

Summer Bible Study 2020 - Psalm 121

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[0 : 00] For more information visit www.fema.org Let's go.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[3 : 00] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[5 : 29] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Here, Psalm 121.

Thank you.

[8 : 29] We love because God first loved us.

We love because God first loved us.

In our maturing, we have created the relationships of a lifetime and engaged in purposeful work. And as we have journeyed through nights of dark challenge and days of brilliant opportunity, God has empathized with us and provided encouragement.

We love because God first loved us. We are not always at our lovable best. In our moody moments and selfish months, our unflattering tantrums and our awkward stages, God has seen us through, waited patiently, and kept us close.

We love because God first loved us. In every age and every stage, God's constancy has been and will be the hallmark of God's unconditional love.

[11 : 23] For the peace that comes with knowing such security, for the joy that comes with knowing such devotion, for the freedom that comes with knowing such faithfulness, we practice love on one another because God first loved us. Amen.

You know, there's a lot of thought about this psalm, about what the setting is or was. It's been argued that it was written in anticipation of going into a battle, that the author wrote it when they were about to set out on a journey.

And it's also been said that this psalm was chanted as the people of Israel went up to Jerusalem to the feasts. It's kind of a bit of a call and response psalm.

It's only eight verses. So let's take a look at it. Verses one through two, it tells us where our help comes from. It speaks to where your help and my help comes from.

We receive our help from the Lord. God is to be always found in the immediacy of our situation. How many days and nights have we been through sitting with an elderly parent, a dying family member, sitting in a courtroom, sitting, waiting to visit someone in jail or prison?

[13 : 00] How many times have we found ourselves standing or sitting or kneeling in the need of God's prayer and God's presence?

Sometimes we might think that God is not nearby. We don't always recognize it. But the psalm affirms that our help comes from the Lord.

As we seek God's face, God invites us to lift our gaze, to lift our eyes.

Where? To the hills. That's where our help comes from. The next verses three and four affirm that God is steadfast, sure, faithful and dependable.

God is the ground on which we stand. You know, when you're kids, you learn about the Bible story about the wise man built his house upon the rock and the foolish man built his house upon the sand.

[14 : 06] But with God, there is no foolishness. We're the ones who can be foolish, but God's foundation is beneath all of us.

God is firm. God is the ground on which we stand. God is not only the ground of our being, but as Paul Tillich says, God is the guardian of our hope.

Sometimes what that means is that God holds it for us when we can't seem to find it. Then verses five and six affirm that God is a keeper, a keeper of us, of the earth, of creation.

But right now, God is the keeper of us. We often don't like that terminology. We think about a zookeeper. We think about a lot of things that might seem as though that's kind of being held in a cage, but it's not.

It means that God is the kind of God that will not disappear in the bright of the sun or in the dark of the moon.

[15 : 21] God brings this sense that God's whole creation is his, and he is the keeper and the holder of it.

He's asked us to be good stewards of it. But in our own lives, these two passages say that when we confront the demons of the night or the demons of the day, God's presence is with us, and God's presence will not be destroyed no matter whether it's night or day.

In the last two verses, we read that God is a preserver. God's role as preserver is the protection that reaches into the places that we don't know.

God preserves the soul of the psalmist. God as a preserver attends to both ones going out and ones coming in.

The psalmist declares that God's protection will follow him. It doesn't stop at some line in the road. It doesn't stop when we step beyond some of what we believe, or when we step beyond the places that we thought we would never be.

[16 : 54] God's protection and sense of presence will be steadfast whether we are stepping across a line into a new job or no job.

God's presence and protection will be with us if we are crossing the line from marriage to not married. From not being parents into parents or from being a person who wants to be a parent but can't seem to ever become a parent.

God goes across all the lines with us. We talk about abandoning God. We talk about going away from God. But that's not really possible.

That's an internal part of us, but it's not God's story. And the psalm reads that God will persevere forever. Forever and ever as the psalm reads from this time on and forever more.

That's pretty amazing. So, what is that about for you and for me?

[18 : 15] The truth is, is that God doesn't just have us. But as the psalm reads, God keeps us. We are God's beloved and we are more dear to God than we can imagine.

Think about the sacrifice of sending Jesus. If that doesn't make you believe that you are important to God, I'm not sure what will, but I'll keep telling you that until you can believe it.

