

Exegetical Notes, Psalm 121
“True Thanksgiving”

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Psalm 121

Background: Psalm 121 is known as “A Song of Ascent.” The Songs of Ascent are a collection of psalms found in our Bible from Psalm 120 through 134. Some scholars believe that these psalms were used in the liturgy of the Temple as songs that were sung as the people entered the building to worship God. Other scholars argue that pilgrims to Jerusalem sang these songs as they came in sight of the city. The theme of these psalms is assurance that, even though life may be a dangerous journey, God is always faithful to his word. Psalm 121 is organized into four stanzas. In each stanza, the introductory line proclaims the subject of that stanza. The rest of the stanza develops the theme expressed in the opening line.

Stanza #1, Verse 1-2

*I lift up my eyes to the hills --
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

- The theme of this stanza is a confession of trust in the Lord.
- As the pilgrim approached the city of Jerusalem, he passed over the low hills that surrounded the city. Thus he lifts up his eyes to the hills, and as he does, he asks himself where his help on the journey to Jerusalem and throughout life comes from.
- He answers his question with the firm resolve that his help comes from God.
- He acknowledges that he can rely upon God for help because God is the maker of all that is, both heaven and earth. God’s position as creator puts him in the proper spot to lend need for all who journey through this world.

Stanza #2, Verse 3-4

*He (God) will not let your foot slip --
he who watches over you will not slumber;
indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

- The theme of this stanza is caught in the phrase, “He will not let your foot slip.” Any traveler knows that if your foot slips you will fall and hurt yourself. The psalmist declares that God will not let this happen to him.
- The ancient gods were thought to sleep in the same way that humans sleep. It was often said that when they did not answer prayers or come to the aid of those who worshiped them, it was because they were asleep. Thus when the psalmist says that God neither slumbers nor sleeps, he is describing how different God is from these others. He always watches over those who serve him.

Stanza #3, Verse 5-6

*The LORD watches over you --
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.*

- The theme of this stanza is that the Lord watches over those he loves. It is a continuation of the theme of the previous stanza.
- Shade is a symbol of protection. The shade is on the “right hand” because the right hand is the hand in which one held his sword. Thus, the protection steadies one’s defense by steadying the sword arm. The Lord is this shade that steadies the sword arm.
- Sun and moon are opposite extremes. They represent the spectrum of trouble that might come at the traveler. The point is that if the Lord watches over you, there is no trouble, not that which comes by day or by night, that need be feared for the Lord will give protection from them all.

Stanza #4, Verse 7-8

*The LORD will keep you from all harm --
he will watch over your life;
the LORD will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.*

- The theme of this stanza is that God will keep those he loves from harm.
- This time, the point is larger than just a trip to Jerusalem or entering the Temple. This time the promise is that God guides those he loves throughout all of life. He watches over our comings and goings all the days of our lives.
- The promise is that God will never stop providing this service to those he loves. He will do it now and forever.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *True Thanksgiving*.. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)