

January 19, 2025

Psalm 121

If the wildfires in Southern California have taught us anything, it's that safety and security in this world is an illusion. It's proven no matter how much money you've made, how high in the hills your million-dollar home is, how famous and accomplished you are, it is terrifyingly possible that you could lose everything within a moment, even your life. Men and women who, a month ago, were among the elites of our culture, have lost everything. In this world, safety and security is an illusion. Sure, you may have a great job with great benefits, but that won't stop you from getting into a car wreck or developing alzheimers. Sure, you may be debt free and your portfolio may be well-diversified, but that won't stop your body from developing cancer, or the market from crashing, or a tornado wrecking your house. Sure, you may be caught up on all your shots and the screenings may look clean, but this won't stop death in the family or violence. I'm not saying this to be morbid. I'm saying this because Americans live pretending that they are safe and secure from disaster and the reality is, that's not true. Our journey in this world is dangerous, and there's no way of getting around it.

This Psalm is written for you. Originally, this Psalm was sung by Old Testament believers as they made the journey up to Mount Zion, where Jerusalem was, to worship at the Temple of God for the passover. And that journey was dangerous and difficult. They didn't have Fords- they had feet. The travelling from the northern part of Israel to Jerusalem would be comparable to walking from Madison to Milwaukee- but you have to climb up and down hills and mountains, make camp in the night in a place where snakes, scorpions, lions, bears, thieves looking to steal all are lurking. This was a dangerous journey, especially with pregnant women, children, the elderly, and yet, they journeyed with joy with this Psalm ringing from their mouths. And that's the point: **Journey With Joy. 1. God is your Helper. 2. God is your Keeper.**

**1. God is your Helper.** The opening line of the Psalm puts us in the place of the people about to journey- "I lift my eyes to the hills." The hills and mountains were both a place of security and fear. Ancient people would look to the mountains with fear because that's where enemies came from. At the same time, and I think this is what the writer is getting at, is that the mountains were looked at as security. Mountains protected you from large armies. Mountains were seen as places where gods dwelled. So, where does my help come from? From what we see in the Old Testament, sadly, this is likely what many of them would have said: "My help comes from my family and children, I have so many people here that if something happened, they'd take care of me!" "My help comes from the army and the king- we have such powerful soldiers and such a politically savvy king that we'll be okay." "Our help comes from the gods! Sure, the Lord is a powerful god among many gods, and if he doesn't send us the rain we need, that's okay, the other nations have gods that give them rain, so if things don't work out, we'll be okay." Do you see what's going on here? "Where does my help come from" isn't just a rhetorical question, it's actually the most important question you can ask. Some of you who have done Bible Information

Course remember when we talked about the 1st Commandment- “You shall have no other gods,” and how that doesn’t *just* mean not worshipping other gods, but something Martin Luther wrote in the large Catechism: *Many a man thinks that he has God and everything in abundance when he has money and, possessions; he trusts in them and boasts of them with such firmness and assurance as to care for no one. Such a man also has a god, money and possessions, on which he sets all his heart, and which is also the most common idol on earth. He who has money and possessions feels secure, and is joyful and undismayed as though he were sitting in the midst of Paradise. On the other hand, he who has none doubts and is despondent, as though he knew of no God. For very few are to be found who are of good cheer, and who neither mourn nor complain if they have not Mammon. This [care and desire for money] sticks and clings to our nature, even to the grave. So, too, whoever trusts and boasts that he possesses great skill, prudence, power, favor, friendship, and honor has also a god, but not this true and only God. This appears again when you notice how presumptuous, secure, and proud people are because of such possessions, and how despondent when they no longer exist or are withdrawn. Therefore I repeat that the chief explanation of this point is that to have a god is to have something in which the heart entirely trusts.*

However you answer that question, wherever your help comes from, that is your god. If your hope and trust is in your money, you’ll swell with pride when you have it and be in the depths of despair when you don’t. The same is true for the approval of others, your children, your reputation- all of these good things- but they can’t be your source of ultimate joy and comfort. If you want to journey with true joy, your help cannot come from anything created, anything that’s between heaven or earth- but the one who created the Heavens and the Earth. Your help, your security, your joy, your assurance that you will be okay comes not from your bank account, your insurance policy, your friends or family, but from the one who has created and given you all those things- the Lord, maker of Heaven and Earth. *Okay, great.* I should put my trust and hope and security not in anything in this world, but in God alone. Why? Because he’s powerful? A lot of gods claim to be powerful. Because not only is God powerful, he’s also your keeper.

