that edge of fear – a pilgrimage can demand more of us than we are prepared to give. Transformation is another way of saying we are dying to the old so that the new can come. We like the new part – but not so much the dying part. These psalms lift up many themes of the spiritual life – repentance, protection, help, joy, security, community, obedience, holiness, and more.

Getting back to today’s psalm specifically, I do like that psalm 121 on its own could be the official traveler’s psalm. Whether you are a day-tourist or going on a 3-month pilgrimage...

Whether you are going across Ashland or across the Atlantic... Whether you are taking the opportunity to go somewhere with friends or headed to a secluded place to be alone with the rocks and trees... this psalm, a psalm that Jesus himself would have known well, will likely speak to the adventurer in you.

I included Peterson's translation of this psalm from the Message as our call to worship today because he writes it in such a way in English as to preserve the "traveler's advisory" he talks about being in this prayer. He says there are three pitfalls that are referred to in this psalm. 1) You can get physically hurt, like stumble and sprain your ankle. 2) You can be exposed to too much sun walking outside and grow faint. And 3) As these travelers were taking on long journeys on foot, you could get fatigued or anxious, exposing yourself to moonstroke. I loved learning that word this week. Moonstroke is a poetic kind of word for emotional stress, as the moon has often been thought of as having a pull on human emotions. (Reading this again)

**Leader: I look up to the mountains; does my strength come from mountains?**

***People: No, my strength comes from God, who made heaven, and earth, and mountains.***

**Leader: God won't let you stumble. Your Guardian God won't fall asleep.**

***People: Not on your life! Israel's Guardian will never doze or sleep.***

**Leader: God's your Guardian, right at your side to protect you -**

***People: Shielding you from sunstroke, sheltering you from moonstroke.\****

**Leader: God guards you from every evil. God guards your very life.**

***People: God guards you when you leave and when you return. God guards you now.***

***God guards you always.***

In either reciting or singing psalm 121, the one who is praying this prayer is calling upon God's protection from physical harm and emotional dis-ease. We are likely familiar with praying in that way. We pray often for loved ones who are making a journey away from our sight, and I know I pray during just about every lift off and landing for sure when I'm traveling by plane. I like being other places, but I'm not the world's best traveler in getting there. A little motion sickness has always been my norm, and my husband likes driving the back roads. As we are traveling, the prayer goes, we look up to the mountains or consider our destination – does our strength come from knowing where we are going? Not so much. We put our trust instead in the one who made the earth and every point on it, from the mountains to the seashore. God is our Guardian – guarding us from every evil, guarding our very lives, guarding us when we leave AND when we come back. God is your Guardian, right now, in this very moment, as you sit here in church. AND God guards you always.

Now does this mean that we will never sprain an ankle, never get overheated and dehydrated, never get irritated at the rest of the family who has spent WAY too long in the car with us and is getting hungry and cranky with no exit ramp for the next 30 miles. Well, we know that isn't the case. God's guardianship is there for us – but it's not for the purpose of making us super-travelers along this human journey. It doesn't erase the hardships of the journey for us. Indeed, we sing this as a traveler's song precisely BECAUSE we know that both the literal and the spiritual journey will require much of us. Yes, Jesus went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the festivals, but he also went up to Jerusalem to challenge the powerful with a message of loving kindness they didn't want to hear. His teaching with authority was causing disruption. To go TOWARD Jerusalem was to embrace the idea that he may stumble into physical violence and feel like God had fallen asleep from protecting him. To go TOWARD Jerusalem was to

experience the heated anger of those who had turned against him and wanted him dead. To go TOWARD Jerusalem was to know that his friends would get scared and deny him, betray him, and leave him emotionally distraught and spiritually wrung dry. Jesus would certainly suffer something like both sunstroke and moonstroke on this journey. To believe, no to SING, that God would be with him now and always is a testimony to the faith that Jesus had, a faith he most certainly cultivated by singing from that dog-eared songbook, the psalms of ascent, year after year after year.

Whether you consider yourself a seasoned traveler or a modest tourist – we are all pilgrims when it comes to the spiritual journey. The choices we take and the directions we go will shape who we are. Living life comes with challenges, be they physical, spiritual, or emotional. Prayers can help us, especially the prayers we make for God to be our guide. I love that Peterson called his book “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction” even as the quote comes from Friedrich Nietzsche, the longer version that inspired him being the inside-the-front cover-quote. And it goes like this: *“The essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.”*

That is the ticket, isn't it? Having a long obedience in the same direction. Having the same 15 songs on your playlist, year after year after year. I lift up my eyes to the mountains, today. I will lift my eyes again to the mountains, tomorrow. Each time I do, I won't fear the climb because I will trust God to be by my side. Some days that will come more easily than others, but if I do it on repeat, the lyrics will become more and more familiar to me.

Thomas Merton also has a famous prayer about the spiritual journey and I will close with it. I'm pretty sure I've shared it before, but now after today, you will probably start to notice that

my preaching also comes from my tried and true playlist about 90% of the time, with only an occasional venture into a new melody.

Merton prayed:

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

nor do I really know myself,

and the fact that I think I am following your will

does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you

does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,  
though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though

I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me,

and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.