

Safely Kept

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Bible Verse: Psalm 121
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Our text tonight comes from Psalm 121 and I invite you to turn in your Bibles with me to that text. Tonight, I'm doing something unusual in that I am going to preach from the English Standard version for reasons which I will explain later on in the message. But Psalm 121 reading from the English Standard version says this,

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? 2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. 3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. 4 Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. 5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. 6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. 7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. 8 The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

As you were listening or perhaps reading in the ESV, you saw the echo of the word "keep." That's the same Hebrew verb, *shamar*, and it is the theme of this Psalm that the Lord keeps his people. He protects them and he watches over them faithfully and unflinchingly. In Psalm 120, just last week we saw that the Psalmist was homesick among liars. He was being assailed and he was very discouraged as the Psalm progressed, but as we come to Psalm 121, we find the answer of the Lord to that kind of distress. Psalm 121 meets the cry that was expressed in Psalm 120 and the recurring thought in Psalm 121 is the idea of keep. The Lord is your keeper. You could say that we are safely kept by the Lord when we belong to him. When we are in Christ, we are always and forever safely kept. So six times in those final six verses, you find that word "keep." Verse 3, "he who keeps you." Verse 4, "he who keeps Israel." Verse 5, "The LORD is your keeper." Verse 7, "The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore." And so it's obvious that that is the theme of this Psalm, that the Lord is our keeper. It kind of echoes in your mind, doesn't it, the idea that the Lord is our shepherd from Psalm 23.

Now the New American Standard translates that verb, "keep," some of the time in the later verses for some reason that is totally lost on my small mind; it changes the translation to "protect" and "to guard you." Now those translations are not necessarily wrong but it obscures the emphasis. It hides what the Hebrew writer was obviously trying

to bring out. It was a single theme brought on by the repeated emphasis on the verb "keep." And the idea that this Psalm is bringing out to us is that in consistent with the songs that we just sang to open the study, God intends to banish all fear and anxiety from us, and the idea of the Psalm is this: he will keep you. He will keep you. He will keep you. He will keep you. He will keep you. He will keep you. He will keep you. If you've ever been in an anxious state of mind and a friend comes alongside and encourages you and says words of comfort over and over again, "It's going to be alright. It's going to be okay." It has a calming, soothing effect on you and you know what that's like. Well, this Psalm is a soothing song for the pilgrim from Psalm 120 who has been troubled by the conflict that is around him and by the enemies that are around him. And so as we gather tonight and some suffering under serious physical distress, others just under inner stress of anxiety and uncertainty, and others with problems that maybe you just keep to yourself, Psalm 121 comes and breathes a word of assurance into your heart, "The Lord cares for you. The Lord is going to watch out for you. The Lord is going to keep you." And there is that emphasis that we'll see as we move along.

So we're going to start by just considering what the Psalm says, that our help comes from the Creator. Our help comes from the Creator, or you could say we are kept by the Creator, we are safely kept by the Creator. And you remember that we've been saying all along that these Songs of Ascent, Psalms 120 through Psalm 134, were sung in route to Jerusalem. As the pilgrims were making their way up for the annual feasts, they would sing these Psalms, Psalms 120 through 134, together. And in a familiar verse to open the Psalm, you find the Psalmist saying this, look at verse 1 with me. He says,

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

Now as we've said, Jerusalem sits at an elevation, it sits on a hill called Zion, the hill of God, and so it seems perhaps the Psalmist is at the start of his journey as this Psalm is opening. He's anticipating going up into the elevation in order to reach Jerusalem. And it's common, I think, for people to read that and think that the Psalmist is saying, "I'm looking to the hills for my source of safety, and I'm going to look up," and somehow, you know, in some kind of symbolic way the hills are going to be his place of safety. And that may be a right way to understand that verse but I think it is better understood in a different way that completely changes the sense of the way that the Psalm opens and acts as a better bridge from Psalm 120 to Psalm 121 because it can be understood in a different way. The fact of the matter is, is that traveling in the hills in those days was actually a time of danger.

If you look over at Luke 10:30 and all when I'm not referring to Psalm 121, I'll be working out of the NASB here. I know that's different but that's okay. In the story of the good Samaritan, you'll remember this. In Luke 10:30, Jesus tells the story about a man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, so he was going the opposite direction but he was in the hills. And what happened to him? He fell among robbers and they stripped him and they beat him, and they went away leaving him half dead. The hills were not a safe place to travel and so as we open Psalm 121, the hills may not have been

his comfort but his threat. He's embarking on a journey that is going to bring threats and potential threats to him.

