

Psalm 121

- The Lord is my Guardian – A song of encouragement -

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Introduction

- ❖ We all need faith, trust and encouragement, especially when we envisage uncertain and possibly difficult circumstances. Psalm 121 is meant to encourage people.
 - The psalm does not teach a “theology of protection.” It is a Psalm of faith, trust and encouragement. The lead singer is encouraged by his fellow travellers.
 - Other Psalms convey the experiences of believers who experience harm in their lives, even the thought that “I say to God my Rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?’” (Ps 42:9).
- ❖ The poetry of Psalm 121 supports this by the use of two voices (“I” and “you”): the lead singer and his fellow travellers. Others suggest a duet of two singers, or even one voice, speaking to himself. See for this suggestion Psalms 42 and 43.
 - **The Psalm is a poetic masterpiece.** The Psalmist used several rhetorical devices such as “climax”¹, “anadiplosis”², “polyptoton”³, and “merism.”⁴ See below.
- ❖ Psalm 121 is one of the songs of ascent (Ps 120-134). Pilgrims sang these songs as they made their way to Jerusalem.

¹ Wikimedia Foundation. (2023b, November 16). *Climax (rhetoric)*. Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climax_\(rhetoric\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climax_(rhetoric))

² Wikimedia Foundation. (2024a, January 7). *Anadiplosis*. Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anadiplosis>

³ Wikimedia Foundation. (2024b, January 16). *Polyptoton*. Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polyptoton>

⁴ Wikimedia Foundation. (2023, July 18). *Merism*. Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merism>

- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Book of Psalms. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a “stand-alone”. You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons.

Context

- ❖ The Book of Psalms belongs to the Wisdom literature. Psalm 121 belongs to the fifth book of Psalms (Ps 107-150), and especially to the songs of ascents (Ps 120-134).

Form and structure

- ❖ Psalm 121 consists of two parts. Note the use of personal pronouns.
 - **First-person: I (my)**
 - **Second person: you (your):**

A song of ascents.	
Part I. (The Lead-)singer, the pilgrim – profession of faith and trust	
<i>(1) A song of assurance (Q&A)</i>	1. I lift up my eyes to the hills— where does my help come from? 2. My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.
Part II. The fellow-pilgrim(s) – response and encouragement	
<i>(2) The Lord will watch over you while you walk</i>	3. He will not let your foot slip— 4. he who watches over you will not slumber; 5. indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
<i>(3) The Lord will watch over you during the day and the night</i>	6. The LORD watches over you— 7. the LORD is your shade at your right hand; 8. the sun will not harm you by day, 9. nor the moon by night.
<i>(4) The LORD will watch over you over your life</i>	10. The LORD will keep you from all harm— 11. he will watch over your life; 12. the LORD will watch over your coming and going 13. both now and forevermore.

- ❖ This psalm consists of four couplets. The chorus sings the second to the fourth as a response to the first couplet.
 - There is a climax. The psalm assures the believer that the LORD is watching over him: while he is walking (2), during the day and night (3), and over his whole life.
- ❖ The first couplet reveals an AB'B'A structure:
 - A. I lift up my eyes to the hills—
 - B. where does my help come from?
 - 'B My help comes from the Lord,
 - 'A the Maker of heaven and earth.
 - These lines reveal a climax in the meaning:
 - I lift up my eyes to the hills— (to) the Maker of heaven and earth.
- ❖ The second couplet shows an AB'A'B structure:
 - A. He will not let your foot slip—
 - B. he who watches over you will not slumber;
 - 'A. indeed, he who watches over Israel
 - 'B. will neither slumber nor sleep.
 - Line 'A explains line A. The one who watches over Israel, surely watches over the individual believer.
 - Line 'B is an extension of line B. By the repetition of slumber...
- ❖ The third couplet has an A'AB'B structure:
 - A. The LORD watches over you—
 - 'A. the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
 - B. the sun will not harm you by day,
 - 'B nor the moon by night.
 - 'A explains A.
 - 'B completes B: day (sun) and night (moon).
- ❖ The fourth couplet has again AB'A'B structure:
 - A. The LORD will keep you from all harm—
 - B. he will watch over your life;
 - 'A the LORD will watch over your coming and going
 - 'B both now and forevermore.
 - Both 'A and 'B extend the corresponding lines A and B.

Technical, hermeneutical and historical notes

Historical setting

- ❖ These songs of ascents or Pilgrimage Psalms (120–34) seem to have been used by those going up to Jerusalem for one of the regularly occurring festivals (Dt 16:16–17).

