

YAHWEH THE GUARDIAN—OUR HELP:
A SERMON ON PSALM 121
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BIG IDEA: The psalmist wants his hearers to confidently celebrate Yahweh’s guardianship of their lives.

OUTLINE: Yahweh’s Guardianship of His Own

- I. The Personal Celebration of Yahweh’s Guardianship (vv. 1–2)**
 - a. The Posture of the Guarded (v. 1)
 - b. The Confidence of the Guarded (v. 2)
- II. The Assurance to Others of Yahweh’s Guardianship (vv. 3–8)**
 - a. The Nature of Yahweh’s Guardianship Declared (vv. 3–4)
 - i. The Ensurer of Our Perseverance (v. 3a)
 - ii. The Constant Watcher of His Own (vv. 3b–4)
 - b. The Nature of Yahweh’s Guardianship Expounded (vv. 5–8)
 - i. His Identity: The Ever-Present Defender (vv. 5–6)
 - ii. His Actions:
 - 1. The Life-Preserver (v. 7)
 - 2. The Lasting Protector (v. 8)

Listen to the Susan Ashton song, “Psalm 121.”

READ PSALM 121.

Introduction

Like an ever-replenished bottle of water in a dry desert are the promises of God to a parched soul. With the psalmist in Ps. 119:50, we declare, “This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.” This world we live in is full of beauty, but it is also twisted, frustrated, and broken. As the Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 7:13, “Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked.”

For many of you, the start of this school year has already witnessed mouthfuls of the curse. Cancer finally takes away the body but is unable to destroy the soul of a 14 year old brother and friend; an unexpected joyous pregnancy is tempered by the questions about the future and the guilt such questions create; sustained discouragement continues to rob your sense of satisfaction in God and his Word; the inability to find a long-term job; Moms and Dads with marital strife; friends attempting suicide; drug and sexual addictions; miscarriage; the lack of knowledge in how to care for your

lonely wife; struggles to know where you fit in this school; unfulfilled longings for a partner with whom you could spend your life and service—all this plus assignments, ministry obligations, job interviews, roommate conflicts, relational tensions, and the list goes on. By day and by night we are loaded with burdens. We come and we go, yet they stay with us. We sit here today with something in our soul that longs for release, for comfort, for help.

In Psalm 121, the psalmist opens with this expression of trust: “Let me lift my eyes to the hills from where my help comes.” He calls himself, he challenges himself to look up to the mountains. To look up means one thing.... He is down. But his relief, his comfort, his help is to be found upward ... where the Maker of heaven and earth resides.

As many of you know, this last year was full of trial in the DeRouchie home, as we pursued one boy for adoption only to have his case fail and then were matched with another boy only to have his case come under extended investigation. Perhaps in no greater way have I ever tasted the depth of the curse on this world—so much paperwork and injustice; so many sleepless nights, filled with prayer and tears; so much identification of my own fleshliness; so much waiting and longing; so many phone calls and unanswered pleas. As the weeks of unknown turned to months, and as every bit of my own strength became increasingly inadequate, God proved himself faithful and strong and sustaining. When I feared such pressure might break the faith of my wife and children, God proved his worth and trustworthiness. I grasped hard to God’s words of command and promise, pleading for help and timely grace. One of the gifts of this period was poetry, and to set the context for our meditation on Psalm 121, I want to read some for you today. You should know that on January 7 of this year, God let us bring home our three year old son from Ethiopia. The name Ezra is short for Azariah, which means, “Yahweh is my help.

“Mercies at Dawn”

How bright the light we once remember,
 The desire of a new day.
 How confident the gates of splendor
 Will come for those who wait.

Dark is the night when trust is tried;
 Long hours of heightened desire
 Will culminate in glorious sight
 Of him we call our treasure.

Aching hearts to bring home our boy;
 Our love grows ever deeper.
 Through this sea, all for our joy,
 The reunion will be the sweeter.

“Yahweh, my helper”—this his name,
 Our God faithful will be.
 He, our rock, never to shame
 Those he died to redeem.

