

PSALMS

Chapter 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? ²My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. ³He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. ⁴Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. ⁵The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. ⁶The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. ⁷The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. ⁸The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

Ps 121 A dialogue (perhaps liturgical) of confession and assurance. Its use as a pilgrimage song provides the key to its understanding. Whether the dialogue takes place in a single heart (cf. the refrain in Ps 42–43) or between individuals in the caravan is of no great consequence since all would share the same convictions. The comforting assurance expressed (see Ps 33) is equally appropriate for the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and for the pilgrimage of life to the “glory” into which the faithful will be received. The psalm is composed of four couplets, each having an introductory line, which the rest of the couplet develops. Key terms are “the LORD” and “watch over,” each occurring five times. (CSB)

Written for a pilgrim viewing Jerusalem’s hills, or by a psalmist when he is feeling overwhelmed. He finds that God, who created all things, is his helper. (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–2, search for help; vv 3–4, the Lord keeps Israel; vv 5–6, the Lord protects at all times; vv 7–8, the Lord will keep you forevermore. (TLSB)

The 121st psalm is a psalm of comfort in which the psalmist comforts us by his example, so that we may remain strong in faith and wait for God’s help and protection. Although it appears as though he sleeps or slumbers so that we are struck down by the sun by day and moon at night, yet it is not so, though we may think and feel it. For God watches and keeps us secure and does not let the sun strike us dead. This we will come to know for certain at last, though we can now only look forward to it. (Reading the Psalms with Luther)

Notice the ascending, step like structure formed by the repetition of the words “help,” “slumber,” and “watch.” From verse 1 on each verse adds to the blessing. (PBC)

121:1–2† Confession of trust in the Lord. A rhetorical question, immediately answered. (CSB)

121:1 *I lift up my eyes* – These words express the pilgrim’s present and intense contemplation of the journey. After all, the way to the holy city would be through hills fraught with danger – slippery paths and loose rocks and deep valleys, as well as robbers and wild animals. (A Commentary on Psalms – Ross)

hills. Those in the vicinity of Jerusalem, of which Mount Zion is one (125:2), or, if the plural indicates majesty (as in the Hebrew in 87:1; 133:3), Mount Zion itself. (CSB)

Psalmist may be looking up to the hills of Jerusalem as he approaches for one of the festivals. Also, the hills or mountains frequently symbolize God’s creation, command, and power. Cf Gn 22:2; Ex 3:1–2; 19:2–3; 1Ki 18:20; Ps 125:2; 133:3. (TLSB)

Where does my help come – This word “help” is a term that is used frequently for divine intervention in which the Lord provides what the people were lacking, or does for them what they cannot do for themselves. So it is more than simple assistance that is meant – without this help the psalmist would not be safe at all. (A Commentary on Psalms – Ross)

His help and security do not come from the hills, but from the Lord who made the hills and everything else in the universe. (PBC)

121:2 *help comes from the Lord* – The Lord is our ally (cf Gn 2:20). (TLSB)

The noun “help” is repeated to begin the line, and the verb “comes” is understood, based on the first verse. The confidence is that this needed help comes from the Lord. (A Commentary on Psalms – Ross)

Maker of heaven and earth. The one true God, the King of all creation (see 124:8; 134:3; see also 33:6; 89:11–13; 96:4–5; 104:2–9; 136:4–9). (CSB)

The participle “maker” stresses the characteristic of the Lord as the creator; and the expression “heaven and earth” signifies the whole universe and everything in it as his creation. The point is that if the Lord created everything, then he created the hills through which the pilgrim must walk; and whatever the Lord has created he can control. (A Commentary on Psalms – Ross)

121:3–4 Assurance concerning the unsleeping guardian over Israel. (CSB)

The Lord is not a god who is on duty only at certain times. (PBC)

121:3 *surely.* The Hebrew for this word meaning “It shall not happen”, “It does not happen.” We might say “don’t even think about it” (Stoekhardt)

not let your foot slip. Not even where the way is treacherous. (CSB)

To totter and slip. Psalms often speak of God’s protection, which keeps the righteous from moving or falling. Cf 15:5; 16:8; 21:7; 62:6; 112:6. (TLSB)

God will not allow the travelers foot to falter and stumble on his way. God removes stumbling blocks from the way. He grants him help and strength and clears the way, so that he can proceed without a mishap. (Stoekhardt)

