

YAHWEH IS YOUR KEEPER (PSALM 121)

A Sermon for SJBC (5/25/25)

On July 13, 2024, then former US President Donald Trump survived an assassination attempt while speaking at a Pennsylvania rally leading up to the 2024 presidential election. Twenty-year-old Thomas Crooks fired eight rounds from an AR-15-style rifle that shot Trump in the upper right ear, killed one audience member named Corey Comperatore, and critically injured two others. Crooks' concealment by trees and the slope of a warehouse roof allowed him to remain significantly out of view of the Secret Service, and a shortage of snipers meant not as many agents were on the roof, thus reducing the surveillance coverage. Many officials regard this incident to be the most significant security failure by the Secret Service since the attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan in 1981.

Following the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901, the United States government authorized the Secret Service with a mission to protect—to protect the President and other dignitaries, to safeguard places where the nation's highest elected leaders live and work, and to secure events of national security importance. The mission of protection includes not only physical protection during work and travel but also counter-surveillance, potential threat assessment and mitigation, collaboration with other agencies, advanced planning, and cutting-edge security technologies. Figures like the president are permanently protected with agents continually assigned to them, and this protection extends beyond the president and his immediate family to the protection of other major leaders. Yet even in a nation like ours, protection can fail, and grievously in this instance, one precious image bearer's life was tragically lost.

Turn to Psalm 121, which is all about how and why God promises to be our security detail—guarding, watching over, and keeping his own with a protection that will never fail. I think of how the patriarch Jacob (= Israel), after hearing Yahweh promise, “I am with you and will *keep* you wherever you go,” said, “If God will be with me and will *keep* me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God!” (Gen 28:15, 20–21). The certainty that Yahweh would *keep* him made Jacob willing to follow Yahweh wherever he would lead.

The great priestly blessing opens, “May the LORD bless you and *keep* you” (Num 6:24). Jesus, too, in his high priestly prayer in John 17, requested for his followers, “Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have *guarded* them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled” (John

17:11–12). Psalm 121 uses the verb “help” twice and the terms “keeper” or “keep” six times, clarifying that this passage concerns hope in divine protection. May the Lord ground our souls in such hope today. Follow along with me as I read Psalm 121.... Pray with me....

The Setting for Yahweh’s Preserving Grace

Psalm 121 is the second of 15 psalms titled “a Song of Ascents.” The psalms come in triads, with the first of each cycle usually expressing the worshiper’s distress, the second declaring his hope, and the third highlighting his arrival in the presence of God.¹ The idea of “ascent,” therefore, is less about climbing altitude and more about seeking the Lord, who is elevated and ruling on high.²

This psalm occurs in the Psalter’s Book 5, which addresses God’s completed kingdom being realized in Jesus (chs. 107–150). When Jesus says in Luke 24:44 that “everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and *Psalms* must be fulfilled,” he refers to predictions like those we find in Book 5.

Book 4 portrayed God’s kingdom in exile, with the people separated from God’s life-giving presence (chs. 90–106), but Book 5 portrays from numerous perspectives a movement out of slavery into salvation, out of darkness due to rebellion into a new freedom from sin and a life of hope. Through several cycles of psalms, Book 5 clarifies how God will use the tribulation and triumph of a single individual to bring life, hope, and a future to many. Psalm 1 referred to him as the Anointed One or Christ, and Psalm 110 calls him David’s “Lord” who now sits enthroned at God’s right hand until his enemies are made his footstool (110:1). But he ascended to God’s presence only after enduring his own trial through death. Psalm 120 opened with him asserting, “In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me.” And now in Psalm 121, this troubled king declares his trust that Yahweh will help him and then promises his people that Yahweh will keep them. *God helped Jesus, so he will keep you.* This is the main point of today’s sermon, and it’s captured in the two parts of our passage: (1) Yahweh helped Christ (vv. 1–2) and (2) Yahweh will keep all who are in Christ (vv. 3–8). “Blessed is the man,” and “blessed are all who find refuge in him” (1:1; 2:12).

Yahweh Helped Christ (vv. 1–2)

Christ’s Posture (v. 1)

The psalm opens declaring Christ’s posture—he’s looking up to his source of help. The ESV’s translation could lead one to see the hills as the cause of the

¹ J. Alec Motyer, *Journey: Psalms for a Pilgrim People* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 20–21.

² Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary*, 4 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 4:332.

psalmist's travail—a place of danger that leads him to question his source of help. More likely, however, the hills (or mountains) represent Yahweh's strength and 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 the LORD 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." At this point in the Psalter's story, Babylon has already destroyed the earthly Jerusalem. So, the "Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever," must be the heavenly Zion, where Yahweh sits enthroned. The songs of Ascents find their goal in this presence of God.

In verse 1, Christ, the troubled king, calls himself to look upward to his source of help—"Let me lift my eyes to the hills from where my help will come." Yahweh helps the one who presses deeper in and higher up ... past the pain, past the trial, through the lingering shadows to the One who is ever able and present to help in time of need (Heb 4:16)! "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence" (5:7). Jesus looked up to God for help, and he found it.

Christ's Confidence (v. 2)

Having noted Christ's posture, verse 2 highlights his confidence. There is no self-reliance in this text. Facing his earthly trials, our suffering savior needed help and knew from where it would rise. "My help comes from the LORD, who makes heaven and earth." The Psalms regularly refer to Yahweh as Christ's help. Thus, David prays for his future savior: "May he send you help from the sanctuary and give you support from Zion! ... O LORD, save the king!" (Ps 20:2, 9). And elsewhere the righteous sufferer petitions, "I am poor and needy; hasten to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer" (70:5).

Rendered LORD in all caps (ESV), Yahweh is God's proper name. Its form points to God's sovereignty as the causer of all things whose purposes are never thwarted, even when darkness wreaks havoc on our souls. Emphasizing this greatness, Christ now adds that Yahweh is the one "who makes heaven and earth." As Psalm 148 clarifies, these poles represent all things visible and invisible in the universe, with the heavens being not only the sun, moon, and stars but also the angels, and the earth including whales and snow, the Himalayas and cherry trees, stallions and cormorants, kings and commoners (cf. Col 1:16).

The ESV translates the verb with the past-tense "made," but the form is a participle, stressing not God's past creation in the beginning (cf. Ps 89:12; 102:26)

but his continual creating throughout time. Presently he clothes the grass of the field with lilies (Matt 6:28–30) and feeds the sparrows (10:29–31), and it's because he is generating and governing all things that he can help us whenever we need.

Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, who *makes* heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives good to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous [ones]. (Ps 146:5–8, ESV amended)

“Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps. He it is who *makes* the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who *makes* lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses” (Ps 135:6–7; cf. 147:8–9). These are all present-time realities that God is generating moment by moment as he “upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb 1:3). “He gives to all mankind life and breath and everything,” and “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:25). Truly “from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (Rom 11:36).

But if Yahweh is indeed this strong and active in world affairs, he would be not only Christ's source of help but also his decisive source of trouble. “Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other” (Eccl 7:13–14). “I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am Yahweh, who does all these things” (Isa 45:7).

Citing Psalm 2, Peter stressed how in killing Jesus, “Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,” were doing only what “[God's] hand and [God's] plan had predestined to take place” (Acts 4:27–28). Before his betrayal, Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Matt 26:38–39). We know “it was the will of the LORD to crush him” (Isa 53:10), and Jesus would fulfill the will of his Father (John 10:17–18). What, then, does it mean that God was Christ's help, when the sovereign one purposed that Jesus be betrayed, beaten, bloodied, and killed? Was God really Jesus's help?

Absolutely, God was there through every verbal curse and every blow, displaying his worth, comforting Jesus's heart, and reminding him of the joy that was set before him (Isa 53:10–11; Heb 12:2). Indeed, the very one who intended Jesus to die also purposed to raise him from the dead so that every ungodly sinner who believes might be justly given new life with no condemnation (Acts 5:30–31; Rom 4:24; 6:4; 10:9; 1 Thess 1:10). In Psalm 121, Christ trusts that Yahweh will

help and keep him, and this Yahweh did. Yet God's aid came not in keeping Jesus *from* death but in keeping him *through* death. Christ's triumph was through tribulation; his crown came by means of the cross, and his vindication secured salvation for all who find refuge in him. This understanding of God's help informs how we read the rest of this psalm, each of us who is called with God's keeping care to "take up his cross and follow [Christ]" (Matt 16:24).

