

Truth for Today

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Psalm 23 - Aspects of our LORD: The LORD as our Keeper

The fact that our Lord is our keeper can be seen in each verse of Psalm 23. He's especially our keeper because He's our Shepherd, "*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want*" (Psalm 23:1, New King James Version). Throughout the Old Testament, shepherds are described as keepers of sheep. For example: "*Abel was a keeper of sheep*" (Genesis 4:2). Rachel was a shepherdess and kept her father's sheep (Genesis 29:9, King James Version). "*Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law*" (Exodus 3:1). And David himself was a shepherd. He was keeping the sheep when Samuel came to anoint him king (1 Samuel 16:11). Later David himself said to Saul, "*Your servant used to keep his father's sheep*" (1 Samuel 17:34, New King James Version). Also, God promised to be Israel's Shepherd: "*Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock.'*" (Jeremiah 31:10).

But the LORD, or Jehovah (the covenant-keeping God of Israel), was David's personal Shepherd. We also have Him as our personal Shepherd because the Lord Jesus is the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Christ is God manifest in the flesh (see Romans 10:9-13 and 1 Timothy 3:16). The Lord Jesus states that He's the Shepherd of the sheep in John 10:14-17. "*I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd. Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again.*" In order to be our Shepherd He had to suffer for us upon the cross so that we might have our sins taken away.

And heaven is our destiny because Jesus Himself gives His sheep eternal life. The truth of the Gospel is that, once saved, I cannot be lost. The Lord Jesus said, "*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand*" (John 10:27-29). The words "*never perish*" more exactly mean "never forever" for there's double security here: in His hand but also in His Father's hand! Each and every believer can have the assurance of which Peter writes: "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*" (1 Peter 1:3-5). My eternal security does not depend on me at all. I rest upon the all-sufficient sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ and the value of His precious blood shed for sinners. He's the author of an eternal salvation (Hebrews 5:9). I also rest upon the keeping power of God. No matter what difficulties come my way, I believe these promises of God.

Let's now go through Psalm 23 and see in it this great truth that the Lord is my Keeper.

Psalm 23:1: "*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*"

The Lord Jesus is the good Shepherd, who cares for His sheep and keeps them from all harm to their souls. "*Because He continues forever, [He] has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them*" (Hebrews 7:24-25).

Psalm 23:2: "*He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.*"

The Lord Jesus tends and cares for His sheep and keeps them supplied with spiritual food. He's the door, by which we enter into the fold. In Him we have eternal salvation. We are able to "*go in and out and find pasture*" (John 10:9). He provides spiritual rest and peace: "*You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You*" (Isaiah 26:3).

Psalm 23:3: "*He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.*"

The Lord Jesus is totally committed to caring for us and to keeping us throughout life's journey. Not for our glory, but for "*His name's sake*" - for His glory and honour so that His name is not blasphemed. In periods of soul-thirst He'll

keep us and restore us spiritually. He knows the right paths for us. He'll lead us aright, if we but let Him for we each have that sheep-like tendency to go our own way! (See Isaiah 53:6). *"I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness, and will hold Your hand; I will keep You"* (Isaiah 42:6).

Psalm 23:4: *"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."*

The pathway of life for believers is fraught with many dangers. We all have to pass through the deep dark valleys for we live in a God-rejecting, sin-dominated world. When we see no way out, we're kept by the overcoming-power that His presence brings. Where He leads, we must follow. We must be content with what He provides us. *"Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we may boldly say: 'The LORD is my helper [and my keeper]; I will not fear. What can man do to me?'"* (Hebrews 13:5-6). And if we have to pass through death itself, He promises to carry us through into the bliss of His presence in heaven. Paul also had this confidence in Him and feared no evil: *"My earnest expectation and hope [is] that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."* (Philippians 1:20-21).

Let me tell you of my younger brother, who died of cancer in his late twenties. One evening, whilst he was undergoing chemotherapy, he asked me to read John 14 to him. I read down the verses and stopped at John 14:18, *"I will not leave you ... I will come to you."* Later that night he went into a deep coma from which he emerged a few weeks later, contrary to medical expectations. After a couple of months, he was able to think straight again. He told me that the Lord's promise from John 14:18 was all that he remembered of passing through the valley of the shadow of death (see Psalm 23:4). He said the Lord had been present with him all the way through! That experience changed him. When his cancer returned the next year and he died, he faced death knowing that the Lord would be with him again.

