



Our Protector in Life's Journey

Psalm 121 | May 3, 2020

English Translation for Rev. Jeremiah Cheung

The greatest problem with religion is the gap between faith and life: what we believe is separate from how we live. Some people who believe in God behave as though they do not know God. We believe in our mind that God is our strength and our refuge, but when problems arise, we act like there is no God. We grow fearful, we worry, we complain.

Church, I'm sorry to say this but what are we afraid of? We are afraid of death. Hebrews 9:27 tells us "*Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.*" Death is our ultimate destination, but we don't know when it will happen — will it be this year, next year, ten years, or twenty years later? We don't know how it will happen — will we fall ill, will we meet an accident, will it be the Coronavirus or some other reason? I am not being negative. On the contrary, people who belong to God are very positive because we live for God. If God wants me to live one more day, I will live another day. If He wants me to live another year, I will live one more year. What's more important than how long we live, however, is whether or not we are living in the will of God while we are in this world. When we live in God's will, God will protect us until we have fulfilled His will. This is the message of Psalm 121.

There are only eight verses in this Psalm.

- 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 slip— He who watches over you will not slumber;
- ⁴ indeed, He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
- ⁵ The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
- ⁶ the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.
- ⁷ The Lord will keep you from all harm— He will watch over your life;
- ⁸ the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

Psalms 120-134 are called Songs of Ascents. A song of ascent is a hymn sung by the Israelites as they journey up to Jerusalem to worship God. The men go to the temple in Jerusalem at least three times a year to worship God: for the Passover, the Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Jerusalem is located on top of the mountain and the temple is built on Mount Zion. Thus, those who go to worship God have to climb the mountain. Nowadays, people go by car to the holy city of Jerusalem. In the ancient days, however, people walked or rode on donkeys and as they ascended the mountain, they sang these Songs of Ascents.



A god-fearing man who follows God's commands will leave his hometown three times a year to journey step by step towards Jerusalem. During the journey, he would at times encounter difficulties. What happens then? Psalm 121 tells us the Lord is our protector in life's journey. He is our bodyguard.

Psalm 121 can be divided into two parts: V1-2 is the first part and it is a metaphor - life is like a journey. The second part of Psalm 121 is in V3-8 and this is an explanation: God is our protector in this journey called life. How does He protect us, the pilgrims on this journey?

I. A metaphor – Life is Like a Journey 1-2

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.*

These two verses are a metaphor. Our life is a journey, more like a journey of climbing up a mountain. I don't know if you've experienced climbing a mountain, but some mountains are easier to climb and some are more difficult. Mountain roads are always more difficult to tread than paved roads. One year, my wife and I visited Canada for a vacation. We stayed at a friend's house near the Canadian Rockies so we often climbed mountains. The view of the lake on the mountain is very beautiful. As we went up the mountain, sometimes we'd come to a place where the road would fork into two paths: one was easy, the other was difficult. On the easy path, we could slowly make our way up the mountain. However, on the difficult path, there would really be spots where we would need to climb with our hands. My wife and I were still young back then and so we accepted the challenge of the more difficult path, where the scenery was so much more beautiful, too.

Church, life will always have difficulties. The psalmist asked, "*Where does my help come from?*" People who seek help are those who are facing difficult situations. People are interesting. We find it hard to reach out and ask for help. It's only when we run out of options that we humble ourselves and ask for help. With the problems we've encountered at this time, even the President has asked the whole nation to seek God in prayer because we find ourselves helpless against the present crisis.

The psalmist encountered difficulties on his pilgrimage to the place of worship. He raised his eyes to the mountain and asked: "*Where does my help come from?*" And he immediately answered himself: "*My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.*"



These two verses tell us that we will have difficulties in life yet we have God's help in the midst of these difficulties. Let me say again that these two verses are a metaphor. Our life is a journey, we will encounter difficulties, but we can be sure that, because we belong to God, we will not be without help. From these two verses, we see two important principles that can help us in our life journey:

1. *Life Must Have Direction*

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.*

We live at least 3000 years after the Old Testament period. We have to understand that in those days, there were no maps, GPS, or Waze; in fact, there weren't even street signs to direct travelers to the Dead Sea or to Jerusalem. So, the most important thing for people who were traveling to the Holy Land was to lift up their eyes and look at the mountains. This was how they navigated. In the same way, if you are lost at sea and you don't have a compass, you need only look up at the sky and find the Big Dipper. From there, you know which way points north.