Not by sight but by faith,
 Through this valley of pain.
 But God is present and keeps us safe,
 His Word, more than bread, sustains.

Awakened in darkness amidst the night,
 From our heart comes a song.
 Our faith is fueled, our God is praised,
 And more mercies come at dawn.

—Jason S. DeRouchie (11/24/2010)

“For Those Who Wait”

Nothing can hinder Yahweh’s saving;
 He acts for those who wait.
 No purpose thwarted, his counsel stands;
 His timing never late.

What comfort is the bigness of God,
 Who holds man’s hearts in hand.
 Our future secure, every promise “Yes”;
 In Christ alone we stand.

His children come asking for bread,
 He never gives a snake.
 In our weakness, his strength is fed.
 He acts for those who wait.

Our God who knows the stars by name,
 Helps our hearts believe
 He clothes the lily and feeds the sparrow,
 And will meet our every need.

Christ is near, a present help
 For all he died to save.
 What tomorrow requires is ever secure
 In light of what he paid.

We rest today without all answers,
 As God removes the dross—
 Identifying with Christ in suffering,
 Upheld while under a cross.

He will complete the work begun;
 We wait for the Faithful and True,
 Who now gives glimpses in the Son
 Of the day when all will be new.

— Jason S. DeRouchie (11/26/2010)

With these words of testimony and hope, let us now turn to Psalm 121. It is the second of 15 psalms tagged the “Songs of Ascent” (Pss. 120–134), which likely were sung during the festival processions of the three annual feasts (Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles), as the pilgrims ascended the southern and central hill country to Jerusalem (cf. Exod. 23:14–17; Deut. 16:16). Balancing the focus in Psalm 119 on God’s Word as a key to life, these psalms address the hope of God’s reigning presence amidst adversity.

Psalm 121 is broken into two sections. Verses 1–2 mark “The Personal Celebration of Yahweh’s Guardianship,” whereas vv. 3–8 provide “The Assurance to Others of Yahweh’s Guardianship.” The psalmist wants his hearers to confidently celebrate with him the keeping role of God.

The Personal Celebration of Yahweh’s Guardianship (vv. 1–2)

The Posture of the Guarded (v. 1)

Verse 1 speaks of the necessary posture of those who enjoy Yahweh’s guardianship—they look up to their source of help. The reading of the ESV could lead one to see the hills as the cause of the psalmist’s travail. As he steps out on his journey, any number

of dangers could be lurking around the corners of the paths ahead of him. I believe a more favorable interpretation, however, is that the hills represent the place of Yahweh's abode, where he reigns over all things on behalf of his people. Look with me at Psalm 123:1: "To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens." And in Psalm 125:1–2: "Those who trust in Yahweh are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains (i.e., *hills*) surround Jerusalem, so Yahweh surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore." In Psalm 121, the believer calls himself to look up to his source of help—"Let me lift my eyes to the hills from where my help comes." This is the proper posture of all who enjoy Yahweh's guardianship—look upward today...past the pain, past the trial, through the lingering shadows to the One who remains seated on the throne of grace, untainted by sin and its results and unswerving in his commitment to bestow mercy and grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16)!

The Confidence of the Guarded (v. 2)

Whereas verse 1 addresses "the posture of the guarded," verse 2 focuses on "his confidence." There is no sense of self-reliance in this text. Instead, the psalmist is radically God-dependent.

References to God dominate this psalm. In verse 2, he is "the Maker" of all things visible and invisible—thrones and dominions, rulers and authorities—all things created through him and for him (cf. Col. 1:16). Because he is the Maker, we can be confident that he is able to preserve, provide, and protect us. In verses 3–5, he is "the Guardian" or in the ESV "your Keeper," "Israel's Keeper," and "your Keeper"—ever present, always watching, constantly for us and never against us (cf. Rom. 8:31–32). Then five times he is given his proper name Yahweh (the LORD in the ESV), the form of which is related to the causative verb of being and therefore stands as an eternal memorial to the fact that God is the One writing our story, the author and perfecter of our faith—Yahweh, the causer of all, who is therefore unthwarted by the darkness reeking havoc on your soul (Exod. 3:14). As David proclaimed, "If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,' even the darkness is not dark to you" (Ps. 139:11–12).