Because I know it to be true. We are not possessions in the eyes of the Lord. Because if we suffer, God feels our pain.

It hurts God when we find ourselves lost. Not hurt mad. Hurt like a child.

Like when one of our children or grandchildren is hurt. The Lord is our keeper. Watches over us by day or by night.

[19 : 18] This psalm, they say, appears to be set. One of the scenarios is that this is a pilgrimage. Well, a pilgrimage is going from this place to that place.

Oftentimes, it's a holy journey. It's a place where you're going to an event, a feast, a worship, a season of Passover or whatever the case might be.

The psalmist looks to the hills. That might be Mount Zion. Mount Zion is quite a hill to look to. God's holy mountain and the place of the temple.

And we can guess it's not an easy journey. Have you ever looked in a mountain and looked up and thought, Oh, that's easy. I can be there a couple minutes.

Having just been in Colorado, just east of the Rocky Mountains, there were many times when I would travel to a mountain and think about what it would be like to climb it.

[20 : 25] Because I'm a smart hiker, I knew to only hike what was good. Like what was within my means. But there was rarely a mountain that I looked at and thought, That's going to be easy.

The mountains that I did get to the top of, the reward is great. But the journey isn't easy. It's not.

And so we know that the opening verse cries out that question. So where will my help come from?

The psalm is a cry for help. So much of the Bible, so many of the Psalms are cries for help.

And on a gut level, even if you've never been thinking of walking up a mountain, we know what that feels like. We know when we're faced with something that is very difficult.

[21 : 30] And there's been times when we wonder, well, who's going to help? Oh wait, I forgot. I'm too stubborn to ask for help. Or where's my help going to come from?

I don't know anybody. I don't know who I could ask. Or who's going to help me? This is too heavy.

Sometimes we're resourceful. I bought a pretty big piece of furniture when I was out in Colorado. And even when I was in the store looking at it, I thought, how am I going to carry that?

How am I going to get that into my car, out of my car, and down the sidewalk and down the steps into my apartment? How am I going to do that? And there's an initial thought of, I can't.

I can't do that. It won't be physically possible. And I almost left. Then I wandered around another part of the store.

- [22 : 39] And I bought a hand truck. I've never owned my own hand truck. I always count on my husband to have a hand truck. But I didn't take one to Colorado with me.
- So I bought a hand truck. And I did it. But I was worried. Now, obviously it's just a piece of furniture.
- But you know what I mean. That there are places when we look at something that seems undoable. A course that we're taking. The requirements that we have to meet.
- Some of us to go to work. Some of us to visit loved ones. The feeling of, how are we going to send our kids to school?
- Are we going to send our kids to school? I think that feels like a pretty big mountain to a lot of people right now. And the cry is the same. Where's my help coming from?
- [23 : 39] God, tell me where's my help coming from? We can't be our own gods. We're not very good at it.
- We can be self-reliant to a point. But the truth is, life will remind us sooner or later that God is God and we are not.
- And that there are places where we cannot help ourselves. We need to look. We need to look to the hills. Look to the challenge.
- And then ask God. Just like we're teaching the kids in Vacation Bible School. You can ask God for anything. Where's my help coming from?
- God, are you sending a hand truck or are you sending a bubble to put my child in or my grandchild in to go to school? Are you sending a bubble for me as a teacher or a teacher who goes into the schools?
- [24 : 47] Show us where our help is coming from. Some people, and you probably know this, some people feel closest to God in the good times.
- God is good. God is great. My own father walked a journey around the time of my mother's death. And before she died, he had become involved in a local United Methodist Church.
- He picked United Methodist because he has a daughter who's a United Methodist pastor. And he got involved and found that that was a great help and it was a great resource after my mother died.
- But then he came to a time when he was quite depressed. And he stopped going to church.
- He was very disillusioned with the fact that nobody really came looking for him. And I'm not sure he gave up on God. He surely gave up on the church in that season of his life.
- [26 : 04] But he didn't pursue God or a faith community when things got dark. So some people are all about God in the good times and when they feel supported and encouraged.
- But when their lives kind of go into a dark place, they sometimes don't turn to God. Other people only turn to God in the hard times.
- And then when things get better, on their way they go thinking that they are sort of the master of their own universe. And if something goes wrong, back to God they come.
- People, you, me, all of us, we are all put in places sometimes where we have to realize the limits of our power.
- My daughter and I have this thing that we do when we're faced with a challenge, whether it was on a mission trip to Puerto Rico.
- [27 : 13] Or just dealing with some physical or emotional challenges, we will say, strong like bull.
- We're strong together. We're more strong together than we are apart. And we're more strong in faith than we are without. So where does our help come from?

