

Sermon for March 17, 2024 – Lent 5

Psalm 121 (EHV)

Theme: **The LORD watches over you**

- 1) Consider his power and committed love.
- 2) Trust in his protection.

A song for the ascents. ¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from? ² My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. ³ He will not let your foot stumble. He who watches over you will not slumber. ⁴ Yes, he who watches over Israel will not slumber. He will not sleep. ⁵ The LORD watches over you. The LORD is your shade at your right hand. ⁶ The sun will not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. ⁷ The LORD will watch to keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life. ⁸ The LORD will watch over your going and your coming from now to eternity.

From reports of wars and crime to natural disasters and political unrest, it's hard not to worry. Add all the spiritual dangers facing us to the mix, not to mention our personal problems, and you have a recipe for sleep-robbing anxiety. How can we feel safe in this world? Where can we find peace?

With the 121st Psalm as our guide, let us learn why we need not feel anxious about anything despite being surrounded by so many evils, under the theme: **The LORD watches over you.** 1) Consider his power and committed love. 2) Trust in his protection.

Part One: Consider His Power and Committed Love

Our sermon text is one of 15 “songs of ascent” found in the book of Psalms. Most Bible scholars believe that these Psalms were written for pilgrims to sing as they journeyed to Jerusalem for one of the big festivals like Passover. Because motorized vehicles didn't exist back then, most people had to walk to these festivals — some for hundreds of miles. And since no police force patrolled the roads, the festival pilgrims were often targets of bandits, robbers, and hungry animals — especially at night.

As they walked through the mountain valleys, they may have looked around them and sang: *I lift up my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from? ² My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.*

What a beautiful song of confidence! Notice that the believers singing this Psalm do not spend time listing their troubles or possible earthly sources for help. No, from the very outset, they turn to the LORD in faith!

Also, the believers do not place their confidence in some generic god or force of nature with whom they need to bargain to get something in return. No, their confidence is in the LORD — the God

who created and controls everything in the universe. Not only is this the case, but this same LORD committed himself to take care of his chosen people centuries earlier on Mount Sinai. Therefore, the believing pilgrims could be confident that, just as the LORD protected and provided for the Israelites in the past (often in miraculous ways), the LORD would continue to do the same for them. Why? Not because they had done anything to earn or deserve it, but only for his mercy's sake in accordance with the special covenant he made with their forefather Abraham.

You know, the journey the Israelites took to visit the temple in Jerusalem is an excellent illustration of your life as a Christian. The LORD has made a special commitment with you at your baptism – declaring himself to be your God and you his dearly loved child in Christ. And the almighty LORD spared no expense to adopt you as his own – paying for your salvation with the blood of Jesus, his only begotten Son.

Yes, the LORD is our God, and we are his people. Our lives on earth are but a pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem, where we will join all believers of all time in an everlasting, joyous festival – praising the LORD for our deliverance. Oh, what a wonderful day that will be when we get to our destination and see the multitudes of believers praising the LORD face to face in His temple. But we aren't there yet. Like the Israelite pilgrims of old, our journey is fraught with various perils threatening our body and soul. As we look into an uncertain earthly future, we might be tempted to ask, "Where will our help come from?" May the LORD grant that we are all quick to confess: *My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.*

And if the LORD has the power to create and control this entire universe, you can be confident that he can help you, too. You can confess with the Apostle Paul: *The Lord will rescue me from every evil work and will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom.*ⁱ Yes, even though it may seem like you have every reason to be afraid, you really have none. Why? Because the LORD watches over you. Remembering His power and committed love, you can trust in His protection.

Part Two: Trust in His Protection

After recalling the LORD's power and promised love, the Psalmist encourages his fellow pilgrims:

³ *He will not let your foot stumble.*

Over a long journey, pilgrims' feet would grow tired – increasing their chances of stumbling over things and getting hurt – especially after sunset when their road became dark.

