

# Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

Bereans Sunday School  
Placerita Baptist Church  
2008

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## Psalm 121 — Help in a Hostile World

### 1.0 Introducing Psalm 121

- Psalm 120 depicted the pilgrim living in a hostile world of unbelievers. Psalm 121 explains that divine help produces the pilgrim's peace of mind in such a world.  
✓ Troubled travelers turn to God for a tranquil trust.
- Many Christians refer to Psalm 121 as the "Traveler's Psalm."
- By dim lamplight 27 year old David Livingstone read this psalm and Psalm 135 to his father, mother, and sister before dawn on a November morning in 1840 before he set out from his home to become a missionary to Africa. — Rob Mackenzie, *David Livingstone: The Truth Behind the Legend* (Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway Publications, 1993), 48-50.

### 2.0 Reading Psalm 121 (NAU)

**121:1** A Song of Ascents.

I will lift up my eyes to the mountains;  
From where shall my help come?

**121:2** My help comes from the LORD,  
Who made heaven and earth.

**121:3** He will not allow your foot to slip;  
He who keeps you will not slumber.

**121:4** Behold, He who keeps Israel  
Will neither slumber nor sleep.

**121:5** The LORD is your keeper;  
The LORD is your shade on your right hand.

**121:6** The sun will not smite you by day,  
Nor the moon by night.

**121:7** The LORD will protect you from all evil;

He will **keep** your soul.  
**121:8** The LORD will **guard** your going out and your coming in  
From this time forth and forever.

### 3.0 Understanding Psalm 121

#### 3.1 Outline

- I. God is the Pilgrim's Helper (vv. 1–2)
- II. God is the Pilgrim's Keeper (vv. 3–8)
  - A. He is Always on Guard (vv. 3–4)
  - B. He is Always Guarding (vv. 5–8)



#### 3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** “I will lift up my eyes to the mountains”
  - The pilgrim does not worship the mountains, nor do his thoughts go to a “high place” where pagan altars were often located.
  - Pilgrims feared traveling the mountains alone — besides dangerous wild animals, there was always the fear of being ambushed by robbers.
  - Some interpreters believe that the pilgrims recited this psalm on their last night, within sight of Jerusalem and the Temple mount, since the next psalm (122:2) speaks of the pilgrims being inside Jerusalem. In their opinion, the psalm looks up at the Temple mount, where the divine Presence resides.
  - “Either way, he knows something better. The thought of this verse leaps beyond the hills to the universe; beyond the universe to its Maker. Here is living help: primary, personal, wise, immeasurable.” — Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 431.
- **v. 2** “My help *comes* from the LORD”
  - ***Are believers unrealistic in believing that God will protect them from all harm?***
  - Psalm 121 recognizes that the pilgrim needs help and protection.
  - The psalmist does not guarantee an untroubled journey in life, he only guarantees the presence of God.
  - “My help” introduces the first step like parallelism in this psalm.
- **v. 2** “Who made heaven and earth”
  - The LORD is all powerful (omnipotent)—if He has power to create the heavens and the earth, He certainly has the power to protect the pilgrim.
  - See Psalms 124:8 and 134:3. Compare 115:15; 136:5, 7; 146:6.

- v. 3 “He who keeps you”
  - This particular term in the Hebrew occurs 6x in verses 3–8 translated with “keep,” “protect,” and “guard.”
  - God is always present (omnipresent) to provide help and protection. His help suffices in all of life’s many dangers and troubles.
    - ✓ Compare Philippians 4:7; 2 Timothy 4:18; and 1 Peter 4:19.
- v. 3 “will not slumber”
  - “Slumber” often refers to a light sleep or being drowsy.
  - God does not doze off even momentarily. He is always watching.
- v. 4 “Behold”
  - Here it means the same as “Indeed, it is true.”
  - God obviously does not sleep — He needs no sleep.
- v. 4 “Israel”
  - First mention of Israel in the Psalms of Ascents.
- v. 5 “The LORD”
  - This divine title is the key title in verses 5, 7, and 8.
  - “Yahweh” (“the LORD”) represents God as eternal and as the covenant-keeping God.
  - The LORD will fulfill His promises — He will never ever leave or forsake His people.
- v. 5 “your shade on your right hand”
  - Shade keeps the pilgrim from harmful effects of the sun. Shade provides relief from direct sun rays and comfort from oppressive heat.
  - The right hand represents the pilgrim’s strength and skill.
  - Relief and comfort refresh him for the rigors of his journey.
  - A helper stands at one’s right hand (Pss 16:8; 73:23; 109:31).
- v. 6 Chiasm — Mirror Image
  - A by day,
  - B The sun
  - C **will not smite you**
  - B’ Nor the moon
  - A’ by night.
  - C focuses on God preventing and protecting. A and B express the totality that means “never” (neither by day nor by night).
- v. 8 “your going out and your coming in”
  - Normally, “[t]he pair of verbs refers to daily work as primarily consisting of going out of the town to work in the fields and returning in the evening . . .” — Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1983), 152.



- For the pilgrim, this might refer to his departure for and his return from Jerusalem.
- v. 8 “From this time forth and forever”
  - God’s care is now and forever — a very comforting thought.
  - Compare Numbers 6:24–26 as well as Romans 8:35–39 and Jude 24–25.

#### 4.0 Singing Psalm 121

##### “I to the Hills Will Lift My Eyes”

(Tune: “Amazing Grace”)

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| <p>1 I to the hills will lift my eyes;<br/>O whence shall come my aid?<br/>My help is from the Lord alone,<br/>Who Heav’n and earth has made.</p> <p>3 Thy faithful Keeper is the Lord,<br/>Thy Shelter and thy Shade;<br/>’Neath sun or moon, by day or night,<br/>Thou shalt not be afraid.</p> | <p>2 He will not let thy foot be moved,<br/>Thy Guardian never sleeps;<br/>With watchful and unslumbering care,<br/>His own He safely keeps.</p> <p>4 From evil He will keep thee safe,<br/>For thee He will provide;<br/>Thy going out, thy coming in,<br/>Forever He will guide.</p> |
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— *The Psalter*, 1912 (paraphrase of Psalm 121)

#### 5.0 Praying Psalm 121

- O Maker of heaven and earth, thank You, for being my help. [vv. 1–2]
- Thank You, Father, for never sleeping or slumbering. [vv. 3–4]
- O God, You are my ever present Protector. [vv. 5–8]
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#### 6.0 Applying Psalm 121

- The all powerful and ever present God helps and protects us.
- God provides comprehensive care in the midst of our troubles.

The Christian life is not a quiet escape to a garden where we can walk and talk uninterruptedly with our Lord; not a fantasy trip to a heavenly city where we can compare our blue ribbons and gold medals with others who have made it to the winner’s circle. . . . The Christian life is going to God. In going to God Christians travel the same ground that everyone else walks on, breathe the same air, drink the same water, shop in the same stores, read the same newspapers, are citizens under the same governments, pay the same prices for groceries and gasoline, fear the same dangers, are subject to the same pressures, get the same distresses, are buried in the same ground.

The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God, we know we are accompanied by God, we know we are ruled by God; and therefore no matter what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will preserve us from evil, he will keep our life.

— Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*  
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 40–41