Oftentimes when we realize that we're powerless, we're able to turn to the hills and find that we can find where our help comes from by putting our footing on what God is teaching us through the scriptures.

Psalms 121 begins with a realization of need. The person who is writing the Psalms is basically saying, can't do this.

Can't do this. I need your help. And the rest of the Psalm is a response to the question. So where's my help coming from? And then the rest of the Psalm is about where the help is coming from.

[28 : 26] My help comes from the Lord. He made heaven and earth, so there's no limits to his help. He will not sleep while you are struggling.

Shade at night in the sun and shelter in the night. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night.

So it doesn't, it's not like God has hours. The Lord will keep you from all evil. He will keep your life. You're going out and you're coming in.

Well, some of you might be thinking that God didn't keep you from terrible things happening.

And that is the way of human life. Terrible things happen.

[29 : 34] So I'm convinced that part of what this is telling us is that God will never leave us. Even when evil is all around us.

Even when death and despair surround us. Even when we're terrified. God will never abandon us.

And that's a hard thing to make sense of. The Psalm reminds us. God has credentials. You might be a person who has credentials.

I have some. But the Psalm tells us what God's credentials are. What are God's credentials? Oh, he made everything.

Everything. Heaven. Earth. All of it. Stars. Sky. Sea. Animals. And people.

[30 : 32] Those are God's credentials. And it goes from that kind of celestial made everything right down to us.

He will not let your foot be moved. God will not sleep on the job. God will protect us both day and night. And keeps both our going out and our coming in.

In other words. God's going to watch over us all the days of our lives. The days when we know it and feel it. The days when we don't.

God is watching over the lives of those we love. Whether they have any idea. About who God is. Or that protection. You think about it.

We generally take personal responsibility for our well-being. We try to get our car serviced.

[31 : 36] Sometimes we can't afford it. But we try to get things taken care of. We learn how to do some basic things. I couldn't get my license.

Until I learned how to. Put oil in the car. And change a flat tire. Now I have a triple A card. But I needed to learn that.

I needed to learn to take care of what I'd been given. Having a keeper who watches over me. And protects us.

It's kind of hard to understand. There are a lot of images. And I often turn to the work of the Holy Spirit. When it comes to watching over us.

And protecting us. Wrapping us. And holding us. It's hard to understand. And I don't know that we'll ever understand all of it.

[32 : 33] And maybe when we get to heaven. We'll ask those questions. And maybe when we get to heaven. We'll just get it. So those of you who want to have those. Fact and answer.

Question and answer periods with God. I'm hoping that that's the way it is. But I don't think we can really understand it.

I don't think we have to. I don't know if you have pets. But when you think about your pet.

They're your pet. And technically you own them. And you're responsible for them. And it's your job to get them licensed. And to care for them.

To give them food. And water. And shelter. But you're not just that. You're not just that.

[33 : 33] To the pet that you have. We have in our home in Rochester. Benny the boxer. And Benny. Is our pet. And it's our responsibility to keep him safe.

And strong and healthy. We are his keepers. And that means that we watch over what he needs. And we take him to the vet when he's sick. Or when he's needed surgery.

We've helped him with his recovery. We take things away from him that will hurt him. Are we always successful or not? But when you think about the things that we need to be successful.

We're not. We're not. We're not. We're not. We're not. We're not. We're not. But when you think about that kind of love that's the kind of love.

That God has to offer us. That's the kind of love that this psalm is about. It's hard sometimes to accept The Lord is my keeper.

[34 : 38] Sometimes it's easier to understand that the Lord loves us. The Lord loves us than it is to think about what that means in terms of the Lord being our keeper.

And certainly God's love is the foundation of what that's about. Because if God didn't love the world, remember John 3, 16, God so loved the world that he sent his only son, Jesus Christ, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

God so loved the world. God loved the world into creation. God loved human beings into creation. From dust we were born and ultimately to dust we return.