Church, does your life have direction? God may lead us differently, but our direction is the same. **Genesis 5:22** *"After he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked faithfully with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters."* Enoch did only one thing while he was on earth, he "walked with God." Walking with God had been the one direction of Enoch's life and it is also the direction for us, for each of us who belong to God.

What does it mean to "walk with God"? Does it mean we do our daily devotions, read the Bible, and pray 24 hours a day? No. The Bible says Enoch walked with God and had children. What does this mean? He got married, he sired children, he worked and earned to provide for his family's needs. You might say, but that is what we all do, that is what people all over the world do. How is he any different? Let me ask you: When you got married and established a family, was God with you? When you work, is God with you? When you are raising your children, is God with you? Or more simply: did you get married for the sake of the Lord? Are you building a family for the Lord? Are you bringing up your children for the Lord? Do you earn and work unto the Lord?

Our greatest direction in life is to live for God and to do everything for the glory of God. We often have the wrong idea that what we do in church glorifies God but what we do outside is simply making a living. Whether in church or in society, everything we do is for God. This must be our life direction, otherwise, we will be lost in the world sooner or later.



2. *We must go all the way and not stop halfway*

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.*

When the psalmist saw his destination from afar, he continued onward. But we all have had this experience where our destination seemed so close but in reality, was still so far away.

Many years ago, our family went to Taipei, Taiwan. On that trip, we wanted to see the newly-built Hotel 101. I suggested taking a taxi, but my wife told me that it was very close to where we'd just had our lunch. Before long, we soon saw Hotel 101 ahead, but after 15 minutes of traveling, we still hadn't arrived. It actually took us half an hour to reach the hotel. It had seemed quite close, and yet it was actually still far away. The same is true of the psalmist's journey. He lifted his eyes to the mountains and could see Mount Zion. But there was still a long journey ahead. And then he encountered difficulties along the way, so he asked for the Lord's help.

Church, are you encountering any difficulties on this journey now? I am sure there are many. Sometimes, it is our family members who encounter difficulties. Sometimes, death and disease come. Sometimes, we encounter economic difficulties or face problems at work. And yes, sometimes, we have to deal with relational conflicts. As a result of these, some people become discouraged and some people leave the church or even give up on their faith. Church, you must not give up! You must continue onwards, do not stop halfway. You must keep on!

I have now been serving the Lord as a pastor for 35 years. 31 of these years were here in the Philippines and 4 years were in Hong Kong. If I say I have never encountered difficulties all these years, you wouldn't believe me either. I encountered a lot of problems even in my very first year with CBCP. The first time I had a meeting with the leaders, I went home and told my wife I don't want to stay on in CBCP. But God had mercy on me, I did not leave. Still, I encountered many difficulties and different challenges. Yet no matter what difficulties I encountered, I continued moving forward and it has been 31 years already. I often see life as a marathon, a 42-kilometer race. We should not only start well, but we must also strive to do well throughout the journey. And we must finish well! Church, determine your life's direction, set forth in this direction, and do not stop. Never, never give up. Sometimes it will be tiring, but after a break, you must forge on.



II. An Explanation – The Lord is our protector v3-8

V. 3-8 tell us that the Lord is our protector on this journey and explain how He protects us.

V.3-4 tell us about our Lord's watchful care. V.5-6 talk about the Lord's power. And v.7-8 talk about how the Lord is with us. This passage tells us that the Lord protects those who belong to Him, that we are under His watchful care, and that His power and His presence are with us.

1. His watchful care – v.3-4

³ *He will not let your foot slip - he who watches over you will not slumber;* ⁴ *indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*

These two verses tell us that God does not sleep nor slumber. He watches over us 24 hours a day. To appreciate the significance of this statement, we have to understand the culture of the ancient Near East. According to Greek mythology, their gods sleep and slumber. Greek gods have a form, they have bodies and thus need rest. But the Bible tells us that our God is a spirit; the second command in the Ten Commandments says that the Lord cannot be represented with any image. God is spirit and He does not need to rest. "He does not slumber nor sleep" means He won't find us annoying if we approach Him with our concerns. He does not view our coming to Him as bothersome.