So he's starting up and you can see, he says, "I lift up my eyes to the hills." He's at the start of his journey and he says, "As I'm about to embark on this dangerous journey, where is my help going to come from?" It's a rhetorical question that he intends to answer with the rest of the Psalm, and what he's saying is, he's starting on this fearful journey with a clear sense of his trust being in the Lord and not in his circumstances. He's not trusting in the things about him, he's not trusting on what his eyes can see or on human resources, but he's trusting in the Creator for his help. And this would be a really good Psalm to remember for the things in life that come, or perhaps the things that are happening even now. At the start of a dangerous stretch of life, a threatening time in life for a major change in life that is coming, perhaps you're moving away to another place, moving to a foreign place where you don't have any friends and you're not sure what you're going to find when you're there, or a new job, or whatever it is, and there's that sense of intimidation that comes over as some of us, and I include myself in this, we don't like change real well. Well, to be facing that at the start, the answer is what's your perspective going to be as you embark on that next journey in life. Perhaps you've learned that you do not have long to live and you realize that you are facing death. I spoke to a friend on my way here who has been diagnosed with cancer and he's waiting to see just how bad it is. And you know, these things are common.

I remember many years ago talking to an older man, his name was Mac, Mac McCurdy, back in California. He and his wife, Nancy, had both been diagnosed with cancer at exactly the same time and both of their diagnoses were terminal. I just remember, he's a big tall guy, I just remember asking him, you know, "What are your thoughts about this?" And he said, "Well, we're about to walk through the forest," and there was a sense of calm and an evident trust in the Lord. He and Nancy had known the Lord for years and years and there was just this sense of calm as he was about to start in this journey and start to find out the tests and the treatments that weren't going to do him much good. There was a sense of calm, in the best sense of the word, calm resignation. Better stated, calm acceptance of what was about to take place because his trust was in the Lord.

And it's a challenge to us. A Psalm like this, a testimony like that is a challenge to us, to recognize that when life brings that to us, as it inevitably does, we're not meant as Christians to shrink back in fear, we're not meant to be afraid of times like that. There is the opportunity for us to remember who our Lord is and how he keeps us and to trust him to lead us through that time. You know, if our faith is not sufficient to stand the test of the most severe tests and challenges, then it's really not worth too much, is it? If we're just going to tremble and collapse at trials just like everyone else does in the world, then it's really not much of a commendation of the Christian faith to do that. But when we know who the Lord is, when we know what he does for his people, when we know that we are safely kept by him through it all, then that enables us to respond differently than we otherwise might do.

And what the Psalmist does here as he says, "where does my help come from," he answers his question in verse 2. His help doesn't come from the hills, verse 2, "My help comes from the LORD." He answers his own question,

2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

His point is this: God created all things, that means that he has power over all things. He sees all things. He rules over it all. And because he rules over it all, that means that he is able to protect his people as they go through times of the most severe adversity. This is a wonderful statement of knowledge of God and of trusting in God. You know, you really can't trust in God unless you know his attributes, you know what he is actually like, and so he points to the fact that God is the Creator of all and that becomes the basis of his help. "My help comes from the One who made everything and sustains everything, and therefore my help is sufficient even as I embark on a journey that is uncertain and unknown from my perspective."

And so he makes this statement and that allusion to the Creator, as we've pointed out in the past, is a theme throughout the Songs of Ascent. Look at Psalm 124:8 where he says beginning in verse 6 in the NASB, he says, "Blessed be the LORD, Who has not given us to be torn by their teeth. Our soul has escaped as a bird out of the snare of the trapper; The snare is broken and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the LORD," here it is again, "Who made heaven and earth." Then in Psalm 134:3 you see it again. Psalm 134:3, the closing verse in the 15 Songs of Ascent. The closing verse says, "May the LORD bless you from Zion, He who made heaven and earth."