God has given us love. Not sappy, syrupy, hallmark kind of love. Not that it isn't that. But it's the kind of love that, as in this psalm, says, I'm not going anywhere.

You can't get away from me no matter how hard you try. I will help you when you're in trouble. It is clear that the writer looks up to the hills.

[36 : 11] So if we're asking for God's help, God is assuring us that it's there. But there is that part of looking for it. There is that part of wanting it.

And there is that part of being willing sometimes to find it in the places we never expected. Maybe that's been a part of your experience.

Help that you didn't see coming. Someone meeting a need that you maybe had given up on. Somebody bringing you something.

That even if your body didn't need it, your spirit needed it. Back in the days when we could do church by visiting, one of the things that churches have been known for forever is bring a casserole, bring cookies, bring something.

When there's been a loss, when there's been a baby, when there's been all kinds of things going on in our lives, we often bring food. God brings us the things that we sometimes don't even know that we need.

[37 : 44] Maybe you can think of some examples of when did you look to the hills? And say, God help me. And then where did you eventually see that maybe God did help you?

You'll probably hear me talk about my experience in Colorado a lot. Partly because it's recent and partly because it was so intense.

But there were times when the situation felt too big or too hard. Didn't mean that I couldn't do it.

It didn't mean that I couldn't care for the family who was in front of me. But it felt pretty hard to kind of take that on alone physically, in body, just me.

And I can remember one time in a really tough situation when I was actually doing a funeral in the chapel at the hospital.

[38 : 51] A family had lost their premature baby. It was such an honor to be a part of it. It was terrible and awful.

And I felt at moments like there was not another chaplain to be seen in the hospital. It was just me. And as I was kind of going around getting things ready, I wished that another chaplain would just happen by.

Just a little word of encouragement. I think I was looking to the hills saying, God, where's my help? I don't need somebody to take this away from me.

I just need to know. I need a little cheerleading. And somewhere in the midst of all of that chaos, it might have even been right after the service.

The chaplain whose office is next to the chapel showed up and invited me to come in and tell her about all that had happened and how it felt.

[40 : 00] I didn't stay long. I really just wanted that feeling of, do you get it? Do you get that this was hard?

Do you get it? Do you get it? Things like that happen sometimes. She was God's help coming to me from the hills.

And there have been other times. Times in very difficult places where someone shows up with simply a note or a flower or something that says, I know this was hard.

And I just wanted you to know that I know. When we look at this psalm and we think about where God is, God's help is, we don't always see it or feel it.

We don't always identify it when it does come. And sometimes we wonder if it's ever going to come.

[41 : 14] It's one of the mysteries of faith. But the scriptures, like this psalm, remind us that it's real.

I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, from the maker of heaven and earth.

He 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 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 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. It's been said that when God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, that in that moment before he didn't have to, this was the psalm that he read.

[42 : 35] Being reassured. So as you travel, as you pilgrimage from here to there, on your journey with God and on your journey through the scriptures, go back to Psalm 121.

Let it be the reminder. Let it be that understanding. I'm going to sneeze. Excuse me.

Let it be that foundation. Let it be that reminder. Night, day, here, across the world, in your home, out on the street, helpless, hopeless, full of hope, full of life.

God is watching over you. You probably already knew all of this. You probably already knew that in these eight verses, we have encompassed a lot, a lot of what we believe in as Christians.

And so I hope and pray for you this night and in the days to come, this psalm into your keeping. And next week, we will be doing another psalm that is very familiar and is often used at different times, a lot of times around the end of our lives.

[44 : 14] Yep. Psalm 23. I hope you'll join me as we join together and look at that, maybe in newer, different ways, or maybe just remembering how much it means to us.

I'd like to close in a moment of prayer. Oh God, we come to you and we want to renew the covenant that we have with you.

You made a promise so long ago. You made a promise to us. You made a promise to be our God.

And so this night as we pray, we say, because you are our God, we will work to be your people. Grow our faith, our trust, our commitment, and our love so that we may graciously uphold our claim and our knowledge of you being our God.

Help us to recognize your presence and all the blessings throughout our journey. Keep us in your care, oh God. We pray in Jesus' name.

[45 : 28] Amen. Go in peace. Amen.