Our brothers and sisters who are married understand this better. Before you got married, you never felt that the other party was a bother. In fact, you want your partner to come and 'bother' you. But once you are married, the man finds his wife bothersome and the wife finds her husband annoying. So the simplest way to escape is by pretending to be asleep so that the other person does not trouble you. Have you had such an experience? Of course, you have. But v.4 says that *He who watches over Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps*. The One who protects us does not doze off nor sleep. Because He cares for us, He will never think of us as bothersome.

Jesus once told a parable: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time, the judge refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out!'"



Then Jesus asked a question, “*When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?*” This question is not about whether or not God will help us. The question is: Are we persistently coming to God for help?

2. His powerful protection – v.5-6

⁵ *The Lord watches over you – the Lord is your shade at your right hand,* ⁶ *the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.*

The right hand symbolizes strength and power. The Lord Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Almighty, symbolizing His honor and power. Why does the verse say ‘the sun will not harm you by day nor the moon by night’? How can the sun and the moon harm people? Today, you might infer that the rays of the sun can be harmful since it can cause cancer. But how could people three thousand years ago know that? Moreover, how does the moon harm us?

To answer this question, we must go back to the culture of the Near East. Disasters are either natural or man-made. According to the culture of the Near East, nature is controlled by mysterious powers. They believe that the sun god is behind the sun and the moon goddess is behind the moon. To them, these things represent some kind of power, a spiritual power. The God we worship is the Almighty God. He protects us so that the sun does not harm us by day nor the moon by night. No power of the spiritual world can harm us.

The Chinese are very superstitious. Often we’d fear that some evil spirits might come to harm us so we become afraid of a lot of things. And we turn to *Feng Shui* and check on the calendar for auspicious and inauspicious days for various activities. We do not choose November for weddings because All Saints Day marks the beginning of that month.

As a pastor, I often have to preside over funeral services for church members or their relatives. Once, someone said: “All who were born in the year of the tiger and the lamb will have to leave.” I was born in the year of the tiger, so I said, “Do I have to leave?” If I leave, then no one will preside over the internment service. His reply was, “You can stay, there is no problem in your case because you are a pastor.”

He was only half right. It was alright for me to stay, but not because I am a pastor. Rather, it was because the power of God protects me. In the Old Testament, when the Israelites came out of Egypt and were traveling in the wilderness, they passed through the land of Moab. The king of Moab used a lot of money to invite a greedy prophet called Balaam to curse the Israelites. Three times, he cursed them but each time God changed the curses into blessings.



Praise be to our Lord; our God turns curses into blessings. We are facing a terrible battle now. May God bless everyone and turn the curse into a blessing.

3. His eternal presence – v.7-8

⁷ *The Lord will keep you from all harm— he will watch over your life;* ⁸ *the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.*

The psalmist concludes the psalm with these verses. He says, the Lord will protect you, he will allow no harm to come upon you, he will watch over your life. How does the Lord watch over us and protect us? The Israelites go to Jerusalem to worship God three times a year. Each journey is equivalent to one 'going' and one 'coming' from Jerusalem. If a person starts joining pilgrimages to Jerusalem at the age of 12 and lives to be 80 years old, he would have 68 years of pilgrimages. If we multiply 68 years by 3 trips a year, that would mean he would have gone on this journey 204 times. He would have gone out 204 times and traveled back 204 times.

The psalmist says “the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.” In other words, He watches over you throughout your whole life in the same way He is with you as you travel 204 times to worship Him.

Today, if we begin to worship the Lord at the age of 20 and we live to be 80 years old, that would mean we have 3,000 weeks to worship Him. For each of these 3,000 weeks, the Lord is with you. When we say the Lord is with us, it does not mean we will not encounter difficulties. It means we have God's protection and this assurance gives us hope.

In Romans Chapter 8, Paul reminds the church that there are no difficulties that will separate us from God. Romans 8:35 says, “*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?*” Today, we can add, “*Shall the Coronavirus separate us from the love of God?*” Romans 8:39 concludes, “*neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

***Difficulties and tribulations are inevitable in life's journey,
but we can lift up our eyes to the mountain and
know that the Maker of heaven and earth is our protector.
What need have we to be afraid?***