

## Things to think about on your way to church Psalm 121 We're going to meet the God who helps us

*[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

### **What are 'The Psalms of Ascents'?**

Today, we continue our series on the Psalms of Ascents, or Psalms of degrees as they're sometimes called. The Psalms of Ascents run from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134, fifteen psalms in total. We don't know exactly why these psalms were grouped together and called the Psalms of Ascents, but most people think it was because they were psalms that the Israelites sang as they journeyed to Jerusalem for their special religious feasts. The Jewish people were expected to leave their homes and travel to Jerusalem for three special occasions through the year, Passover (which the Jews called Pesach) and the Feast of Unleavened bread, the Feast of Weeks or Harvest, (which is called Pentecost in the New Testament and which the Jews called Shavuot) and the Feast of tabernacles or ingathering (which the Jews called Sukkot).

You can read more about these feasts in Exodus 23 for example. Maybe these were fifteen songs that the people sang together on their way to Jerusalem to prepare themselves for worshipping God when they got there. Some people also wonder whether these Psalms were sung by the priests on the fifteen steps of the temple from the 'court of the women' to the 'court of the male Israelites', but we don't really know that for certain.

Most of the fifteen Psalms of Ascents contain references to some historical help from the Lord. But it's usually quite difficult to pinpoint the exact occasions referred to. Sometimes we're reminded of events whilst David was king. Sometimes things sound like they might refer to the time when the Jews came back from captivity in Babylon. Sometimes, it's so difficult to pinpoint exact historical occasions that we think the psalmist is actually writing prophetically about things that will happen to the people of Israel in the future, after the Lord has come again.

But the fact that we can't pinpoint exact historical events is actually helpful for us. It means that we're not limited to very specific circumstances in drawing applications and lessons from these Psalms. So today, as we consider Psalm 121 and think about our help coming from the Lord, we will see how this would be a comfort for Jewish people on the road to Jerusalem. But we'll see too, that it's an encouragement for us that our help comes from the Lord, too. And I'm sure you can see how a Jewish believer during the time of the Great Tribulation in the future will draw help and comfort from the Psalm, too.

### **What's the reason for this series?**

What's the reason why we've called this series "Things to think about on your way to church?" We know that the Psalms weren't written about people going to church – the Church didn't exist when these psalms were written. They were written about Jews going up to Jerusalem to visit the house of God. But Paul tells Timothy that the Church today is the "house of God" (see 1 Timothy 3:15), so we can learn from the kind of things the Jewish people thought about on their way to the temple and learn something for ourselves today. When a local church gathers together, we are God's

house. And so, things that the Jews thought about on the way to the temple all those years ago, might teach us some lessons to consider as we meet together week by week.

## **Psalm 121**

Our focus for today is the second of the Psalms of Ascents, Psalm 121. So, let's read it from NKJV, so that we know what it says.

A Song of Ascents.

I will lift up my eyes to the hills — From whence comes my help? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall 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 shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul. The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

Perhaps you can picture the scene? The temple was located in the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem itself was built on a plateau in the hills of the Judean mountains. That's why the Bible speaks so often of people going "up" to Jerusalem. They literally had to go up a hill. As we've mentioned, three times a year Jewish believers were expected to leave their home towns and travel to Jerusalem for special gatherings. Some would no doubt have had to travel a long way. Imagine the dangers they could face along the journey. Perhaps there would be dangers from thieves and bandits. Do you remember the story the Lord Jesus told of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10? A man goes down from Jerusalem to Jericho and is attacked by thieves. Perhaps the Lord told that story because the roads around Jerusalem were well known for the gangs that patrolled them?

The journey to Jerusalem would also have been difficult due to the heat of travelling during the day, and the cold nights whilst they camped along the way. When I walk anywhere around the city I live in there is usually a pavement to walk on. Whatever we might think about the unevenness of some pavements, I suspect what we have today is much better than existed in the times of these psalms. The road to Jerusalem would likely have been tough and difficult. I've no doubt people slipped and injured themselves at tricky points along the way. Maybe when they got to Jerusalem, these Jews enjoyed the celebrations. Perhaps they were highlights of their year. But I wonder if perhaps the journey to get there each time didn't fill them with joy, but with fear.

### **Where did the psalmist's help come from**

And so, we get the opening statement of Psalm 121, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills." Imagine for a moment that you're part of a Jewish family travelling up to Jerusalem for one of the feasts. And as you pass through the valleys and through the mountains you look up to the hills surrounding you. And you just start to feel a bit nervous. What dangers might be concealed in these hills? Tricky parts of the path, bandits, weather conditions, animals? You can easily understand the next question of the psalmist. "From whence comes my help?" Where is my help going to come from? Who will help get me and my family safely to Jerusalem?

