

## Psalm 121

### *The Pilgrim's Progress*

#### Introduction

Written in the year 1678, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is perhaps the greatest Christian novel written **in all time!**

Created by Puritan Pastor **John Bunyan** – during his time in prison when he was arrested for preaching the Gospel to the lost people of England!

Now if you're familiar with the book in any kind of sense, then you'll know that the book was written **as an allegory** for the entire Christian life!

The book is **believed to have been** the second-most popular book ever printed **just behind the Bible!**

And interestingly enough it's **never been out of print**, since its inception in **1678!**

Now what makes this book **such a wonderful story** for the entire Christian journey, is **the fact** that all throughout the journey, the main character Christian, is **constantly reminded** of *the God who keeps His people safe, through life's toughest journey!*

#### Psalm 121

And that's exactly what our Psalm is seeking to remind us of here this morning!

Psalm 121 is a Pilgrimage Psalm!

You will see (if you have a look) in the heading of your bibles, the superscription **given before verse 1** – **this is A song of Ascents! X2**

And what that means is that **it is one of 15 psalms** that were sung by the Jews traveling to Jerusalem for **one of the three main Jewish festivals** given throughout the year...

And on the way to the temple, as the people would **ascend the hill of the Lord**, they would sing these **incredible songs of security & safety**, of **comfort & strength** for the journey ahead!

Now these were real pilgrims, on a real journey – to a real location – but in another sense they were **also spiritual songs** – songs that conveyed **spiritual meaning & reality!**

These songs were sung by the Jews **coming back from their time** in Exile – **but beyond that** – these are **also spiritual songs** that **Christians have** as they make their way to the City of God – **the New Jerusalem!**

And so **NOT only** were these songs sung as kind of a **respite & peace** from this **weary world**...but there was a sense in which **they were coming back home!**

The Psalm is actually a dialogue...

In verses **1 & 2** we have the **perspective** of the **weary traveler** about to make his trek on his way to Jerusalem – and in **verses 3-8** we have the perspective of the **seasoned veteran**; an experienced traveler – one who has made this journey **many times over!**

And in fact, some scholars have even assumed that this **may well have been** one of the Priests travelling on the road **on his way to the temple...**

And so by that account – this is a Psalm relevant whether you are a Jew travelling on the way to Jerusalem – and this is a Psalm relevant for **the entire Christian life!**

Whether you're a seasoned veteran who's made the trek many times before – or whether you're a **weary traveler** sitting in the pews here this morning – Psalm 121 is a song concerning:

**Pilgrims, Perils, & a Powerful God!**

**Main Point**

The main point I want us to see as we come to this spectacular Psalm is that:

*God is our peace and our protection through life's toughest journey X2*

## Outline

And we're gonna see this in 2 points:

- In verses 1-2 – Perfect Peace on a Perilous Path!
- &
- In verses 3-8 – Personal Protection from a Powerful God!

Perfect Peace

Personal Protection

## Psalm 121

So, Psalm 121, beginning at verse 1 – the Psalmist writes this:

*I lift my eyes toward the mountains. Where will my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.*

## Opening Gambit

If this Psalm is (as we said) sung **by the Jew** travelling to Jerusalem... **then verse 1 makes a lot of sense:**

*I lift my eyes toward the mountains. Where will my help come from?*

So beginning at Jericho **250 meters below sea level** – travelling to Jerusalem **730 meters above sea level** – the journey on this road was **almost entirely up-Hill!**

Many have speculated that **this was the journey** taken in Luke chapter 10 **in the story of the Good Samaritan** – and because this was a **very well-known route** in the ancient world – this would have been a **notoriously dangerous journey** for any weary traveler!

Armed men, wild animals, the Amalekites, the Philistines, and a **whole host** of dangerous perils **lay lurking** in & amongst these mountainous hills!

### **Spiritual Danger**

But **NOT only** were the physical dangers **intensely present throughout this hillside** – but **the spiritual dangers** were there **as well!**

**In the ancient world** – the **hills and the mountains** were **notorious dens** of apostasy & idolatry...

This is where people would go to commit **all kinds** of sexual sin, and immorality, & perversity!

