

The Lord Will Keep You!

Psalm 121

March 15, 2020

We live in a time of great uncertainty. Especially with Coronavirus, we are not sure what will happen to us. Just a few months ago, we had no idea that the whole world would be facing a deadly virus.

However, this kind of pandemic is not new to us. A few years ago, we had swine flu (H1N1 virus) which claimed well over 10,000 lives in the United States alone, and about 400,000 lives around the world.¹ According to some report, the swine flu actually claimed 17,000-18,000 lives in the United States.²

In 1918, we had the Spanish flu (H1N1 virus, same as the swine flu) which infected about 500 million people around the world which was 27 percent of the total population at the time, and claimed as many as 100 million lives around the world.³ So, when we consider that, COVID-19's ill-effect is not as bad as some others. This does not mean that coronavirus is not serious; it definitely is. It is deadly dangerous. I am sure medical technology has advanced quite a bit since then, and we can address these diseases much better than before. With all the efforts of the government, pharmaceutical and medical industries put together, I am sure we will contain it in the near future.

Still our hearts are unsettled. We cannot deny the concerns, worries and fears we have. So, in times like this, Psalm 121 is a great reminder of God's protection. It reminds us that the Lord our God is our only and ultimate security for our lives.

This psalm is a song of ascent. It is the song the Israelites sang as they went up the hill to the city of Jerusalem.

Three times every year, faithful Israelites went to Jerusalem to worship the Lord there. They went to Jerusalem for Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot. Passover is in the Spring, Shavuot in the late Spring, and Sukkot in the Fall.

Jerusalem is located on a hilltop. So, no matter what direction people came from, they were going up the hill to Jerusalem. As the pilgrims walked and traveled, they often sang together. Psalm 121 was one of the songs they sang on their way to Jerusalem. This song reminded them of who their Lord really was.

¹ <https://www.livescience.com/41539-2009-swine-flu-death-toll-higher.html>

² From Rush Limbaugh's talk show.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_flu

“I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”⁴

People recognized that material possessions and their connections with the people in power could make their lives comfortable and successful. Even then they knew their lives were not fully secured. With a lot of wealth, they could buy whatever they needed or wanted. They could even hire people to do all their chores, and the connections they made with the people in power could make their lives easier.

Even in modern days, things have not changed much. Still, wealth and connections can make our lives comfortable and successful. With money we can buy whatever we need. With connections, we can make the impossible possible.

Many things can keep our lives comfortable and secure. Medications for example, there are all kinds of medications that keep us painless, comfortable, and heal our diseases. We have computers and cell phone to get whatever information we need or buy whatever we want online. We don't have to go out and buy. We can stay home and buy whatever we want and they will deliver it to us. Of course there are some things that we still need to go out and see before we buy; but a lot of things can be bought online. With surveillance systems our properties and lives are much more secure than ever before.

Because of the coronavirus, this past week, the Bishop in our Annual Conference, Bishop Hagiya, sent an email to all the pastors suggesting that we should have worship services online to help keep everybody safe. We may not be able to do that in our church, but we are living in such a time.

We have friends who bring us joy and fulfillment. We have family that brings us comfort and happiness. (I am sure some family members bring us headaches, too.) All I am saying is that we have all kinds of things that make our lives comfortable and secure. But ultimately, our true help comes from the Lord, the one who keeps and protects us, the one who has the absolute power.

Psalm 121 reminds us that the Lord constantly protects us at least in three ways.

First, God watches over us. Our text, the verses 3-4 say, “He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”⁵

⁴ Psalm 121:1-2.

⁵ Psalm 121:3-4.

If someone watches over you at night in a hostile place, you don't want that person to fall asleep, do you?

One of the serious offenses in the military is falling asleep while on a stay-awake-guard-duty. It is a serious offense because it could mean the difference between life and death not only for the guard but also for the rest of the soldiers. Here we see that God stays awake to protect us. He never slumbers or sleeps. He's watching over us every moment of every day. Psalm 121 only has 8 verses. But the Hebrew word that is translated as "watch over" or "keep" appears six times in this psalm.

The writer of this psalm mentions it over and over again because he wants us to know that the Lord is watching over us every moment of every day.

Second, God protects us always.

The verses 5-7a say, "The Lord watches over you – the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm..."⁶

Remember, this was one of the songs sung by pilgrims walking up to Jerusalem. In the late Spring and Fall, the sun could be very hot and dry in the Judean desert. Once in a while, they would find a tree that gives a shade. And there they would rest for a while. The psalmist is saying that like the tree that provided a shade and a place of rest, the Lord will protect you from all harm.

"The moon by night" refers to the dangers of the night: robbers and wild animals. In other words, God is your protector, your ultimate security from all harms. This is a wonderful reminder.

However, we all know that bad things can happen to good people. We all live in a sinful body in a sinful world. We all live under the curse of death. None of us have a perfect immune system. We all get sick once in a while, and we all will eventually die, unless Jesus comes first. So, how does God keep us from all harm? Consider the third way God helps us.

That is, we are not alone in this life because God is always with us.

The second half of the verse 7 and verse 8 say, "He will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore."⁷

⁶ Psalm 121:5-7a.

God is always watching over us. Not in a surveilling sense; but in a protective sense. The phrase, “coming and going,” refers to everything that we are engaged in. In everything you do, the Lord is watching over you, guiding you and protecting you. When you are experiencing joyous moments like your wedding, the birth of your children or a promotion, and when you are experiencing difficult moments, such as loss your loved ones, or major setbacks in life, God is right there with you. Right in the middle of all your experiences.

God is also with you in non-exciting moments like: when you wake up, when you eat, when you go to work, when you take your kids to school, when you shop... There isn't any moment when God does not watch over you. The Lord is always with us through the Holy Spirit. And through the Holy Spirit, God watches over us and keep us from all harm.

Jesus promised us that he would always be with us. He said he would be with us “until the end of the age.”⁸ That was his expression. In John 16:7, Jesus said, “But very truly I tell you, it is for your own good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” The Advocate he is talking about is the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit leads and guides us in this life and escorts us into the next. So his care extends from this life to the next. At the end of the Psalm 121 we read this phrase, “both now and forevermore.” Not just in this life, but also in the next life, the Lord will lead us and guide us and bless us.

This is why, for the believers, death has lost its sting.⁹ Think about it, what is the worst that can happen to us? Dying and going heaven? Going to heaven is not so bad, is it? Throughout the Bible and especially in our passage, the Holy Scripture reminds us over and over again that God will “keep us” and “watch over us.”

While coronavirus continues to threaten our lives, we all need to take every precaution we can to protect ourselves and others. But let us not live in fear, and let us trust the Lord each and every day.

⁷ Psalm 121:7b-8.

⁸ Matthew 28:20.

⁹ I Corinthians 15:51-56.