

# PRAY FOR KEEPS

PSALM 121    MAY 17, 2020

Martin Luther once said, “As long as we live, there is never enough singing.”<sup>1</sup> While are not the *most* sing-song culture, there are many occasions where only a song will do. Once a year, *Happy Birthday* will be dedicated to you. And, only once a year is *Auld Lang Syne* allowed to come out to be heard.

If you go to a ballgame you know there’s a moment coming - in the seventh inning stretch - where bitter rivals join together to sing about the joys of America’s past-time. You don’t have to be a baseball fan to enjoy *Take Me Out To The Ballgame*. Sure, you’re singing about going to a place where you’re already at, and you’re singing about a popcorn treat no one actually wants to eat, you sing about never leaving the park and that you and all the rest of the crowd are happy to be found in the stands. It may be idealized, but it’s just the right song for the time and the setting.

Dory, everyone’s favorite Pacific Blue Tang, swam into our hearts singing: “Just keep swimming, just keep swimming.” It was that song that not only helped her and Marlin though many trials, but ended up saving the lives of a large school of grouper who were caught in a fisherman’s net.

Songs have the ability to cheer our hearts or steel our resolve. They can also help us to remember things we’ve once learned but have a hard time recalling. If I were to ask you what the capital of New Hampshire was, or the order of the books of the Bible, a lot of you would start scrolling a song in your head.

In the Psalms, we’ve seen many kinds of songs that God has given us to sing through life. Songs of hope and songs of praise. Songs of lament and songs of sorrow. They’re given to us, not just so that we have some sort of emotional *vent*, but so we will learn the heart of God and how to live in closeness to Him.

Inside the Psalter there are 15 songs that were specifically used by Jewish pilgrims on their trips to the Temple in Jerusalem 3 times a year. They’re Psalms 120 through 134 and they’re called Songs of Ascent. Jerusalem was built on a hill, and so, from wherever you were traveling, you would go up the road, elevating up Mount Zion until finally you arrived in the Temple courts where you would worship God among His people.

These songs were meant to be sung as they took their trip. Probably the most famous among them is Psalm 121. You heard it at the start of our service this morning. When we look at the words, we may be tempted to say, “Now, wait a minute - The Lord will protect you from *all* harm? The sun won’t strike you? My foot will never slip?” Is this some Biblical version of *I Believe I Can Fly*? Or were the pilgrims just meant to sing something frivolous to pass the time, a sort of *Take Me Out To The Ballgame* on their long stretch from tent to Temple?

We’ll find this wonderful song is not shallow. It’s not unrealistic. It is a precious melody we can take with us as we make our own pilgrimage from here to heaven.

A little context might be helpful. The very first Song of Ascents, Psalm 120, is full of distress. The singer takes a look around and finds himself among violent and hate-filled people. He finally comes to the conclusion that he has “dwelt too long” in this place so far from God. And so he calls out to

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther *Luther’s Works, Vol 16: Lectures On Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*

the Lord who is faithful to immediately answer. That's the first song in the pilgrim journey. Some Bible scholars see an analogy of the moment that a person realizes that they are sinners and call out to God for salvation. He does not withhold it, He answers. And now the pilgrim begins their long walk with Him.

So, our pilgrim has made the decision to go and now, setting out, we find ourselves at the start of Psalm 121.

**Psalm 121:1 - A song of ascents. <sup>1</sup>I lift my eyes toward the mountains. Where will my help come from?**

There are several ways to look at this opening verse. Are we looking at mountains *standing between* the traveller and the Temple? Are we looking at the hills *surrounding* Jerusalem? Or, are we looking at the Temple Mount itself? All three would be mountains that the pilgrims would encounter and all three have their own implications.

Whichever it was, the singer looks up and quickly comes to the conclusion that he needed *help*. We'll find he's concerned about the elevation and the elements and potential enemies lurking about.

If we're looking at mountains on the road, standing between him and Jerusalem, they would be foreboding, indeed. Even if there weren't thieves hiding in the cliffs, mountain trails are much more hazardous and difficult than those on the level plain.

If we're looking at the mountains *surrounding* Jerusalem, chances are the singer would also see the pagan shrines on the high places, stocked with shamans and temple prostitutes.<sup>2</sup> They'd be selling themselves and selling charms and potions, promising help and protection, if you would only leave the path and linger for awhile with them.

If we're looking at the hill of Jerusalem, the sight wouldn't be frightening, but encouraging. There is the place where he's headed. But, even then the singer does well to focus his attention, keeping himself from making the mistake of the Pharisees, who thought that their city and their traditions and their buildings was what kept them safe. This pilgrim must not going to make the mistake of Samson, who let his mind and his morality wander, thinking that his strength came, not from the Lord, but from his hair, leading to his destruction.