We see this in Jeremiah chapter 3 verse 6:

*Have you seen what backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there she has played the harlot!*

And so when the psalmist says:

*I lift up my eyes toward the mountains...*

He's **NOT** saying:

*That's where I look for help!*

He's saying:

***That's where my trouble is coming from!***

***That's where my mind is anxious to look!***

*I lift my eyes to the hills, and I wonder:*

**HOW WILL I MAKE THE JOURNEY!**

*From where will my help come!?!?*

This is a desperate plea for God's **security & comfort** on this long, hazardous road ahead!

**The Temple**

And yet here's **the amazing thing** about this Psalm – here's the amazing thing when you and I **gaze upon creation & we remember the God of heaven & earth!**

When they made this journey from Jericho to Jerusalem – **when they walked** these **treacherous roads**– there was a Temple **beyond those hills** that symbolised the very **presence & power** of almighty God!

So that when the **Pilgrim & the Old Testament saint** would make their way & ascend that hill – they would **see that Temple** in that City!

And they were immediately **remember:**

**I AM WITH YOU!**

I will be with you on this perilous journey **as you make your way** to me!

Which is why the Palmist **now answers his question** in verse 2:

*My help comes from the LORD!*

It doesn't come from creation – it comes from the God of creation who sits in the heavens!

**Merism**

In fact, that expression *Creator of heaven & earth* was a figure of speech **in the Hebrew mindset** – and it was **used primarily to express** the Sovereignty of God **in all things!**

In the technical sense of the word, this expression is what we would call *a Hebrew Merism!*

## X2

A merism was **an expression of speech** designed to encapsulate everything in between 2 points of reference!

So it takes **2 polar opposites** – 2 total extremes – and **it draws our attention** to what's **in between those 2 points!**

So, if I said to you:

*My body aches form head to toe!*

What I'm essentially saying is that:

*My body aches everywhere!*

Head to toe **are the 2 extremes** that encapsulates everything **in between those 2 points!**

And so, when the author refers to *Yahweh the Creator of heaven & earth* – **Heaven & Earth** are the **2 opposites** that encapsulate everything in between those 2 points!

Every man – every woman – every beast – every animal – every tree – every valley – everything **seen & unseen** –from the **deepest depths** of the heart of the earth – to the **greatest heights** of the hope of heaven – **everything in between** those 2 realities are **solely & supremely** governed by:

## **OUR GREAT GOD!**

If you're in a storm – if you're in a valley – if **you are terrified** –**NOT knowing** how you're going to get from point A to Point B:

It's probably best that **you look to the One** who made all things!

I'm just guessing!

Probably where you're gonna find your comfort & strength!

### **Peril to Peace**

Because **notice now** – that **all of a sudden** what served to be one of the greatest places of **anxiety and fear** – has now become **this incredible location** of **security & strength!**

Do you see what happens when you fix your eyes on the correct object?!?!

What started out to be **his greatest threat** of **peril & pain** – has now become **his greatest comfort** of **security & hope!**

When you fix your eyes on the object of faith – your perilous **pain** becomes **Perfect Peace** in  
the hardest times!

This is the power of what **looking to God** in our lives **does!**

If you know the One who **knows all things** and **governs all things** – then **what can separate us** from the love of God in Christ Jesus!

### **Where are you looking**

Charles Spurgeon once said:

*The purpose...providence...predestination; and proved faithfulness of the LORD –  
**these are the hills** to which we **must lift our eyes**, and **from these** our help must  
come!*

Friends:

Where are you looking in the current circumstance of your life?

Are you looking to the **mountainous perils** that are present in **your life...**

Or are you looking **above those hills** to the One who made them?

*My help comes from the LORD; the Creator of Heaven & Earth...*

### **Perfect Peace on a Perilous path!**

#### **Transition to Point 2**

And then in verses 3 to 8...the **Psalm begins to shift...**

Rather than the Psalmist continuing his **own internal dialogue** (reminding himself of the promises of God) – verse 3 **appears to be a response to the pilgrim** described in verses 1 & 2!