Verse 2 points to the great confidence known by all who are guarded by God. Regardless of your own challenge or sea of pain, I call you to declare with the psalmist—even now, preach it to yourself: "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (cf. Ps. 124:8).

The Assurance to Others of Yahweh's Guardianship (vv. 3–8)

In vv. 3–8, a shift takes place from a declaration that Yahweh is the psalmist's help to a hopeful pledge of his Guardianship of others. Personal celebration gives rise to statement of assurance: “*My* help is from Yahweh.... He will not let *your* foot be moved; he who keeps *you* will not slumber.” In the context of temple worship, we could have had antiphonal singing, where the psalmist spoke on his own behalf in vv. 1–2 and a choir/congregation affirmed or expounded on his statements in vv. 3–8. It is also possible that here, as in Psalms 42–43, the psalmist in vv. 3–8 is talking to himself. “Why are you cast down, O my soul? ... Hope in God” (Ps. 42:5). And here: “Self, Yahweh is your Guardian; Yahweh is your shade.”

While possible, within the context of these psalms of ascent, it seems most likely that the psalmist himself recalls the Lord's faithfulness to him in times of trouble and then assures another who may soon experience adversity that God is indeed a great Provider and Protector. The images of looking up to the hills, the need for sure footing, exposure to the elements by day and night, coming and going may all point to a father exhorting a son prior to their pilgrimage or to a shepherd who has made his way to Jerusalem and is now exhorting a fellow pilgrim en route back home.

Regardless, the psalmist's confidence in God is sure. The Maker of heaven and earth “will not let your foot be moved; your Guardian will not slumber” (v. 3).

The Nature of Yahweh's Guardianship Declared (vv. 3–4)

Under the heading “The Assurance to Others of Yahweh's Guardianship” in verses 3–8, verses 3–4 “Declare the Nature of Yahweh's Guardianship.” I was surprised to find that the word combination that depicts the stumbling step in verse 3 is never used in Scripture of physical falling; rather all four of its other occurrences use it figuratively for someone who is or anticipated being overcome by divine judgment (Deut. 32:35), personal sin or weakness (Ps. 38:16[17]), or enemy oppression (66:9; 94:18). When the psalmist declared, therefore, “He will not allow your foot to slip,” he was most likely speaking of the perseverance of the saints. He is not promising the absence of pain or even failure. But he is promising that, amidst seas of adversity, the elect will remain upheld, not because of their own doing but because of the preserving hand of God. As Jesus declared in John 10:27–28, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” Or in Paul's words from Romans 8:33–34: “Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”

Do not put your hope today in yourself, for were it not for God, you would surely slip. But because of his mercy, our faith will remain. As asserted in Psalm 94:16–18: “Who stands up for me against evil doers? If Yahweh had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence. When I thought, ‘My foot slips,’ your steadfast love, O Yahweh, held me up.” It is the steadfast love of Yahweh that sustains. It never ceases but is ever fresh morning by morning (Lam. 3:22–23). The sure confidence we have today that we will remain with God tomorrow is God himself. Thank him. Remain dependent on him, and plead for his sustaining grace.

Not only does Yahweh’s Guardianship mean he is the one who ensures our perseverance (v. 3a), but it also means he is constantly watching over our souls (vv. 3b–4). The Hebrew of verse 4 suggests a development from what precedes. Whereas verse 3 suggests “your Guardian” will not slumber now, verse 4 stresses “Israel’s Guardian” will *never* slumber or sleep. Psalm 127:2 tells us that God “gives to his beloved sleep,” and we are able to rest only because we know God never does. “Yahweh is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary” (Isa. 40:28). Remember how the prophets of Elijah’s day could not arouse Baal to act on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs. 18:27; cf. “Prayer to the God’s of the Night”). Not so with Yahweh. He is always awake, always aware, and always watching over his children, including the adopted ones.