He begins with two possibilities that may have been taken from the experiences of those who were on a pilgrimage to the festivals in the holy city. Roads were not more than trails. Slipping or stumbling could be dangerous with rocks and stones strewn in the path. This was especially so when they had to wend their way through the mountains. (Leupold)

Keeps you – Because this word “protect/keep” is used six times in these eight verses it is clearly the focus of the passage. God’s protection of his people at times came through direct, divine intervention, such as through angels who were given charge over people lest they dash their foot on the way (Ps. 91:11), or through unexpected super events (Judg. 5:4), or through the circumstances of life in which the Lord was clearly at work but remained hidden (Gen. 12:10–20), or through the agency of other believers (leaders such as kings and priests who were to

shepherd the people) who were God's instruments for guiding and protecting the people. (A Commentary on Psalms – Ross)

not slumber. Like the pagan god Baal (see 1Ki 18:27). (CSB)

121:4 *he who watches over Israel.* The Lord of all creation and the guardian over Israel—the One in whom the faithful may put unfaltering trust. (CSB)

Slumber or sleep – God does not become drowsy and inattentive. He does not sleep while His people struggle. (TLSB)

God is not like the pagan gods – he does not need rest, eat, or sleep; he is always there and always protecting. (A Commentary on Psalms – Ross)

121:5–6 Assurance concerning unfailing protection. (CSB)

121:5 *watches* – God is a keeper, a watchman who preserves His people when they cannot see their own danger. (TLSB)

shade. God's help is like sitting in the shade at noon. As seen also in v 6, His protection is timeless. For other uses of this word for “shade” or “shadow,” cf 17:8; 57:1; 63:7; Is 4:6; 25:4. (TLSB)

The figure “shade” (a metaphor) compares divine protection to shade to signify constant and complete coverage. (A Commentary on Psalms – Ross)

at your right hand. – By stating that the shade is “over your right hand,” the speaker means that the protection would be on all the pilgrim does – whatever he puts his hand to. (A Commentary on Psalms – Ross)

121:6 *sun ... moon.* Here, in agreement with the “shade” metaphor, these serve as figures for all that distresses or threatens, day or night (see Isa 4:6; 25:4–5; 49:10; Jnh 4:8). (CSB)

People rightly feared the sun's heat, but they may also have feared the moon's eerie light. (TLSB)

Here the words “sun” and “moon” form the expressed subjects of the verb. But they are to be explained as figurative, intending to convey what goes on under the sun and the moon; they also complement what is expressed in “day” and “night,” meaning all the time. This too would comfort the pilgrims since the journeys to the holy city often meant traveling for a day or two. (A Commentary on Psalms – Ross)

121:7–8 Assurance concerning all of life. (CSB)

121:7 *keep you from all evil* – Such a promise would need to be explained in the light of constant difficulties of life. The word “evil” (s.v. Ps. 10:15) can refer to any kind of calamity or misfortune in life, anything that brings pain and distress to a person, including sin, of course. For the psalm to assure the pilgrim that God will protect him from “all evil” will have to be harmonized with other passages that focus on the “evil” that the psalmists had to endure – hence we have the lament psalms. (A Commentary on Psalms – Ross)

Verse 7 is the prayer or wish, and verse 8 its reply – which would follow the pattern of the verses with verses 2, 4, 6, and 8 as replies. (A Commentary on Psalms – Ross)

121:8 *your coming and going.* Lit. “your going and coming.” Although the Hebrew order is like that in such military contexts as 1Sa 29:6 (“to have you serve”); 2Sa 3:25 (“your movements”), the sense here is similar to that in Dt 28:6. (CSB)

Final verse includes both distance, “going ... coming” and time, “this time forth and forevermore.” God’s protection always covers a person. (TLSB)

The two together refer to all activities in the daily course, especially going out on the pilgrimage and returning home, and including all movements in between (see Deut. 28:16; 31:2).

We use this verse in the traditional baptism liturgy as an expression of the Lord’s care for the newly baptized child throughout its life. (PBC)

Ps 121 We are pilgrims on a journey to our heavenly home (Php 3:20–21). This psalm reminds us to focus on the Lord, who oversees our journey. Do not allow the mountains, moon, sun, or anything else in creation to frighten you. Our God is eternally alert and goes above and before us.
• O Lord, we trust in Your vigilant love. You will preserve us in order to bring us home. Amen.
(TLSB)