It appears that a **second lonely traveller** has decided to join **the pilgrim** of verses 1 & 2!

And this second Pilgrim – a much more seasoned pilgrim; is seeking to inform the first Pilgrim of what this Creator God is like!

And what this **seasoned Pilgrim** is wanting to say to him is simply glorious!

He reminds the first Pilgrim of **the Covenant making – Covenant keeping** LORD God Yahweh – Who **cares for** His people, who **keeps** His people, who **protects** His people – who is **present with** His people!

This God is **not simply** a distant or remote Creator – **but** He is the LORD; the compassionate God – who feels this intensely **protective & proactive** love toward His people!

He is the LORD who keeps – He is the LORD who **preserves & protects** His people!

#### **From Peril to Praise**

And that's leads us into point number 2 here this morning:



*Personal Protection from a Powerful God!*

So have a look with me at verse 3 – the seasoned Pilgrim responds:

*He will not allow your foot to slip; your Protector will not slumber. Indeed, the Protector of Israel does not slumber or sleep...*

**Protect**

Now the idea of protection here in the Hebrew is **very important!**

When the psalmist uses this word **Protect** – he's **NOT** just thinking of some **vague mere assistance** – like hey **if you ever need a hand**, give me a call and **I'll come running to protect you!**

Neither is he referring to some **vague passive protection** – like hey I have a precious garden here I want to protect; let me **hedge some protection** around it to keep it safe!

**So, it's not a passive protection & it's not a distant protection!**

But rather the word the Psalmist uses here literally means:

*To guard – to attend to – or even watch over **very carefully!***

You might use this word to speak of a Shepherd guarding his sheep at night!

Or you might use it to speak of a guard keeping watch over prisoners in a cell!

This is used of vinedressers in Scripture keeping watch over their harvest!

This is a **fierce and jealous protection** that does **NOT falter** & does **NOT fall!**

In fact He uses this word **6 times in these 8 verses** to **make sure we know just how serious** God takes our protection!

**Just how exhaustive** this protection is!

## **Feet**

Verse 3:

*He will NOT allow your foot to slip...*

Now the image **here of course**, is that of a **weary pilgrim** losing their base on a slippery road!

In the ancient world; walking or climbing required **absolute attention** to **every single step** you take!

And oh man in this world what a dangerous place to take a Trek – and you know that!

And so the assurance here is that the LORD Himself will watch every single step you take toward Him – but NOT JUST watch it, but guide it, govern it, watch it & protect from **all spiritual harm & danger** in this world!

If you know anything about the path these Pilgrims travelled – you would know that this was a **very dangerous & very slippery road!**

So this would have been Good News for the Pilgrim to hear because the slip of a foot **would have been the difference** between life & death!

Between making the journey to God; and **not making** the journey to God!

And the term *foot* here **would have been a euphemism** for the **entire human body**; because your feet are what carry your body; so **if your feet go**, the rest of you **would follow!**

## **Every Circumstance**

But beyond that – the term foot **would have also depicted** this idea of **location!**

Your feet are what carry you from Point A to Point B – and so:

The psalmist is essentially praying for protection on the journey **NOT just** for the whole person – but for the whole person in **every location!**

**Wherever you go, God is going to watch your every step!**

### **Slumber or Sleep**

Now how do we know this?!?!?

How do we know that God is going to be **this attentive** in every single moment & step we take?!?!?

Well, he tells us there in verse 3 – because:

*...Your protector will not slumber. Indeed, the Protector of Israel **does not sleep!***

So, the preserving **power & protection** of God – is based upon **His attentive to us** – **NOT** our attentiveness to Him!

His ability for us – **NOT** our ability for Him!

He **does NOT slumber** & He **does NOT sleep!**

The idea of **slumbering** denotes **indifference!**

And the idea of **sleep** denotes **silence!**

And so the psalmist says that:

On **both accounts** – both in the area of **silence** and **indifference** – the God of the Bible:

**DOES NOT YIELD!**

He **does NOT slumber** – and He **does NOT sleep!**

He **does NOT falter** & He **does NOT fall!**

**He is attentive!**

**We need this**

Now why is that **such an important element** for the pilgrim to know...?!?!