Now look, we always like to put these things into a New Testament Christological framework as well so that we're always thinking about these things in the fullest possible context as we stand on this side of the cross. Listen, beloved, those of you who know Christ and those of you who are going through adversity, maybe have gotten bad news from family or disappointing news from family in the recent past, hear me carefully: the Lord is able to secure your well being as you journey on in what is about to come. He is able to do that. Not only is he able to do it, he is willing to do that. And not only is he able and willing, he will do that because the Lord is the keeper of his people. This is what he does. This is what he knows to do. This is what he has committed to us to do. "I am with you always," the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 28:20. "I am with you always even to the end of the age." So while the future and the outcomes are uncertain and unknown from our perspective, they are not unknown from God's perspective. He sees all. He created all. He sustains all. He is guiding everything to accomplish exactly what he purposed from the beginning of time. And as a result of those great eternal truths, our soul is able to rest and to be confident in him because of who he is in relationship to his people. He is able to secure our well being.

Now it would be easy to take this Psalm out of its context and twist it to mean things that the Psalmist obviously never intended to mean and that God never intended his word to mean. So in verse 7, some might read the idea, "The LORD will keep you from all evil," of saying that Christians will not have problems, and if they have problems, then it's just

an expression of their own lack of faith, and if you had enough faith, then you would not be having these problems. That is a very wicked teaching and it is very wrong, and it is something that we need to understand and decisively reject. Throughout all of Scripture, God's people suffer. The Lord Jesus Christ himself suffered often while he was walking on this earth, enduring the ultimate suffering at the cross. And he was sinless, and he was blameless, and he was the eternal Son of God and he walked through that valley. Think of the patriarch Job. He was a man blameless. The Lord said, "He's blameless in my sight." And yet the Lord allowed him to be stricken by Satan with physical and spiritual calamities for a time. Scripture does not promise us, this is not a blanket statement that we will cruise to heaven on a bed of roses, rather the fullness of the teaching of Scripture is that God keeps and preserves us through the trials, not from them in an absolute sense, and that as he brings us through those trials, he is accomplishing purposes in our lives. He is accomplishing purposes by teaching us to depend upon him, and when the final outcome is shown, we will find that our trials have been used in the hand of God to shape us and to conform us to the image of Christ and to prepare us to enter into heaven to be with him forever.

So we can't view it in a small narrow sense about what's happening today, we view it from the fullness of the perspective of the purposes of God in our lives and we view it from that perspective, we see clearly and undoubtedly the Lord does keep us from all evil because he delivers us safely into heaven in the end, right? As a result of that, we can rest even though the waters may be turbulent along the way. God will keep you. God will keep you. God will certainly accomplish his good purpose in you if you are in Christ, and that becomes one of the pillars upon which we approach all of life. This is how you develop a biblical approach to life. We're developing a biblical approach to life as we go through these Psalms, and the biblical approach to life tells us that we need to bring our fears to the foot of the cross, we need to put our fears in the context of who God is, what he has done and what he has promised to his people, and view life from that perspective and live in light of what we know by faith rather than what we see with our eyes around us. So much sorrow and heartache would be avoided if we would only do that on a consistent basis and ask the Holy Spirit to help us appropriate these truths from God's word into our lives.

Now so his help comes from his Creator, the first two verses. Now for the rest of the Psalm, we're going to see that his help comes from his keeper. It comes from his Creator in the first two verses, his help comes from the keeper in verses 3 through 8. And the imagery here that he begins in verse 3, fits with the idea of a pilgrim who is walking, a pilgrim who is reciting these things, singing these Psalms as he is making his journey up to Jerusalem so that he says in verse 3, remember he's going up and he's on paths and so forth. Verse 3, he's speaking of God and he says,

3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

So as he's walking along he's saying, "The Lord's not going to let my feet slip." There's perhaps a physical sense in which they appropriated that, but in a broader sense as we're

walking through life we have this confidence that the Lord has established sure footsteps for us even if they seem uncertain from our perspective.

What does it mean that God keeps us? What's the idea behind that verb? Well, it's the idea that he protects us. He guards us. He watches over us. We're never alone. We're never ultimately vulnerable to the wiles of Satan, and we're never completely at the mercy of the hands of wicked men because the Lord is with us and sustaining us through it all. So he keeps us in that he has us in a place of safety. He is always present to provide help and protection. Let me say that again: he is always present to provide help and protection for us, and get this, his help is enough for the many adversities in life. The help may not seem as abundant as you might like it to be at any given time, it may not be as timely as you would like it to be at any given sense of time, but underneath it all there is an invisible hand orchestrating your circumstances and covering you as you walk through life as a believer, making sure that whatever reaches you has already been filtered through the purpose and the protection of God so that everything that comes to your life has been ordained by God for your good and for his glory. Everything.