The psalmist has a confident reply! "My help comes from the LORD." No matter the danger, this traveller was confident that he had someone to help. The LORD is mentioned five times directly in this Psalm and referred to at least four more times as "He who" or "He shall" or "He will." The psalmist was confident that God would help them.

So, let's just pause for a moment at this point and zoom forward to our day. What does this man on the road to Jerusalem teach us as we make the journey to church to gather with the Lord's

people each week? Although we're not travelling to Jerusalem, I suspect most of us can empathise a little bit with this man on the road. Like him, we can recognise dangers and challenges in the days ahead. We might worry about money issues. Where is the money for the next bill coming from? We might be concerned about job security. Family life might be difficult just now. Children might be having difficulties at school. Friends might have fallen out. We could be tired, overworked, and stretched too thin. Every time you gather with the Lord's people, I suspect there are some issues, either in the week that's just happened, or in the week to come that cause you concern. We might ask the same question as the psalmist. Where is my help going to come from? Christians can have the same confident reply. "My help comes from the LORD."

### **The Maker of heaven and earth**

The psalmist reveals something more about the LORD. He's the One "who made heaven and earth." Why is that mentioned here? Well, who else would be better to help? Sometimes I see someone in need and offer to help. I remember one time walking past a car that had broken down, and the owner was trying to push it into a side street. So, I stopped to help. Let's just say that I'm not the world's strongest man, and so I was of limited help, though I tried my best and we moved the car a bit. Pretty soon, another man joined us who was much fitter and stronger than I am, and the car moved much more quickly! My desire to help was well intentioned, but I wasn't especially helpful because I wasn't fit for the job. But the man in Psalm 121 says that his help comes from the Maker of heaven and earth. His Helper was so powerful that He spoke a word and worlds came into being. Nothing is too hard for Him. Let's remember that point. We often look for help in all the wrong places. We look for help from people who are not able to help us. Sometimes their efforts to help can even be damaging to us. But that's never true of the Lord. He is always able to help. There is no limit to His power.

The rest of Psalm 121 reveals different ways in which the LORD helped the psalmist as he travelled to Jerusalem.

### **The LORD will keep you from stumbling**

First of all, verse 3 says,

He will not allow your foot to be moved.

Perhaps sometimes as the psalmist walked the path to Jerusalem, he would stop paying attention to where he was stepping. Occasionally his foot would slip and he would stumble and fall. Maybe the path got difficult at points, and it was easy to fall or get your foot stuck in a rock. But the psalmist was confident that God would not allow his foot to be moved.

What might we learn from this? For the psalmist, I think this was a real assurance that God looked after their physical steps as they walked to Jerusalem. I'm sure the same is true for us. God notices every step we make and has His eye on it. Nothing will happen to us that He doesn't allow. But perhaps we can push the point a bit further? James says in his epistle that we all stumble in many things (James 3:2). So often we trip up spiritually and fall into some sin or other as we try to walk with the Lord. But Jude's short letter gives us a great promise. Jude finishes his letter with a burst of praise saying,

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 23-24).

Jude was sure the God was able to keep him from stumbling. If we're Christians, we can be sure of this too. God is able to keep you from stumbling and present you faultless before the presence of His glory! Perhaps you have travelled or will travel to church to meet with believers this week.

But in the back of your mind is some difficult circumstance coming up in the week ahead. Perhaps you know you will face something where there is a good chance you'll fall into sin. Maybe you need to speak with someone who often seems to cause you to lose your temper. Maybe you'll need to go somewhere where you will face temptation. Like the psalmist on the road to Jerusalem, you worry you might stumble and fall. Remember that your help comes from the Lord and He is able to keep you from stumbling. We could say that God helps protect us from ourselves.

### **The LORD never slumbers nor sleeps**

The next section of Psalm 121 covers the end of verse 3 and verse 4. Here the psalmist says,

He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall  
neither slumber nor sleep.

Some of the Jews travelling to Jerusalem for the feast faced long and difficult journeys. Almost all journeys we can take today are completed within a day. You can even find yourself on the other side of the world in less than 24 hours if you pick the right flights. But journeys to Jerusalem probably took many days. The Israelites would have to sleep along the way. That would have been dangerous. As well as the risk of bandits, there could be wild animals. Before David went to fight Goliath, he told King Saul that he had fought against lions and bears, so I assume they must have been living in the wild areas of Israel at the time. Imagine again that you are part of a family travelling for the feast. It's the end of a long day of walking and you're tired, and every bone and muscle aches. You want nothing more than to close your eyes and to sleep. But there's a nagging worry at the back of your mind. What about my children? What about the lions and the bears? What about bandits? At some point you need to sleep. Who would look after your family? Well, the psalmist was convinced that God would. And God was better than any watchman could be, because He never slumbers or sleeps. The psalmist was aware that there were times of the day when he was physically vulnerable. He needed to sleep so couldn't be on guard. But he trusted the God who would always watch over him.