Why does He need to hear of God's attention & care on this journey?!?!

Well, it's important for him, **for the very same reason** it's important **for us!**

Because there are **times in our lives**, (as there would have been in the Pilgrim's life) – when **we often think that God is asleep at the wheel!**

There are times in our lives, when it **feels** like the Lord Himself has fallen asleep and **is watching us perish!**

And when those times come – when your heart doubts; and **your fears grow** – what is it that is going to hold you fast – what is it that keeps your feet from falling?!?!

Well, the psalmist tells us:

Our protection is based **solely upon** the never **failing**; never **silent**; never **careless** heart of God!

**1 Kings 18**

And by the way – this idea of *a God who never sleeps* – would have been **totally different** to every other pagan god in these days...

Do you remember in 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 18, when Elijah is standing on top of Mount Carmel and **He dares the priests of Baal** to call fire down from heaven, **to show him** just how “*real*” **these gods were!**

And what does Elijah **end up saying** when there was no response from these gods:

*Maybe your god is thinking it over; maybe he has wandered away; or maybe he's relieving himself on the toilet...*

And then he says in verse 27 – he says this:

*Or maybe your god has fallen asleep!*

*And they shouted loudly, and cut themselves with knives and spears, according to their custom, until blood gushed over them. And **all afternoon** they kept **raving on** until the offering of the evening sacrifice, (and then listen to this) **but there was no sound; there was no answer, and no one paid attention!***

Their god slumbered & their god slept!

But **NOT** our God friends – NOT the God of Israel!

NOT the LORD; the Protector of Israel!

Our God **never slumbers & He never sleeps!**

He is the God who is **always present for His people in every circumstance!**

**Verse 5**

And then he ramps it up in verse 5 and personalises the Psalm – just in case we missed it in verse 4:

*Behold! The LORD protects you! X2*

So notice the progression he takes in taking the argument from the **greater** to the **lesser**:

If He does it for Israel – if He does it for the Nation!

If He does it for Abraham – He does it for Isaac – He does it for Jacob – He does it for Joseph!

**How would He not also** seek to do this **for you** – the ordinary believer – the **nobody** of the faith?!?!

The everyday – ordinary – **no named Christian!**

Did you notice that neither one of the pilgrims are **named** in this Psalm!

Nobody knows who they are – and nobody knows their identity – and yet God will do this for you weary Pilgrim!

**Leslie Allen** in his commentary on this point says something quite astonishing – he says:

*The potent promise, 'I will be with you,' avails not only for the heroes of the faith such as Moses or Joshua, but passes in turn to **the ordinary believer...***

This is hope in the **everyday moments** of life...

In fact **I want you to notice just how committed** this God is, for **each & every one** of His travelling saints – Verse 5:

*The Lord is a shelter right by your side. The sun will not strike you by day or the moon by night...*

In the ancient Middle East, the **shelter of the shade** was a **particular kind of comfort** to the weary traveller!

In the scorching heat of Jerusalem – **shade was the difference between life & death!**

But beyond that, when you're in the desert with scorching hot weather, the shade was a **wonderful reminder** of the Lord's **promise & protection** for His people!

This is a common theme **that is picked up** through **many of the Old Testament Psalms & Songs**:

Psalm 36 verse 7:

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the *shadow* of your wings...

Psalm 17 verse 8:

*Protect me as the pupil of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings...*

Psalm 91 verse 1:

*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty....*

And so the shade in verse 5 was is this **wonderful reminder** of God's presence & protection for His people!

## **Luna**

Now some commentators wish to say that the reference to the moon here, **simply has to do** with the ancient belief of lunacy:

That the **rays of the moon** were **spiritually harmful** to the human soul...

That's why we have the word *Luna* in our vocabulary; from the word *Lunatic* because they literally believed that too much exposure to the moon **sent people crazy!**

But I think this is **another Merism** that depicts the **24hour care & protection** of the Lord!