And beloved, it's important for us recognize something very important, and this is where good theology changes the way that you look at things. Some people will stop at the statement that says, "Well, the Lord has allowed this to happen," as if the Lord was passive in the circumstances that come and he's just kind of standing at a distance and allowed it. In other words, God chose not to intervene and therefore this calamity has come into my life. Some of you may still be used to thinking in those ways. That's not a good way to think. That's not the fullness of biblical thinking. That's not the fullness of biblical revelation. The Bible teaches us that God by his providence is actively orchestrating everything that happens. He uses secondary means, he allowed Satan to afflict Job, but it was in the sense that God was directing and limiting and purposing what was going on there. God isn't passive in his involvement in your life. He's active and he brings these things to us in order to accomplish good purposes for us and we need to keep that greatly in mind, and there's a much greater sense of comfort in that of saying, the difference between saying, "The Lord has brought this to me," as compared to, "The Lord allowed this to happen. God could have intervened but he didn't. He didn't help me when He could have." That gives you one perspective, the sense that God has all of these things in his hands and is bringing to me exactly what I need at any given season of life. That changes the way that you view life.

The other thing that I would say about this, speaking from sad personal experience, you know, as we look to the Lord for comfort, it's not always going to be immediately upon the introduction of the trial in your life that you necessarily feel the comfort and the peace. Sometimes there's going to be times where the sheer weight of the trial and the sheer magnitude of what is happening seems to have a cloud pass between you and the sunshine of God. That's okay but just don't expect it all to be immediate, don't expect the comfort to be always immediate and deep and profound. How would you know the blessing of comfort if you didn't have some kind of idea of the sense of isolation that living in this fallen world sometimes brings to you? If the hand of comfort has been stayed for a time, it's only that you might appreciate it more deeply when God does

stretch it forward and encompass you in it. But through it all, regardless of your emotional state, the reality is that God is always watching over you. He is always keeping you. He is always protecting you.

And the Psalmist goes on to emphasize this as we go on to verse 4. He says, "Behold." Behold is a way of saying, "Indeed. This is true. What I am about to say is a certainty." He says,

4 Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

In that Old Testament context, talking in a national sense about the nation of Israel and God keeping his people, and he draws comfort from God's national care. God keeps Israel. He doesn't sleep. He doesn't need to sleep. He doesn't get tired. He doesn't get weary.

Turn over to Isaiah 40 as that passage comes to my mind. Isaiah 40 as there's a thematic echo to what the prophet said in Isaiah 40 beginning in verse 27, "Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the LORD, And the justice due me escapes the notice of my God?'" Why do you talk that way? Why are you saying that? Why are you saying things that are untrue under the weight of your affliction? Does affliction give you the right to question what God has revealed? No, it doesn't. So the prophet says to them in verse 28, "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth," same theme as from Psalm 121, "[He] Does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable." And, "Though youths grow weary and tired, And vigorous young men stumble badly, Yet those who wait for the LORD Will gain new strength; They will mount up with wings like eagles, They will run and not get tired, They will walk and not become weary." That's a biblical commentary on the theme that we're looking at here in verse 4, the Lord neither slumbers nor sleeps. He doesn't fall asleep on the job when he's keeping you. It is a constant, abiding, permanent state that we are in of being under the protective hand of God who safely keep his people without fail.

Now there comes a point where we should start to realize, you know, "Since that is true, then that means that I am in a greatly privileged position. I have been greatly blessed," you say to yourself. "For God to save me, for God to bring me to Christ, for God to fill me with His Spirit, that's a place of unspeakable, uncountable, immeasurable blessing for me to be in His protective hand." This means I view life from a completely different perspective than I did when I was an unbeliever. "I'm not afraid of the future," you can say to yourself. "I don't know what it's going to bring but I know who holds the future and the One who holds the future holds me too."