In Psalm 23:4, David's confidence was in the Shepherd's rod and staff. They provided practical evidence that the LORD would keep him through those many dark and difficult periods of his life. (Many of his other psalms record his feelings of helplessness, depression and acute anxiety during those times). Think of the terrifying experiences he had when Saul became jealous of him and saw him as a threat to his reputation and his throne. Then there was the conspiracy of Absalom (See 2 Samuel 15:1-37), which had David fleeing for his life. But the LORD kept him safe, even when there was just a hair's breadth between life and death. David related his own use of the rod in 1 Samuel 17:34-35, when he told Saul how this cudgel was his weapon of defence to kill the lion and the bear. He realised that the LORD would keep him safe in all situations of spiritual danger. The staff was the shepherd's implement to walk with; and to round up the flock. It reminded David of the LORD's ways of keeping him safe in the ordinary affairs of life.

Psalm 23:5: *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over."*

Now David thinks of how the LORD would impart calm assurance despite the constant pressures of his spiritual and physical enemies, and make him victorious. Believers today have this same assurance. In Romans 8:31-39, Paul triumphs in the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord and from which we can never be separated. In Romans 8:35-36, he asks, *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: 'For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.'"* Then he assures us in Romans 8:37, *"Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us."* No wonder our cups run over with joy!

Psalm 23:6: *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."*

David concludes his statements of the keeping power of the LORD by exclaiming the prospect that *"in God's house for evermore my dwelling place shall be."* Christians also are surrounded by the goodness and mercy of the Lord Jesus. He'll keep us safe in this world until He comes to take us to be with Himself in heaven (see John 14:1-3).

Psalm 121

I would like to extend these meditations on 'The Lord as our Keeper' by looking at Psalm 121, where this is the psalmist's central thought. Addressing his fellow Israelites, he affirms, *"The LORD is your keeper; The LORD is your shade at your right hand"* (Psalm 121:5). Please notice the six occurrences of "keep" as I read the psalm from New Revised Standard Version: *"I lift up my eyes to the hills - from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; He who **keeps** you will not slumber. He who **keeps** Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your **keeper**; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. The sun*

*shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will **keep** you from all evil; He will **keep** your life. The LORD will **keep** your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore” (Psalm 121:1-8)*

Psalm 121 is the second of the fifteen “Psalms of Ascent”. The first concerns the dangers and difficulties of life: *“In my distress I cried to the LORD, and He heard me”* (Psalm 120:1, New King James Version). So in Psalm 121:1, the psalmist’s natural instinct, or human urge, was to flee to the mountains, for they were Israel’s natural defences. But this is countered by his question, *“but where does my help actually come from?”* In response, his thoughts (in Psalm 121:2) immediately leap to the LORD, the Creator of the universe! In Him is wise and immeasurable help for every godly person. *“In the LORD I put my trust; how can you say to my soul, ‘Flee as a bird to your mountain?’”* (Psalm 11:1). *“Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds His people from this time forth and forever.”* (Psalm 125:1-2).

Some commentators think the “Psalms of Ascent” were sung by the pilgrims of Israel as they went up to the Feasts in Jerusalem three times a year (see Exodus 34:23). In Exodus 34:24, the LORD promised to protect their land (and by extension themselves, their homes and their kinsfolk) from the hostile nations who surrounded Israel, whilst they were on their pilgrimages. Yes, the LORD, the Creator, unaided by natural or man-made defences, is able to keep His people safe! He is their Protector! John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15-17 and Hebrews 1:2-3 identify the Creator to be the Lord Jesus Christ. We know that He holds all things together and that He sustains all things by His powerful word (Colossians 1:17 and Hebrews 1:3). He is our all-powerful Protector, who will keep us safe on our Christian pilgrimage to heaven!