The **cold of night & the heat of day** describe **every kind of peril & pain located in this life!**

If verse **3** is talking about **everywhere you go** – then verses **5 & 6** are talking about **everything you do!**

That is:

From the **rising of the sun** – to the **setting of the moon** – and by implication **everything in between those 2 actions** – God is there watching over us!

Everything that happens by day or by night –is under the **sovereign care & protection** of God!

Why?!?

Because He never slumbers & never sleeps!

### Verse 7

And then in verse 7 the psalmist drops all of the metaphors – and simply states what he's **always been saying** this entire time – he says it in terms **as plain as he can:**

*The LORD will protect you from all harm; He will protect your life. The LORD will protect your **coming and going** both now and forever ...*

The Lord will protect His saints!

Now this **doesn't mean** that nothing bad will ever happen to God's people in this life – the Psalm is **literally built upon** a pilgrim who's about to travel a **dark & dangerous road**; by day & by night!!!



So clearly, he **doesn't mean** that we're not gonna have **any trouble or pain** because the Psalm is built upon **a theology of knowing** that we're **going through some valleys** here!

So what the Psalmist is actually saying is **NOT** that we **won't** experience trouble or pain – but that:

God will be with us when we do!

He will hold us, He will preserve us, He will keep us, in the darkest hour of our need!

He will NOT let your soul be lost!

As Jesus famously said in Matthew chapter 10:

*Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot **touch the soul**...Be fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell forever...*

The point of the psalm is **NOT to say** that **we will not** have any problems as we go through the valleys of life – but the point of the Psalm is that **God will keep us safe as we go through them!**

Derek Kidner in his commentary on this Psalm **helpfully clarifies this point** when he says:

*In light of other scriptures, to be kept from all evil **does not imply** a cushioned life, but a well-armed one. Psalm 23 expects the dark valley **but can face it.***

So, the point is **NOT** that we are to read this with **absolute promise** of prosperity & health **wherever we go** – but the point is that **we are to read this psalm through the eyes** of other Scriptures!

Through the eyes of Romans chapter 8!

*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 **in all of creation** will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus...*

So notice what Paul says:

*He will preserve your life, but that **does NOT mean** He will preserve your body!*

And in fact, the Hebrew word for *harm* in Psalm 121 can also be translated as *evil!*

And so I think the Psalmist is speaking about **Spiritual evil & harm** that avails the Christian life, but will **NOT ultimately** cause our hearts to fall away!

As Charles Spurgeon famously said:

*If the soul is kept; then all is kept! What can harm a soul that is kept of the LORD!*

Wherever you are – **whatever you are going through** right now – **as bad as you think it may be** – it is **only by** the sovereign **grace & love of a glorious God** in keeping you on that road!

Ultimately keeping you from an **even greater harm of separation from His love!**

### **Florence Chadwick**

Florence Chadwick was a record-breaking **long-distance** swimmer!

She was the first woman to successfully swim the English Channel both ways!

And in 1952 Florence attempted to swim from **Catalina Island** – to **the Los Angeles Seacoast**; 41 Kilometers in length!

And on the morning of the momentous swim the weather was extremely foggy and very chilly; she could hardly see the boats that were with her in the water, accompanying her as she went!

But still, she swam for **fifteen hours straight!**

But finally, **after many hours** of exhaustion, she began to **request to be taken out of the water...**

Her mother who was in a boat right beside her telling her that she was extremely close **urged her to press on!**

But eventually she couldn't take it anymore – and her body was just so **physically and emotionally exhausted**, that she had to stop the swim and **be pulled out of the water!**

And it wasn't **until she was in the boat** that the fog started to lift, and she **finally saw the shore** that was only:

**800 meters away!**

At a news conference the next day, when she was being interviewed the news reporter asked her:

*Why didn't you just finish the race – why didn't you swim the last 800 meters?!?!*

And she said to the reporter:

*All I could see was the fog in front. ...I think **if I could have just seen** that shore, I would have **made that journey....***

### **Verse 8**

How do we know...that we will make it, in our **Christian journey** of faith?!?!