Yahweh Will Keep All Who Are in Christ (vv. 3–8)

The Importance of Being in Christ

Upon celebrating his assured victory, Christ now promises his people that God will also keep them. But the implication of Yahweh's keeping us is fully dependent on whether we are in Christ by faith. Within the Psalter, "blessed is the man," and "bless are all who find refuge *in him*" (Ps 1:1; 2:12). Yahweh promised Abraham, "*In your offspring* shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen 22:18). But outside of the individual seed, there is only curse. We are sinners; Christ alone is the savior. Just listen to Paul in Romans:

- We "are justified by [God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is *in Christ Jesus*" (Rom 3:24).
- "You must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God *in Christ Jesus*" (6:11).
- "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life *in Christ Jesus* our Lord" (6:23).
- "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are *in Christ Jesus*. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free *in Christ Jesus* from the law of sin and death" (8:1–2).
- "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" (8:38–39).

Are you *in Christ* today? Your future hinges on how you answer this question, for it is only *in Jesus* that "all the promises of God find their Yes" (2 Cor 1:20). "Be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who find refuge *in him*" (Ps 2:10–12).

If you are *in Christ*, trusting him even today for the forgiveness of your sins and the fulfillment of all God's promises to you, then because God helped Jesus,

he will also keep you. This leads us into the next unit, which has two parts, the first denials (vv. 3–4) and the second affirmations (vv. 5–8). Both clarify the significance of being *in Christ*.

What Yahweh Won't Do (Negative Implications) (vv. 3–4)

In verses 3–4 we learn two things Yahweh won't do for those in Christ: (1) he won't allow you to stumble to your destruction (v. 3a), and (2) he won't ever stop watching over you (vv. 3b–4). Having experienced God's sustaining grace, Christ turns to his followers in verse 3 and says, "He will not let your foot be moved" (v. 3a). Scripture never uses this figure of speech to refer to physical staggering, tripping, or loss of balance. Instead, the language is always metaphoric for someone who is or anticipated being overcome by enemies (Pss 66:9; 94:18; cf. 16:8; 21:7; 55:22; 62:2, 6; 94:18), destroyed by personal sin or weakness (17:5; 38:16; cf. 112:6; 125:1), or devastated by divine judgment (Deut 32:35). Therefore, in saying, "He will not let your foot be moved," Christ is promising that God would help his saints to persevere. He is not pledging the absence of pain or even failure, but he is indicating that, amid seas of adversity, the elect will keep believing, keep hoping, keep trusting, not because of their own doing but because of the preserving hand of God (cf. Pss 94:17–18; 125: 1–2).

As Jesus declared, "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" (John 10:27–28). Anticipating how Peter would deny him, Jesus says, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31–32). True believers will stumble, but when they do they fall toward the cross rather than away from it. You will not stumble off the path into destruction, for God has promised to keep your foot secure. Our sure confidence that we will remain with God tomorrow is God himself through the grace he supplies in Christ. Thank him. Remain dependent on him and plead for his sustaining grace.

Next, along with king Jesus assuring us of our perseverance, he highlights that God is ever watching over our lives. "He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (121:3b–4). "Israel" likely refers to all who are in Christ, the new people of God, the church. As Peter would say, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a *holy nation*" (1 Pet 2:9). The church in Christ is God's new Israel (cf. Gal 6:16).³

³ Psalm 87 already told us how peoples from many nations would gain new birth certificates declaring that they were born in the transformed Jerusalem. With this, Psalms 117 and 118 brought the nations into Israel when they said: "Praise the LORD, all nations! Extol him, all peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the

Whereas verse 3 says, “He who keeps you will not slumber” now, the Hebrew of verse 4 stresses that “he who keeps Israel” will *never* slumber nor sleep (cf. Ps 44:22–23). Our God is always awake, is always aware, and is always watching over his children (contrast Baal, 1 Kgs 18:27 and “Pray to the Gods of the Night”). When the relationship is strained, God is with you and will guide your steps. When you’re worried about bills, God knows and will supply. He promises: “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” (Isa 41:10; cf. 43:2–3). Whether your sleepless nights are filled with diaper changing, with paper writing, or with tears and prayers for yourself or for others, God is with you with all the energy and grace you need. Believe his promises and look to him at any hour—in the light or in the night. Yahweh’s keeping grace for those in Christ ensures that he won’t let your faith lastingly falter and that he will not grow weary in his care (Isa 40:28). God helped Jesus, so he will keep you. Take hope in this.