As Jesus declared in John 10:16, 28: “I have other sheep that are not of this fold.... They will never perish.” Or God spoke through Isaiah: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am Yahweh your God” (Isa. 43:2–3). Though you die, yet shall you live (John 11:25). “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.... And lo, I am with you always to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Whether your sleepless nights are filled with tears and prayers, diaper changing, or paper writing, God is with you with all the energy and grace you need. Don’t forget him. Look to him at any hour—in the light or in the night. Yahweh’s Guardianship means that he ensures our perseverance and that he constantly watches over his own.

The Nature of Yahweh’s Guardianship Expounded (vv. 5–8)

In verses 5–8 “the nature of Yahweh’s Guardianship is expounded.” Verses 5–6 speak of his identity, and verses 7–8 address his activity.

First, his identity. God is “the ever-present defender of his own.” Verse 5 begins with the declaration, “Yahweh is your keeper, your Guardian.” Just as God is “the Maker of heaven and earth” and can therefore care for you (v. 2), so too he is “Israel’s Guardian” (v. 4), and with that, “your Guardian” (v. 5). The psalmist then unpacks

this watchful role (vv. 5b–6): “Yahweh is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.” Hear this: the Lord is at your side, and come what may in the light or in the night, he is your protector, your shade. This cannot be viewed as a promise for a trial-free life. Indeed, the psalmist has proclaimed his need for a Helper. But he knows that his God is for him, a true Guardian ensuring his perseverance and not allowing him to be overcome. “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor. 4:8–9). “The LORD is your shade on your right hand” (Ps. 121:6); don’t fear!

As for God’s actions, he *guards* his own perfectly. In verse 7 he is a life-preserver and in verse 8, a lasting protector. “Yahweh will keep you from all evil; he will keep your soul” (v. 7). We pray, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matt. 6:13). Jesus prays, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15). So Paul promises, “the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one” (2 Thess. 3:3). He may assault. Indeed, you may enter into direct combat, wrestling “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness” (Eph. 6:12). But as you take up the full armor of God, you rest knowing the One for you is greater than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4; cf. Rom. 8:31) and that Christ our Redeemer is now seated at the Father’s right hand, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Eph. 1:21). As God’s own, you rest secure, for even if you die, yet shall you live (John 11:25).

Along with being a life-preserver, our Guardian is our “lasting protector” (v. 8). Through all life’s journey, in your coming and your going, both now and unto an eternity of tomorrows, Yahweh will keep you. “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38–39). “Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from Yahweh, and my right is disregarded by my God’? Have you not known? Have you not heard? Yahweh is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength” (Isa. 40:27–29). “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (41:10).

“Remember my affliction and my wanderings...! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of Yahweh never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are

new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “Yahweh is my portion,” says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him’” (Lam. 3:19–24). “My help comes from Yahweh, who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 121:2).

Take heart today. Proclaim to yourself what is true: the LORD is with you, a present and faithful Guardian. Like an ever-replenished bottle of water in a dry desert are the promises of God to a parched soul.

In closing, toward the end of my family’s journey of waiting and wondering, I wrote these words.

“Basking in the Rising of the Son”

The sun breaks and beauty appears,
 A daily reminder that all our fears
 Of dread are passed, though pain persists—
 The toil, the sorrow, a persistent mist
 That will be burned away in course of time,
 A hopeful rest when full glow shines.

The light of dawn is only agreeable
 Because the light of noon is foreseeable.
 If no hope existed for a brighter light,
 Sustained shadows would be lingering night.
 Yet darkness is passing; the true light glows—
 A brightening sky overcoming sorrows.

The dawn of immortality is the life we tread,
 A life of grace because Christ bled
 Taking wrath we all deserve—
 A gift of love to preserve
 A people for himself into the age to come—
 The curse abolished in the rise of the Son.

—Jason S. DeRouchie (3/3/2011)