**2. The Lord is Your Keeper.** You may have noticed that in your bulletins, I italicized some of the words: all of those words are one word that shows up several times in this one Psalm. That word is, *shamar*. *Shamar* means to keep, guard, or hold something as special and important. When the Old Testament tells us to “keep” God’s commandments, that we are supposed to regard them as special, holy, and perfect, to hold them close to your heart and not lose them- like a special possession and treasure just for you. That’s what God does to you. He treasures you. He holds you. He values you. He prioritizes you. In fact, he is so protective of you that he doesn’t sleep! He keeps you. Money doesn’t do that for you! Your spouse, children, friends, as wonderful as they are, can’t do that for you. Your job, your followers, your reputation doesn’t do that for you. God alone keeps you. And the psalm beautifully walks you through all the things he does. 1. He keeps you from stumbling- if life is a journey, that journey is dangerous and the Scriptures talk about your faith life as a part of that journey, and to sin, or even leave the faith altogether, is pictured as stumbling or falling. And here, it’s clear that God is watching your journey, and he keeps you close to him because he chose you to be his own from before he made

the world- he chose you! So he's going to keep you from stumbling in all different kinds of ways! 2. He doesn't sleep. Okay, of course he doesn't. He's God. But think about that. There is nothing that escapes his notice. There is nothing that he forgets. The hairs of your very head are numbered. There is nothing he doesn't know, nothing that surprises him. 3. He's your shade that protects you from the sun by day and the moon by night. What's that mean? Remember, the middle-eastern sun beats down hard- us pale people can appreciate that- but the ancient Jews saw the sun as oppressive and obnoxious. The moon wasn't much better. The ancients believed that the moon had a power to make people lose their minds- and not just the Jews, but the Greeks and Romans too. In fact, the word "lunatic" comes from the Latin word for the moon- "luna." The Psalmist is saying that God protects your body and your soul. Your flesh and your spirit. Your physical and spiritual natures. Every inch of you is protected by God. The hardships of the day- difficult labor, sickness, disaster, and the terrors of the night- intruders, fears, even ghosts and demons (and I know some of you need to hear this)- even those can do nothing without God's permission. 4. God keeps your comings and goings. Once you exit this building, God keeps you. Even during the night while you sleep, God keeps you. Even when you are sick and in pain and alone, you're not alone. God keeps you. And even when you are dying, God keeps you. There is never, ever a time when God isn't keeping you.

How can you be sure of this? Sure, it sounds nice, but how do you know? And how can you know this when things sure seem to be out of God's control and he apparently doesn't like you based on how life is going? The key to this and every Psalm is this question: What was going in Jesus' heart as he sang this Psalm on his way to Jerusalem for the final time? As he lifted his eyes to Mount Zion and asked, "where does my help come from?" He knew. It wasn't coming. The Son of God would have to face the doom that we deserved, the thing we all fear most, the abandonment of God. And Jesus cried, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," because on the Cross- Jesus endured true Hell and was abandoned by God so you and I would never, ever, ever have to wonder if God truly keeps us. Because of Christ, you can be sure he does. Therefore, stop worrying. But what if our country falls and the \_\_\_\_\_'s take over and our culture decays? You are a citizen of a much more lasting kingdom than this. But what if our church dies? Buildings close and merge, but Christ's church will endure forever. But what if we lose out on our retirement. What if we lose our house? What if we can't afford food? What if we can't be treated for our sicknesses because our insurance is bad and we can't afford care? What if my children get sick? What if they die? What if I die? Whatever you lose, your Helper is more than capable to pay you back infinitely what he took away. If you lose your life, you actually gain life forever. Nothing, nothing can separate you from the love of Christ. Nothing.

I want to tell you about one of the most influential Christians to ever live. His name was Philip Melancthon. He started college when he was 12 years old, and by the time he was 21, he had published many books, including a Greek grammar book and was a respected authority on Law, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, and theology. He was a genius. He was also a close,

personal friend of Martin Luther- the man whom God used to help Christians rediscover the most important truth of the Bible- we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. In fact, some of the most important theological writings of the Reformation weren't actually written by Luther, but by Melancthon, and Luther considered him the greatest, most gifted, intelligent man he ever met. He was also plagued with worry. He would worry about the invading Turkish armies that might take over Europe. He was worried about the Pope and Catholic Emperor- the two most powerful people in Europe- who were doing everything in their power to get Luther burnt alive. He was worried about the state of Christianity- so many pastors didn't know their bibles, so many Christians didn't even know, let alone believe, the truths of Scripture. He was worried about his society, the drunkenness, the lewdness, the declining spiritual and moral state of Saxony- sound familiar? He was always worried, and in those moments, Luther would often say, *"Let Philip cease from ruling the world."*

My friends, you're not in control. Thanks be to God for that. Because the one who is is infinitely wiser, more powerful, more alert, more able, and infinitely kinder, more loving, more generous, and more protective of those you love than you or I will ever be. Let him rule the world. If that's true, our journey may be dangerous, but it's in his hands, under his watch, and leading ultimately to him. Let's journey, and let's journey with joy. Amen.