Genre

- ❖ Psalm 121 is a Psalm of Encouragement and Trust. Other Psalms of Trust are 11; 23; 27; 62; 63; and 131.

Rhetorical devices

- ❖ Anadiplosis: is the repetition of the last word of a preceding clause. The word is used at the end of a sentence and then again at the beginning of the next sentence.⁵
 - Verse 1.b and 2.a. The word order in the English translation is different from the word order in Hebrew:
 - where does **my help** come from? : מֵאֵין יָבֵא עֲזָרִי
 - **My help** comes from the LORD : עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה
- ❖ Climax: words, phrases, or clauses are arranged in order of increasing importance. In its use with clauses, it is also sometimes known as auxesis (literally "growth").⁶
 - **slumber** > **slumber** > **sleep** (verses 3 and 4).
 - the LORD will watch over your coming and going **both now** and > **forevermore** (verse 8).
 - The entire psalm reaches a climax toward the end:
 - He will not let your foot slip— (while you are walking; verse 3);
 - The LORD watches over you— (during the day and the night; verses 5 and 6);
 - The LORD will keep you from all harm—
 - he will watch over your life; (your life; verse 7).
- ❖ Polyptoton: is the stylistic scheme in which words derived from the same root are repeated.⁷
Note the root: שָׁמַר: to **keep, watch over**.⁸

⁵ Wikimedia Foundation. (2024a, January 7). Anadiplosis. Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anadiplosis>

⁶ Wikimedia Foundation. (2023b, November 16). *Climax (rhetoric)*. Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climax_\(rhetoric\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climax_(rhetoric))

- he who watches over you will not slumber; שֹׁמֵר
- indeed, he who watches over Israel ...; שֹׁמֵר
- The LORD watches over you— ; שֹׁמֵר
- (...)
- The LORD will keep you from all harm—; שֹׁמֵר
- he will watch over your life; שֹׁמֵר
- the LORD will watch over your coming... שֹׁמֵר

❖ Merism: a combination of two contrasting parts of the whole refer to the whole.⁹

- “heaven and earth”: the whole creation (verse 2);
- “sun” and “day” – “moon” and “night”: the whole day (verse 6);
- “your coming and going”: the whole journey (verse 8).

Parallellismus membrorum

❖ Parallellismus membrorum is a special feature of Biblical literature, especially of the Old Testament Wisdom Literature, i.e. The Book of Job, Psalms and Proverbs. It “is also present, although less prominent, in biblical prose. It can be defined as the repetition of the same or related semantic content and/or grammatical structure in consecutive lines or verses.”¹⁰

- See also the structure of the Psalm above.
- Synonymous parallelism.
 - Not used in this psalm.
- Syntactical parallelism
 - The second line completes the first line (verses 3 and 4) with a climax:
 - A. He will not let your foot slip—
 - B. he who watches over you will not slumber;
 - ‘A. indeed, he who watches over Israel
 - ‘B. will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁷ Wikimedia Foundation. (2024c, January 16). *Polyptoton*. Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polyptoton>

⁸ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000, p. 1582).

⁹ Wikimedia Foundation. (2023a, July 18). *Merism*. Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merism>

¹⁰ See for more information: Berlin, A. (1992). *Parallelism*. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.)(Vol. 5, p. 155).

- Antithetical parallelism
 - Not used in this psalm.

The LORD and the covenant¹¹

- ❖ God's character is revealed in the Psalms through several roles. Among these are the creator, king/judge, covenant Lord, Father, redeemer/deliverer.
 - *Creator (Ps 121:2)*. The LORD is “the maker of heaven and earth” (Ps 115:15; 124:8; 134:3) by his spoken command (Ps 33:6; 148:5); it is the work of his hands (Ps 100:3; 138:8).
 - *King/Judge (not specifically mentioned in Psalm 121)*.
 - *Covenant Lord (Psalm 121:4)*. Not only is the Lord the creator of the universe, but he entered into a covenant with his chosen people (Ex 19:3-6; Ps 78; 106). He watches over Israel.
 - *Father*. But beyond this covenant relationship, the Psalms depict Yahweh as one who plays an even more personal role in relationship to his people (Psalm 121:1, 3).
 - *Redeemer/Deliverer/Helper/Watcher*. As the covenant Lord, he protects his chosen:
 - “Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God” (Ps 146:3).