**Psalm 121:2 - <sup>2</sup>My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.**

No matter who the pilgrim was, what year they were traveling, where they were coming from or how needy they were, this was and is true. God, the Creator, has made Himself available to us.

He offers more than just a bus ticket or a walking stick. The help described here means acts of supplying what is needed in abundant measure. To support and *further* the one being helped. We're talking more than a simple guide here. Before the modern era, these long trips were often supplied with a guide to help those who hadn't been before. Like how Sacagawea helped Lewis and Clark. Sometimes those guides did a great job. In 1843, a missionary named Elijah White led a caravan of 100 wagons carrying 1,000 people down The Oregon Trail.<sup>3</sup> He had made the trip the year before and so knew a bit of how to handle it.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson *A Long Obedience In The Same Direction*

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/a-thousand-pioneers-head-west-on-the-oregon-trail>

On the other hand, sometimes those guides *don't* do so well. Lansford Hastings promised the 89 members of the Donner Party that he knew a shortcut to California.

The Psalmist reminds us that God is not simply a guy who has been down the road once before. He's the One who *made* the heavens and the earth. He placed the stars throughout the galaxies so that they might form particular constellations from our vantage point. He hangs the planets on nothing and keeps them in motion. He gives life to the universe. And why did He do all of it? So that He might interact with you and me. So that He might walk with us as He walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day.

This reminder is both humbling and invigorating. As we look at our surroundings or down the road of life and find ourselves thinking, "I need help." We're immediately met with the truth that not only will God help, but also the that God fashioned the cosmos *so He could love us*.

Our singer, seeing the mountains, takes the next step forward, still singing. Trials and temptations most certainly lay ahead, but God would not fail to help. In verse 3, the voice changes from I/my to you/your. Remember: The pilgrims were singing this as they went. And so it seems best to see this as them singing to themselves what they know to be true.

**Psalm 121:3 - <sup>3</sup>He will not allow your foot to slip; your Protector will not slumber.**

God's providence extends to *you*. It's not just for the great movements of history. He has numbered the hairs of *your* head. He has prepared a path for your life so that you can discover the good works He has set before you.

But we've come here to a phrase we must reconcile. Is this song telling the truth? I've sprained my ankle, after all. Many around us are, right now, enduring suffering greater than a slip of the foot.

Eugene Peterson writes, "At no time is there the faintest suggestion that the life of faith exempts us from difficulties. What it promises is preservation from all the evil in them."<sup>4</sup>

That is what's promised to us in the Scriptures. That God will sustain us. That He will complete us. That He will *keep* us. In fact, we lose something when the song is taken from Hebrew into English. Six times a certain word is used - the word "keep." God, the Keeper, will keep us. And He will not get tired of performing that gracious work.

We may twist our ankle walking down the steps today, that's just part of life in a sin-ruined world. But God is on record, promising that He will not allow our enemies to overcome us or temptation to overwhelm us.

**Psalm 121:4 - <sup>4</sup>Indeed, the Protector of Israel does not slumber or sleep.**

The longest recorded time of sleeplessness in humans is 264 hours.<sup>5</sup> That's 11 days. But, even then, the subject was experiencing significant cognitive and behavioral problems due to lack of sleep.

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson *A Long Obedience In The Same Direction*

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randy\\_Gardner\\_\(record\\_holder\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randy_Gardner_(record_holder))

Not so with our Lord. He never tires of His work and He never tires of us. He never looks down as an exasperated Father and says, "I just need a break!"

It's a very good thing that our Lord stays awake and attentive to us and to the nations of this world. There is a realm around us that we cannot see. There are strains and pressures that exist around the clock, even when we need to sleep. What hope would we have if we had no help from heaven? Or if our God needed to take naps?

It reminds me a scene from the classic Disney movie *Swiss Family Robinson*. The family has been marooned on a strange island. There, on the beach, with a little make-shift shelter, the wife and boys are sleeping while the father tries desperately to stay awake, musket in hand. He's exhausted and keeps nodding off. All the while, there's a tiger lurking in the underbrush. Pirates are sailing close. All sorts of dangers they don't even know about.

We're not left on our own like the Robinsons, stranded on a beach. God takes the watch of our lives.

**Psalm 127:2b - God gives rest to his loved ones.**

He is always ready, keeping watch, keeping us.

**Psalm 121:5 - <sup>5</sup>The Lord protects you; the Lord is a shelter right by your side.**

The pilgrim, concerned about the path ahead, comes to a wonderful realization here: The Lord is *already there beside him*. He hasn't been walking alone. The Lord is by his side, doing His work.

What sort of protective work does the Lord promise to us? As Christians in the Church age the physical blessings in God's covenant with Israel do not apply. So, what protection is given now?