This is a good lesson for us too. There are times when I cannot look after myself. I need to sleep. There are times when I cannot be with my family. Each day we separate to go in different directions, to school and to work for example. I can't protect my family every hour of every day, no matter how much I might like to. But I'm glad that God can. He never sleeps. He never slumbers. He is there, all of the time, fully aware of everything that happens to all of us.

When my children were younger, sometimes they would wake us up in the middle of the night for something they considered to be really urgent. They needed help with something. But I was so asleep that although I woke up, I wasn't really able to help them much because I didn't really know what I was doing. When their hour of need came, I was only half awake and not really able to help. But you can rest assured fellow Christian, that when your need comes God doesn't need time to wake up before He can help. He never slumbers and never sleeps. So, when we worry about circumstances that are outside our control, we should remember that our help comes from the Lord. He never sleeps. We can say that God helps us when we can't help ourselves.

### **The LORD is your Keeper**

The next description comes in verses 5 and 6.

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.

Let's imagine you're on a journey up to Jerusalem again. Imagine walking in the middle of the day. Step after step as the sun beats down upon you. It must have been hard work during those hot days. But then at night, when you were ready to sleep, the temperature plummets and you get really cold. But, says the psalmist, the LORD kept them. They were going to Jerusalem to worship

Him, and He helped them along the way. He was like a shade to them. However hot the sun got, it would not defeat them. Neither the coldness at night. Night and day God had His eye on His people. He was their Protector or Keeper. And the reminder of these truths as they sang Psalm 121 on the journey would have been an encouragement to them.

And so, He is for us too. There are often circumstances that are outside our control. Whether that's the weather on a journey, the choices of our government, or the decisions and reactions of friends and work colleagues – all of these are things we have no control over. But God knows about them. And He is able to keep us in all of these situations. When we find ourselves in circumstances outside our control, we should remember that our help comes from the Lord and He is our Protector. God helps us in all our circumstances of life.

### **The LORD is your Preserver**

In verse 7, the psalmist goes further.

The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul.

Maybe many evil things faced the Israelites on their journey up to Jerusalem. We've already thought about bandits. Perhaps there were immoral influences from those they met on the road. But the Lord helped the psalmist and preserved him from evil. That's true for us today as well. We face many evil influences around us. Paul says in Galatians 1:4 that the Lord Jesus

Gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.

In Psalm 121 we've seen lots of ways in which the Lord gave help. Each of these was to give encouragement to the Israelites as they ascended to Jerusalem each year for the feasts. But we need to pause here for a moment and think carefully about what exactly this Psalm is telling us. After all, wouldn't some Israelites have fallen and hurt their feet as they travelled? Does the statement that God wouldn't let their foot be moved mean that no Israelite ever twisted their ankle or slipped off the path? Did none of them ever get sunburn from the glaring sun? Did none of them ever fall into the hands of thieves? I suspect some of them did. So, I don't think Psalm 121 is supposed to be a set of guaranteed promises for every situation. I think it's more of a reminder that whatever the fear, God was able to help them in it.

That's why I think the Psalm ends the way it does. Verses 7 and 8 say,

He shall preserve your soul. The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

There was something about the Israelites going out and coming in. This was part of a routine of life. Going to Jerusalem was something they did year after year after year. And if it is that they sang the Psalms of Ascents as they journeyed, then every time they would sing Psalm 121 at some point. And each time they did, they would remember that God had kept them until that point in their lives. He had kept their feet from stumbling. He had protected them from the sun, and throughout the night. He had been their Protector. He had proved it over and over again. Young children in the group might be singing the psalm for the first time. They were starting to learn that God would help them. Older people would have sung it time after time, and their lives were living proof of the truth of it. And they were examples to the youngsters who had only sung the psalm a few times. This routine of singing a psalm about God's help on the way to Jerusalem each year was an important teaching tool to reinforce the lesson that God does help His people.

## **Practical Applications**

As we finish today, remember that we've called this series "Things to think about on your way to church." Of course, really, we don't go to church. We are the church. We go to gather with the Lord's people. But the point remains the same. This week, as you travel to gather with the Christians you meet with, what conversation will you have as you journey? Will you be chatting about Saturday's sports results? Or busy discussing the jobs of the week ahead? Or might you just follow the example of the Israelites and start to think about some of the things taught in the Psalms of Ascents. I wonder if this week, you and your family might prepare yourself for worship, by thinking about the God who helps. Could you list some ways in which the Lord has helped you this week? Could you tell whoever you travel with about them? Can you rejoice about the fact that the God who never slumbers or sleeps is your Protector? Can you be thankful that He has preserved you from evil this week, and He has kept you from stumbling? The Israelites found comfort from Psalm 121 as they travelled to Jerusalem.

May the Lord help us to gain comfort and encouragement from it, too, as we go to meet with the Lord's people this week.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on "Psalm 121; We're going to meet the God who helps us," talk T1453.

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