What Yahweh Will Be and Do (Positive Implications) (vv. 5–8)

Finally, our passage speaks positively, affirming what God will be and do for all who find refuge in Jesus. Six times these last six verses describe Yahweh as a “keeping” God. It’s this verb that clarifies how the one making heaven and earth is our security detail. He is “watching over, protecting, guarding, keeping, preserving” his own at all times. Can you believe this today?

You may have come longing to provide for your family but recognizing that your present job is not paying the bills. You need summer work, yet no positions have opened. Your newborn is repeatedly sick, keeping you away from the Word and Christian fellowship for which you deeply long. You are weary from school, weary from your job, weary from the demands of little voices. You are tired of your spouse’s exhaustion, your kids’ disobedience, your parents lack of care. Your conscience is guilt-ridden because your proneness to wander is so consistent—wandering eyes, wandering thoughts, unhealthy desires, sick motivations. You lack discipline and drive. You lack desire for the Word, desire to pray. You long for more time to play or sing or draw or serve, but the season in life does not allow for it. You feel the emotional toil and spiritual drain of pouring out. You feel the weight of caring for little children and aging parents, the burdens of loving struggling kids and of longing for reconciliation or for progress where there is none. You long to marry but find the maturing of relationship hard. You struggle with signs of your own selfishness and need for growth. You long for a child, yearning to be a parent, but God has so far not bestowed this blessing. Will you

faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.... Let Israel say, ‘His steadfast love endures forever’” (Pss 117:1–2; 118:2).

trust the living God amid such trials, believing that all these are part of his perfect plan to conform you into the likeness of his Son? As with Christ, God's keeping hand does not always protect us *from* harm, but his keeping does mean that he will be with us and will unquestionably preserve us *through* harm. Can you believe this today? Will you persevere in your hope? From where will your help come? "The LORD ... will not forsake his saints. They are *preserved* forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off" (Ps 37:28). Once we are reborn in Jesus, the life we enjoy will never end, for Yahweh is our keeper.

Next, Jesus tells us that Yahweh is our "shade," under whose shadow we find both rest and joy (Ps 91:1). Verse 6 figuratively portrays the sun and moon as powers that would seek to destroy. Faced with similar challenges, Christ earlier pled: "Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the *shadow* of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by" (57:1). And having experienced rescue, the delivered king then cries, "You have been my help, and in the *shadow* of your wings I will sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me" (Ps 63:7–8).

With such hope, Paul wrote, "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). We are talking here about God's promise to be ever present for you. From dawn to dusk, from light to night, in the rays of the sun or in the reflections of the moon, you experience nothing that can alter God's favor for you or your future in his presence. "He has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So, we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'" (Heb 13:5–6). "The LORD is your shade on your right hand" (Ps 121:6), so don't fear!

Right now, Yahweh is for you. And verses 7–8 conclude by stressing that he will remain so into the future. "The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life." From the midst of his desperation, Christ prayed, "You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again" (71:2). Then, upon his rescue, he proclaimed, "Even 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" (23:4). Now, we who find refuge in Christ pray to our Father in heaven, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matt 6:13). Jesus had prayed, "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).

The devil may assault with his flaming darts (Eph 6:16), seeking to steal, kill, or destroy (John 10:10). Indeed, you may enter 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; Eph 1:21). God is both your picnic shelter and your bomb shelter. “You will be delivered up by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives” (Luke 21:16–19; cf. Matt 10:28–31). “Some of you they will put to death.... But not a hair of your head will perish.” Such is the hope for all who are in Christ. God helped Jesus, so he will keep you.

Finally, in verse 8 God promises steadfastly to keep our daily cycles of life, both “your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore” (v. 8). Every trip to the store and every return from the library; when you go to work or when you return from T-ball; both in the mundane and in the memorable, Yahweh promises to keep his own. God helped Jesus, so he will keep you. He is watching over you now, and he will protect your soul from lasting rebellion and from eternal damnation.

Conclusion

Today we have heard the word of Christ. Our fighter verse urges, “Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col 1:16). In Psalm 121 Christ’s word expresses trust that Yahweh will help him, and then it promises us who are in him that God will also keep us. God helped Jesus, so he will keep you.

God’s protection of us is not a secret service. We are to know him, believe in him, see him, and sense him with us always. And he will never fail at his protective mission. Take comfort in the safety God supplies. As Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25). Take hope today.

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. (Num 6:24–26; cf. John 12:25; 17:12; 2 Thess 3:3; 2 Tim 1:12; Jude 24–25)