As the festive pilgrims reached Psalm 121:3, they would encourage each other, *“[The LORD] will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber.”* This personal care and protection from their God is promised in other psalms, for example, Psalm 91:11-12: *“For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.”* It’s the godly person’s reward because of his total trust in God. The secret of this promise is found in Psalm 91:1-2: *“He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust.’”* Psalm 91 is messianic, meaning that it applies primarily to the Lord Jesus, who encountered the Devil and other opposition during His life. However, other psalms give expression to the urgent pleas of ordinary believers, made in prayer to God, as they experience hostility from the world, in whatever dispensation they live:

- *“Preserve me, O God, for in You I put my trust”* (Psalm 16:1);
- *“Keep me as the apple of Your eye; hide me under the shadow of Your wings”* (Psalm 17:8);
- *“Keep my soul, and deliver me; let me not be ashamed, for I put my trust in You”* (Psalm 25:20);
- *“Preserve my life, for I am holy; You are my God; save Your servant who trusts in You!”* (Psalm 86:2).

Yet other psalms reflect the assurance that the psalmist actually experienced the LORD’s keeping power:

- *“The LORD will preserve him and keep him alive, and he will be blessed on the earth; You will not deliver him to the will of his enemies”* (Psalm 41:2);
- *“He preserves the souls of His saints; He delivers them out of the hand of the wicked”* (Psalm 97:10);
- *“The LORD preserves the simple; I was brought low, and He saved me”* (Psalm 116:6).

Having mentioned at the end of Psalm 121:3 that the LORD never sleeps, the singers then boast of the faithfulness of their covenant-God in Psalm 121:4. He is Israel’s God, who, unlike the gods of the nations, has no weaknesses or needs. *“Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.”* Awake and alert at every moment, He can bring instant help to His own. *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble”* (Psalm 46:1). He’s easy to find at all times and provides, according to Psalm 121:5-6, a 24/7 round-the-clock care! He guards you by day and He guards you by night even from the most overpowering, and the most insidious, of foes. But, *“the sun shall not strike you by day”* (Psalm 121:6) reminds us of how it beat down upon Jonah and thus of the necessity to be living in the will of God to gain the practical benefits of the promises of Psalm 121:6. Psalm 121:5-8 is written in a personal way. We each can say that the Lord Jesus is my Keeper (Psalm 121:5), who will keep me from all evil or harm (Psalm 121:7a). That especially applies to my soul or inner life (Psalm 121:7b) and includes the dark valley experiences of Psalm 23:4.

Psalm 121:5-7 parallels Psalm 91:3-11, from which many believers have received real comfort and consolation, especially when they are facing extreme circumstances or enduring terminal illnesses or facing death by martyrdom: *“Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the perilous pestilence. He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler. You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day, nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand; but it shall not come near you. Only with your eyes shall you look ... No evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling.”*

Psalm 121 ends with Psalm 121:8 guaranteeing the total safety of the pilgrims each and every time they undertook their pilgrimages to Jerusalem. The Lord Jesus also will keep everyone of us whatever we face throughout life, whether we go out into the perilous world or return to the safety of our own homes or church fellowships. For Christians, our pilgrimage is on-going until we reach our heavenly home in eternity. As we go out into a hostile world, He prevents *"the arrow that flies by day"* from harming us; and as we come back home He protects us from *"the terror by night"*, each of which speak of those fiery darts of the wicked one which would contaminate our hearts and minds.

During the 1980s and the 1990s, we had a poster based on Psalm 121:8a (New International Version) on the wall of our front porch. It read, *"The LORD will watch over your comings and your goings."* It was a great encouragement to all the family for it seemed to cover all our enterprises. That period was one of busy family life: our four children were growing up and attending school each day; my wife was looking after both them and the home, whilst I held down a very demanding job. But the accurate translation is, *"The LORD will watch over your going out and your coming in"*. That reminds me that my last movement in life will be upwards to my heavenly home. Yes, we have the wonderful assurance that the Lord Jesus will keep us safe throughout life on earth until He calls us to His Father's house in heaven above, where *"I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever"* (Psalm 23:6).

Let's pray: *"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Saviour, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen"* (Jude 24-25).

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