Our journey is also long and tiring. And, as fatigue sets in, our chances of carelessness and spiritual stumbling increase. Who will save us from such hurt? The LORD will. How? First, by lighting our way in the dark world with His Word, as it is written: *Your words are a lamp for my feet and a light for my path.*ⁱⁱ The other thing the LORD does is remain present with us. Remember what Jesus promised his disciples before his ascension: *Surely I am with you always until the end of the age.*ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus himself is our Good Shepherd, leading us through the darkest valleys in life, using the staff of his almighty Word and sacraments to guide and guard us against all danger.^{iv}

He who watches over you will not slumber. ⁴ Yes, he who watches over Israel will not slumber. He will not sleep.

The LORD was not like the false gods of the nations surrounding Israel, to whom human attributes were often ascribed – including the need for sleep. The LORD is not like any earthly creature that needs rest. No, He is the Maker of heaven and earth. His vigil is constant. He sees the dangers surrounding us. He knows about our fears. He remembers His promises. That is why you can move forward through life unafraid. God will keep believers safe, working in all things for your everlasting good – just as he promised.^v Nothing can separate you from the love God has for you in Christ.^{vi}

⁵ The LORD watches over you. The LORD is your shade at your right hand. ⁶ The sun will not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

The desert sun posed a real danger for the pilgrims, causing them many problems like burns, exhaustion, and thirst. But these verses speak about a different kind of oppression: a spiritual one. Night and day, the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh drive us hard – tempting us to sin. But that’s not the end of it. After we fall, Satan accuses us with feelings of guilt, shame, and regret. Like the desert sun exhausting a wearied pilgrim, these feelings exhaust us. And the longer we live, the worse it gets. Who will save us from the oppressive guilt and shame that exhausts us during the day and robs us of sleep at night?

The LORD who watches over us will be our shade. Jesus invites us to bring all our burdens to him, and he will give us rest.^{vii} How so? By showing us his pierced hands, feet, and side. He paid for our sins in full. We are forgiven. Yes, the Holy Spirit stands by our side – day and night – with the refreshing shade we need from shame and regret. That shade is the Gospel. It is Jesus himself. Through faith in him, we find complete forgiveness. And if the LORD himself forgives us, then we can forgive ourselves – trusting that we are at peace with God because of what Jesus did to save us.

⁷ The LORD will watch to keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life. ⁸ The LORD will watch over your going and your coming from now to eternity.

From what kind of harm will the LORD keep you? From every kind there is: disease, crime, war, disaster, sin, temptation - you name it. The LORD promises to watch over your life.

“But,” someone might ask, “don’t Christians suffer evil all the time? Don’t some fall victim to crime and others to disease? Aren’t Christians persecuted every day and, in other parts of this world, killed for their faith? How, then, can the Psalmist say that the LORD will keep us from “all harm” when we all experience harm at some point in our lives?”

The Psalmist can say this because the “harm” the LORD is most concerned about is spiritual, not physical. God does not just want us to have a good life on this earth; He wants us to live with him forever in paradise. To that end, he is always working, using the evil we experience in life to serve his good purpose. I cannot give you specific reasons for why God may allow you to be harmed and specifically how it will serve your good. Only he knows. But there is one thing I can say for

sure: just as a good doctor only hurts his patient to heal him, the LORD only allows hurt in our lives to benefit us spiritually.

The LORD will keep you from all harm. As you cling to him in faith, He will watch over your life - protecting you from crime, social unrest, natural disasters, diseases, and any other evil that threatens you. And if, in his divine wisdom, he allows you to experience some earthly evils, then you can trust that he only allows it for your spiritual good: either to strengthen your faith or quicken your journey home to Himself in heaven.

Yes, when faced with seemingly insurmountable worries and troubles, take comfort in your Guardian God, who has committed himself to care for you, for Christ's sake. The almighty LORD promises to stand beside you through thick and thin - guarding you in all your ways. He uses his authority to keep you safe throughout your earthly pilgrimage, accompanying you throughout your journey. He is always with you - ready to warn and instruct through His Law and forgive you through His Gospel. There is no need to be afraid: the almighty LORD has committed himself to watch over you for Jesus' sake. Trust in His protection. Amen.

ⁱ 2 Timothy 4:18 EHV

ⁱⁱ Psalm 119:105 EHV

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 28:20 EHV

^{iv} Cf. John 10:11ff & Psalm 23:4

^v Cf. Romans 8:28

^{vi} Cf. Romans 8:35-39

^{vii} Cf. Matthew 11:28