**1 Corinthians 1:8 - <sup>8</sup>He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns.**

**2 Thessalonians 3:3 - <sup>3</sup>But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one.**

**Galatians 5:10a - <sup>10</sup>I am trusting the Lord to keep you from believing false teachings.**

**Revelation 3:10 - <sup>10</sup>"Because you have obeyed my command to persevere, I will protect you from the great time of testing that will come upon the whole world to test those who belong to this world.**

**Jude 24 - <sup>24</sup>[The Lord] is able to protect you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of his glory, without blemish and with great joy,**

God's protective work was not only for Jewish road trips. He walks with you today.

**Psalm 121:6 - <sup>6</sup>The sun will not strike you by day or the moon by night.**

From here out the song makes it a point to ensure that God's got it covered. Morning, noon and night, in every place, in every way. There is no trap door He isn't aware of that we might fall into while we walk with Him. There is no complication He hasn't considered.

Whether it's the heat of day or the cold of night, the Lord is able to meet our needs. This is demonstrated literally for us when we read about God's presence in the wilderness with the Israelites. God's glory was a cloud by day to give them shade and a fire by night to light the way.

Commentators talk about the dangers of the desert sun and then the ancient belief that the light of the moon could make you "insane." That's where the word lunatic came from, by the way. But in a general sense the song is reminding us of the all-encompassing nature of God's care for you. And it reminds us that God cares about *all* of you. Mind, body and spirit.

**Psalm 121:7 - <sup>7</sup>The Lord will protect you from all harm; he will protect your life.**

One of the images of God's *keeping* us is of a hedge preserving us from evil. I was reminded of *Guardians of the Galaxy*, where the heroes are about to be killed, and Groot, who is sort of made of living branches, starts growing himself as a protective shell all around his friends. He gives his life to keep them safe. This is what Christ did for us at the cross. He bore the weight of our sin and took on himself what we could never withstand. And then God raised Him from the dead in power. Now we are His, held safe in His hand as He continues the good work He began in each of us, hedged in His powerful love.

Though bodily hurt is part of life on this side of eternity, we know that we cannot be snatched from the fold of God. Even in the Old Testament, God's people weren't exempt from death. So we recognize that this song is speaking here of something much deeper, something much more important. As Psalm 66 says: Our lives are in His hands and He keeps us from stumbling.

Paul said it this way:

**Romans 8:35, 37-39 - <sup>35</sup>Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? <sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Verse 8:

**Psalm 121:8 - <sup>8</sup>The Lord will protect your coming and going both now and forever.**

The setting of the song is a pilgrim on the road to to the Temple. But then, of course, they'd have to return home one day. They'd have to pass those same mountains, those same dangers. Once home, they'd have other paths to take. Many comings and goings. God goes with you. Actually, He invites us to go with *Him*. To follow Him as He leads us through life, knowing what is best for us. Knowing perfectly well how to accomplish His good work in us.

This tender, powerful care isn't just for the worship service. It's not even just for this life, but *evermore* He will be with us, our Keeper, our Shield, our Faithful Savior.

There are a lot of different kinds of Psalms. There are praise Psalms and lament Psalms, royal Psalms, Psalms of thanksgiving. This one would be called a trust Psalm. But that doesn't mean it's wishful thinking. This song was given to God's people, both ancient and modern, to help remind us of what is *true*. We're told in Philippians chapter 4 that we need to think on things that are *true*.

Looking at the world around us, looking down the roads of life, we see a lot of dangers, a lot of uncertainty. But of this we can be certain: God is with us. He is our Keeper. He isn't asleep on the job, but has all the care and all the power that we read about in His word.

Peterson, once again, said, "Everyone who travels the road of faith requires assistance from time to time. We need cheering up when our spirits flag; we need direction when the way is unclear."<sup>6</sup>

Psalm 121 would have us *sing*. Not something inane or something unrealistic, but to sing the truths of God, which will not only bring us cheer, but will help us correct course when necessary. A mixture of request and reminder, that God is *not* unconcerned. He is deeply attentive in every phase and every circumstance of our lives. And so, the comfort of this song can be a melody in our heart, not just once a year like Happy Birthday or in one particular type of situation like Take Me Out To The Ballgame, but it can be like the song that played during the credits of the old *Lamb Chop* show. Remember that? "This is the song that doesn't end...yes it goes on and on, my friends." This is a song for us to sing every day as we travel toward the New Jerusalem.

Apply these truths to your hearts. Remember that the Lord is our ever-present help. And, as Virgil said, "Let us go singing as far as we go: the road will be less tedious."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Eugene Peterson *A Long Obedience In The Same Direction*

<sup>7</sup> Virgil *Book IX, line 64*