Exposition

A song of ascents

- ❖ “ascents” = “מַעֲלֹת”¹²: upward movement of people: plural pilgrimages.¹²

Part I (verses 1-2) The lead singer

Verse 1-2

- ❖ “I lift up my eyes to the hills—“
 - This might indicate an attitude of prayer and trust (Ps 123:1).
 - Bratcher and Reyburn offer the following translation: “When I look to the mountains, I ask myself where my help will come from,”¹³

¹¹ This overview is based on: Oswalt, J. N. (2008, p. 249-250). *God*. In T. Longman III & P. Enns (Eds.).

¹² Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000, p 613).

¹³ Bratcher, R. G., & Reyburn, W. D. (1991, p. 1052).

- **“The hills.”** There is no need to locate these hills. Some think that these hills were dwelling places of pagan gods. These gods will not provide any help. See for instance the story of Elijah and the priests of Baal (1 Kgs 18:16-45).
- This explanation is not helpful. The lead singer does not expect any help from other gods (verse 2). He is on his way to Jerusalem. He needs to ascend the hills and is not walking on a paved walkway. His foot can stumble. He is not protected against the sun (heat) during the day or the moon (cold) during the night. The road can be dangerous, bearing the story of the Good Samaritan in mind (Lk 10:27-35).
 - For walking in groups, see Psalm 42:4:
 - "These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng" (Ps 122:1; Isa 30:29; Lk 2:41-44, Jesus travelling with his parents and relatives).
- ❖ **“where does my help come from?”** the Maker of heaven and earth.
 - This is a profession of faith and trust.
- ❖ **“My help comes from the LORD,”**
 - He does not expect help from anybody else.
 - **“the Maker of heaven and earth”**: he holds everything in his hands, the entire universe (Gen 1:1-2:3; Ps 115:3; 124:1; 134:3; 146:5; Hb 13:6).
 - **“heaven and earth”**: a rhetorical device: merism, see above.

Part II (verses 3-8) *The fellow traveller(s)*

Verse 3-4

- ❖ **“He will not let your foot slip.”** See also Psalm 66:9; 94:18, and Psalm 91:9-13. Walking uphill might be dangerous. A slipping foot might result in a sprained ankle or worse. How do you reach your travel destination with a sprained ankle? How do you reach home without the assistance of medical aid?
 - The slipping foot is an example of “evil” or **“all harm”** (Ps 121:7).
- ❖ **“— he who watches over you”**
 - **“watch” / “keep”** (verse 7) **“שָׁמַר”**: **keep, watch over**. This word is used six times. It functions as a “polyptoton.” See above. See also: 1 Sam 2:9; Pr 2:8; 3:21-26; 1 Pet 1:5.
 - Note the priestly blessing (Num 6:24-26):
 - **“The LORD** bless you and **keep you**;
 - the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

- the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."
- ❖ **"he who watches over Israel."** When the LORD watches over his people, he will also watch over the devout individual.
- ❖ **"will not slumber; indeed, (...) will neither slumber nor sleep"**
 - **"indeed"** is emphatic. The clause is a climax. See above.
 - As a contrast, see 1 Kings 18:27: At noon Elijah began to taunt them. 'Shout louder!' he said. 'Surely he (Baal) is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. **Maybe he is sleeping** and must be awakened.'

Verse 5-6

- ❖ **"the LORD is your shade at your right hand;"**
 - "shade at your right hand": means "close to you, near you, at your side."¹⁴
 - See Psalm 91:1. Shade is a metaphor¹⁵ for protection. In other instances, the Psalms use the metaphor of the shade of the wings of a bird: Psalms. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 63:7.
 - **"the right hand."** This might refer to the most vulnerable side. This verse might convey the thought, that the LORD will protect you where you are vulnerable. See also Psalm 16:8
- ❖ **"the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night."** This is an example of merism: day and night, the whole day.
 - **"nor the moon by night."** What kind of harm does the moon cause by night? Does verse 6 refer to "the primitive conviction that the moon causes madness or lunacy"?¹⁶
 - A simpler solution is this. During the day, especially in the desert, the sun can be very hot, causing sunstroke, while at night, with a clear sky, the temperature can drop to zero or even lower, causing hypothermia of the body.
 - Wilcock offers this explanation too: "Perhaps, the psalmist simply means that he need fear no evil either in daylight or in darkness."¹⁷

¹⁴ Bratcher, R. G., & Reyburn, W. D. (1991, p. 1053).

¹⁵ A metaphor is a figure of speech that, for rhetorical effect, directly refers to one thing by mentioning another. Wikimedia Foundation. (2024d, January 27). *Metaphor*. Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphor>

¹⁶ North, R. (1980, Vols. 4–5, pp. 234–268). *שִׁנְיָן*. In G. J. Botterweck & H. Ringgren (Eds.), & D. E. Green (Transl.).