And he keeps Israel. He keeps his people. He doesn't need sleep and he does not sleep. This Psalm in the mouth of an Israelite at that time, they would be thinking in terms of, "He delivered us at the Red Sea by the hand of Moses. He led us into the Promised Land by the hand of Joshua. He brought us safe from the exile as Cyrus issued his decree and Ezra and Nehemiah led us back." Then you think further in New Testament terms, he

delivered them and sent a Redeemer to them, the Lord Jesus Christ. And look, the point of all of it is this: the God who did those great things is the same God who with the same meticulous care keeps you on a personal and individual basis. The God who has done that is the God who delivered you from sin in Christ. The God who has done that is the God who delivered you from Satan. The God who did that is the God who delivered you from judgment and hell when he saved you in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Don't you see, beloved, don't you see how the history of revelation, the testimony of Scripture, the history of redemption all speaks loudly and clearly and plainly about how God cares for his people and keeps them even in the most adverse of situations? Don't you see what this means? This means that God is not indifferent to your plight. God is not viewing it from a distance. He's intimately involved. He intimately cares and by no means would he ever disregard you or pass you by in his love and oversight. This is a place of tremendous protection, tremendous security. And we're not talking about old wives' tales here, we're not talking about silly fables that someone made up. This is the revealed word of God, the imprimatur of which was verified by the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the true word of God and he intends us to believe it, to trust it, and to shape our perspective on life by it. We are developing a biblical approach to life when we think this way and when we look at these kinds of Scripture. So God is fully awake, God is fully aware. He knows what you need before you ask and so there's just this tremendous, intimate, personal sense of care and confidence, care and confidence in the keeping power of God.

Let me take you to another Scripture, Matthew 6. How intimate, how proactive God is, how this even changes the way that you pray. Jesus in teaching his disciples on prayer, tells them not to pray in a ritualistic rote manner, simply repeating things by memory and your prayer life going no further than that. That ritualistic mumbling of the same words over and over again is not what God has ordained prayer to be like at all. In fact, Jesus condemns that kind of praying so that he says in verse 6, he says, "you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." Verse 7, "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words." If I just say enough, if I just utter enough syllables, maybe God will hear and God will respond. What underlies the presupposition of that is, "I have to get God's attention by saying the same things over and over again." What Jesus is saying is, "It's not like that at all." He's not alluding to Psalm 121 here but the theme is the same. The theme and the underlying purpose of it all is the same. The omniscience of God and the omnipotent care of God undergirds the way that he hears and responds to our prayers.

Look at verse 8, Matthew 6:8. He says, "So do not be like them," do not be like those Gentiles, don't use a lot of meaningless repetition, meaningless babble. Don't be like that. Why? "For your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." He already knows. You are not giving him any information when you pray. You're not instructing him. You're not bringing to his attention something of which he did not already know. He already knows it all. In fact, if you added Psalm 139 to this, he knows what you're going

to pray before you even say it. David said in Psalm 139, "before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, You know it all." And the wonder of it all then becomes is we recognize that there is this sovereign God who knows us intimately, who knows all about our circumstances, who knows all about what's on our heart, and so we pray not to give him information, not to get him to change his mind on anything, but we pray in order to express our loving dependence upon him and to express our trust in him. "Lord, I trust You through this. You do not slumber. You do not sleep. You are the One who keeps me therefore I pray with confidence even if I'm praying as the tears are running down my cheek. I'm confident that You know, that You hear, and that You care, and that You keep."

All of those verbs are important. He knows. He hears. He cares. He keeps. This is the magnificent, unspeakably grand intimacy that Christ died to bring you into. And so great, so magnificent is his keeping power that Christ is assuring the keeping of his people as he intercedes for us. Now even as we speak, he's interceding before us in heaven at the right hand of God, at the very throne of God he's interceding for us. And if Christ is interceding for us, interceding that we would be kept, what can possibly interfere with the keeping power of God? The Father desires this. The Father designed this. Christ is praying for the fulfillment of it. The Spirit indwells us to keep us. We are magnificently and eternally secure in him. No matter what life may bring to us, no matter what the headlines are, no matter what the next report is from the doctor, no matter what the next phone call brings, we are safely kept. He is sovereign over all and yet, my friend, he has such personal care for you that he numbers the hairs on your head, Matthew 10.

