

November 4, 2018

Psalm 121

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Assurance of God's Protection

A Song of Ascents.

¹ I lift up my eyes to *the hills*—
from where will **my help** come?

² **My help** comes from *the Lord*,
who made heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴ *He who keeps* Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵ *The Lord* is your keeper,
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

⁶ The sun by day,
it shall not strike you
nor the moon by night.

⁷ *The Lord* will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

⁸ *The Lord* will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

Luke 2:8-11

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⁸ In that region [near the city of David called, Bethlehem in Judea] there were SHEPHERDS living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of *the Lord* stood before them, and the glory of *the Lord* shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "**Do not be afraid**; for see—I am

A Song of Ascents: is a title given to fifteen of the Psalms, 120–134. Many scholars believe the title indicates that these psalms were sung by worshippers as they ascended the road to Jerusalem to attend the three pilgrim festivals described in Deuteronomy 16:16: the feast of unleavened bread, the feast of weeks, and the feast of tabernacles. Others think they were sung by the Levite singers as they ascended the fifteen steps to minister at the Temple in Jerusalem. In any case they are poem-songs of worship uttered during a pilgrimage journey.

the hills: In Hebrew the word used is "the mountains": this can refer to: 1) to the mountains from where one in danger expected help; or 2) to heaven, considered as high, and as the abode of God; or 3) to the hills on which Jerusalem was built, as the place where God dwelt, and from where aid was expected. In Ezekiel, we became familiar with this designation of the holy city. This designation of Palestine developed from the contrast, "Between the Mesopotamian plain and 'the mountains of Israel.'" "Thus, the 'hills' (or mountains) became synonymous for the holy city."

the Lord: Here the poet uses the great name of God Yahweh – which is impossible to fix to one translation. It means something along the lines of "the Eternal One: who was, and is, and is to come." Jewish believers write Yhwh or read ADONAI (Hebrew for Lord) in place of pronouncing this holy name aloud. Most modern English translations replace it with the word Lord with a capital L to make this distinction. In our psalm we see that YHWH is the primary actor, mover and shaper of all things. The one who starts all action.

my help: The poet places his/her hope not in the mountains (the holy and high places); but, but in the One who made the mountains. This refrain is echoed in another of the Songs of the Ascents, where the congregation as a whole will echo this claim: "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 124:3).

he who keeps: There is a close relationship between the Songs of Ascents (Psalm 120-122) and the Priestly Blessing of Numbers 6:24–26. ²⁴ *The Lord bless you and keep you;* ²⁵ *the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;* ²⁶ *the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace."*

Poetically, the author has used the verb "to keep" to structure the parallelism of the verses 3 through 8.

The Message of psalm 121 can be summarized as claiming confidence in that help (first for the poet, then for us as readers) comes from embracing these facts:

Help comes from YHWH, the one who is present, who is there, and is in covenant with Israel.

Help comes from the Creator of all things, the all-powerful God. Help comes from the one who, therefore, has the ability to keep (or protect) Israel. V. 4 is the only verse in vv. 3–8 that is not

bringing you **GOOD NEWS** of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace
among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- **What grabs your attention in this reading?**
- **How have you experienced God as a help, or the help in your journey of faith and life?**
- **How do you need God’s help (preservation or protection) in your pilgrimage journey of life and faith?**
- **How does the word “joy” strike you in this reading about the shepherds?**
- **How does God’s presence bring you joy?**

personalized to “you.”

Help comes from the one who personally protects those who are his.

YHWH’s help extends from the present into the eternal, and so .

as such, the individual can take these second-person truths to his or herself; the “you” can become “me.” These verses declare something that Yhwh does as part of who he is.

Do not be afraid This is one of the most repeated greetings in the Bible, usually uttered by angels, or messengers, speaking on behalf of God.

GOOD NEWS This is the Greek word “euaggellion” related to the word “aggellos” (angels or messengers). It means both good news and the literal word “gospel.”

SHEPHERDS in Palestine proper the shepherd held a subordinate position. The office of the eastern shepherd, as described in the Bible, was attended with much hardship, and even danger. He was exposed to the extremes of heat and cold, his food frequently consisted of the precarious supplies afforded by nature, such as the fruit of the “sycamore” or Egyptian fig. He had to encounter the attacks of wild beasts, , such as lions, nerves, panthers and bears, nor was he free from the risk of robbers or predators hordes.) To meet these various foes the shepherds equipment consisted of the following articles: a mantle, made probably of sheep skin with the fleece on, which he turned inside out in cold weather, a scrip or wallet, containing a small amount of food ; a sling, which is still the favorite weapon of the Bedouin shepherd; and lastly, a staff which served the double purpose of a weapon against foes and a crook for the management of the flock.

The shepherds word required great watchfulness, particularly by night It also required tenderness toward the young and feeble particularly in driving them to and from the pasturage. While they were the keepers of some of the most prized societal possessions they undoubtedly were dirty and smelly from the obligations of their vocation. As a result, they were seen both well and with suspicion as uneducated outsiders who didn’t follow costumes, came and went, and could possibly be up to no good.