¹⁷ Wilcock, M. (2001, Vol. 2, p. 223).

- See also Exodus 13:21: “By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.”

Verse 7-8

- ❖ **“The LORD will keep you from all harm—“**
 - Keep you from all harm (1 Tim 4:18).
- ❖ **“he will watch over your life”**
 - watch over your life (Ps 41:1-3; 145:17-20).
- ❖ **“the LORD will watch over your coming and going”**
 - “your coming and going.” Bratcher and Reyburn list some alternative translations. “It may also be translated ‘wherever you go’ or ‘wherever you may be.’ Some take the phrase to be quite specific: ‘when you leave here and when you arrive at your destination,’ that is, for the whole journey (another example of a merism; see above). The general sense seems to be preferable.”¹⁸
- ❖ **“both now and forevermore”** means The rest of your life.

Application

Questions before

- ❖ When do you or other people need (spiritual) encouragement?
 - In trials (persecutions).
 - In case of doubt and uncertainty.
 - In making difficult (spiritual) decisions.
 - In facing an uncertain future and making (spiritual) plans.
 - And of course, everyone needs (spiritual) encouragement now and then.
 - In demanding and challenging tasks.
 - In leadership positions.
 - During sickness and medical treatments.
 - In the end, we all need (spiritual) encouragement now and then.

¹⁸ Bratcher, R. G., & Reyburn, W. D. (1991, p 1054).

- ❖ How can we relate the contents of this Psalm to daily life? We all need help. We pray to God.
 - And still, people stumble, literally and also in their thoughts, words, actions, relations, at work, in church, in society, in faith, etc.
 - People will be harmed by heat stroke (2 Kgs 4:8–37), be robbed while travelling (Lk 10:25–37), be injured, suffer due to disability, or die due to accidents and the hardships of life.
 - The prophets were persecuted (Mt 5:11-12). The apostles endured hardships (Rom 8:31-37). Witnesses of Christ were killed because of their faith (Rev 6:9-11).
- ❖ Is it true that we all need help?

Realize

- ❖ We are vulnerable human beings who stumble and many occasions.
 - We don't have the future of our lives in our own hands, although some authors claim differently. Wishful thinking?
- ❖ We are responsible to human beings, responsible towards God, ourselves, others, and also to the larger world.
 - We must not expect that the LORD will intervene and protect us when we act irresponsibly.

Remark

- ❖ Psalms were composed and sung on different occasions, especially those psalms which convey emotions, hopes, prayers, and requests. Take for instance Psalm 88. This Psalm was meant to be sung by someone whose "life draws near the grave" (Ps 88:3). It is an individual lament.¹⁹ Psalm 138 is an example of thanksgiving: "I will praise you, O LORD, with all my heart; before the 'gods' I will sing your praise" (Ps 138:1).
 - Psalm 121 is a song of ascents, sung during or at the start of travelling to the sanctuary, the temple in Jerusalem, or on the way home. **It is a song of faith, trust and encouragement**, not only to encourage the traveller during this particular journey but also for the rest of his life.

Praise

- ❖ Praise the LORD as our Keeper and Watchman
 - He is the creator of heaven and earth.
 - He is the eternal God who watches "over your coming and going both now and forevermore."

¹⁹ See for an overview: Limburg, J. (1992). *Psalms, Book of*. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.).

- It too enjoins believers to entrust their lives to a faithful creator and to derive strength from experiencing the peace of God keeping their hearts and minds (Phil 4:7; 2 Tim 4:18; 1 Pet 4:19):²⁰
 - 2 Timothy 4:18: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”
 - 1 Peter 4:19: “So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”
- ❖ The Promise of Christ:
- ❖ "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

Help

- ❖ What is the nature of the help that the LORD will provide? Because he is the creator of heaven and earth, he can provide help by all means, seen and unseen.
 - By angels.
 - By other people.
 - By natural events.
 - By his Spirit and his Wisdom.
 - By his presence (Mt 28:20).
- ❖ Did you ever experience the help of the LORD?

Compare Proverbs 3:21-26

- ❖ My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment,
do not let them out of your sight;
they will be life for you,
an ornament to grace your neck.
Then you will go on your way in safety,
and your foot will not stumble;
when you lie down, you will not be afraid;
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.
Have no fear of sudden disaster
or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked,
for the LORD will be your confidence
and will keep your foot from being snared.

²⁰ Allen, L. C. (2002, p. 209).

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