How do we **look past** the **fog & fear of our lives**, to the holy city of God and **KNOW** that we will make it to the end?!?!?

How do we know that **we will persevere** and **NOT** give up so close to the end?!?!?

We'll notice how the Psalmist concludes this song in verse 8:

The Lord will protect your coming and going both **now and forever...**

Both in this life & in the next!

Both in waking & in sleeping!

Both in walking & in resting!

Both in day & in night!

Both in moon & in sun!

From coming in & going out!

Everything you do is based **NOT UPON** your attentiveness to Him – but **His attentiveness** to **you!**

### **Gospel**

This is the one to whom we should look – to the One who works for those, who wait on Him...

Those who say to Him *“carry me in the journey, for I cannot make this on my own...”*

### **Gospel**

And it would be remiss of me if I did not say to each and everyone of us sitting here this morning:

Set your eyes on Jesus Christ – come to Jesus Christ – trust in Jesus Christ – look to Jesus Christ!

Put your trust in the Risen Lord Jesus, who paid the full penalty of our sin and rescued us from the valley of the shadow of death!

And who walks with us every step of the way and carries us up that hill!

### **Richard Sibbes**

He will protect your coming out & going in, **in all places, at all times, both now & forevermore!**

### **HE IS WITH YOU!**

In the words of Richard Sibbes:

*“As we say of the mother and the child, **both hold eachother, but the safety of the child is that **the mother, holds, him!**”***

You are told to persevere – you are told to come – you are told to walk toward the LORD!  
but the safety of the Pilgrim is **only found in the fact** that:

### **GOD HOLDS THEM!**

If you want safety for your soul – if you want eternal security – if you want the guarantee that your eternal soul **will not be lost** to the evil & harm of this world – then:

### **Set your eyes on Jesus!**

Set your eyes on the Author & Perfector of your faith; and **NEVER LOOK BACK!**

### **Conclusion**

The promise of Psalm 121 is **NOT** that **we will NOT experience** trials & suffering in this life – **but the promise is that:**

### **GOD WILL BE WITH YOU, WHEN YOU DO!**

Holding us – loving us – Protecting us – & guiding us **through Life’s toughest journey!**

That is our hope – that is our promise – and that is our protection through:

***Pilgrims, Perils, & a Powerful God!***

Let's pray.

## Psalm 121

### Discussion/Application Questions

[Read Psalm 121 together]

**Main Point:** *God is our peace and our protection through life's toughest journey*

**Q1.** Psalm 121 has often been categorized as “*A song of ascents.*” What does this mean? – How does knowing this help you to interpret the Psalm?

**Q2.** In Verse 1, the Pilgrim seems to be distressed about his journey. Why do you think he is worried about the road ahead? – What is it that brings him comfort in verse 2? – What are some deep valleys you have personally walked through in your life? – How has God helped you through them?

**Q3.** How does fixing our eyes on the correct object of faith help us to walk through suffering and pain in our lives?

**Q4.** If we take verse 3 to be the response of a seasoned pilgrim on the journey, what does this teach us about the need for having other godly saints in our lives? – Do you identify with the pilgrim in the first half or the second? – What are some ways we can help each other persevere in the faith?

**Q5.** What is the major theme you see in verses 3-8? – What does the word “keep” mean?

**Q6.** Why is verse 3a (*your foot will not slip*) such a wonderful promise for a travelling pilgrim? – What does the Psalmist mean when he says “*Your Protector will not slumber. Indeed, the Protector of Israel does not slumber or sleep...?*” – Do you ever feel that God is unattentive and even asleep at times in your life? – What helps you to fight those thoughts?

**Q7.** [Read verses 5 & 6; see also 17:8; 36:7; 91:1]. What would the image of shade had represented in the mind of the Pilgrim?

**Q8.** [Read Romans 8:33-39]. In light of Romans 8 and other Scriptures, how should we understand the claim in verse 7: “*He will keep you from all harm?*”

**Q9.** [Read Verse 8]. What is the guarantee that Christians will persevere until the end?