So we soak that in, so to speak, we glory in the position that is ours but we should take it a step further, going beyond just the fullness of the richness of being safely kept by God so that our minds start to engage a different question: what kind of God is like that? Who is a God like that, that is so good and so kind to his people? Is the Creator not aware that we're simply a mere sinful creature, a speck of dust on a planet spinning through the universe? We whose breath is in our nostrils, is he not aware of how insignificant we are? And we start to realize that it's not about us at all, this is about who the great God of it all is.

Look at verse 5 where he says, "5 The LORD is your keeper," that proper name of God, Yahweh. Yahweh is your keeper. And he goes on and he uses that name multiple times in the last half of the Psalm. Verse 5, Yahweh,

5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

Verse 7, "The LORD will keep you from all evil." Verse 8, "The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in." Lord being the name that expresses God's covenant-keeping nature. He is a God of loyal love. He is a promise-keeping God. So that these promises that he will safely keep us come from the God who by his very nature is a promise-keeping God, a loving God of loyal love who never abandons or forsakes his people. Never ever. So the more severe the trial, the greater the depth of your questions and our heartache is simply becoming a bigger, broader, more visible platform for God

ultimately to display to you just how great and how faithful and how loyal he is. In time, it will be shown.

So we see his promise-keeping nature, the one who keeps us in none other than the Lord who is the covenant-keeping promise-keeping God, and as you read on in the Psalm, it's not just that he's the keeper of the nation of Israel, he goes on in verses 5 and 6, this is really sweet, he says, "The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand." Those "yours" there, the personal possessive pronouns, singular, meant for you to take and appropriate individually. Those of you who know Christ, this is who the Lord is to you. He is your keeper personally, by name. The Lord is your shade on your right hand personally, by name.

And it goes on and says in verse 6,

6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

Now in our days, that might sound a little strange to make, you know, in our days of climate control and air conditioning and umbrellas and all of that to keep the sun off of us, that might seem like not to be a very big deal in our day and age, but it wasn't that way in the times when this was written. The Middle Eastern sun as they were walking on those paths to Jerusalem would have presented a very real danger to them because of the intensity of the heat and the possibility of sunstroke and heatstroke and thirst. These were very real dangers as they were making their way to Jerusalem.

Now we might not think much about that, we might minimize that but even in our own day it wasn't that long ago where this danger played itself out in a most unusual and unsuspecting place. It was only 20 years ago, just 20 years ago, 2001, that a national football league player named Korey Stringer died from heatstroke that he sustained during a practice with the Minnesota Vikings. You can Google this and read about it. He had been sick the prior day, had been throwing up and he was determined to make his way through the practice. This was in the day where they approached these things differently. His internal body temperature got up to 108 degrees and he died within hours after collapsing at the practice. Beloved, this was an athlete of highest skill, highest training, of highest physical condition, and the sun killed him. The heat and the humidity killed him. Well, if that could happen to someone like that in the modern era, imagine how great the risk and threat was of sun and heat to ordinary travelers making their way to Jerusalem. So for them to be singing this Psalm saying the Lord is your shade on your right hand, this was no theoretical thing, this was an active expression of trust that says, "The Lord is going to deliver me safely on my journey to Jerusalem. He will get me there. He will sustain me no matter what the external obstacles may be."

So he says at the end of verse 5, "the LORD is your shade on your right hand." That shade would be real relief, real comfort in the midst of it. And he says in verse 6, "The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night." By day and by night, simply a poetic device expressing completeness. The Lord will completely protect you so that nothing is striking you. The two extremes cover everything in between so that there is a

total protection that is taking place in the midst of the journey. They were making a literal physical journey. We're making a spiritual journey. We are pilgrims on our way. Here we have no lasting city. We're seeking a city to come. We're marching to, as the old song says, we're marching to Zion, marching to our heavenly Zion. And as you and I walk on that path, that spiritual path to that spiritual destination, we have complete confidence that the Lord is with us and will keep us no matter what the adversity may seem to say to the contrary in the meantime.

So God protects us from threats that we see. He protects us from threats that we do not see. Our greater threats are in the spiritual realm in an Ephesians 6 kind of way. We wrestle not with flesh and blood but with the powers of the air. These supernatural beings that are bent on our destruction, we can't see them, we're not aware of them, we don't ever recognize how great the threat is and the Lord is protecting us even in the midst of those threats as well. He insulates us and protects us from the dark dangers of powerful forces so that in verse 7 he says,

7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

He will keep you. He will keep you. He will keep you.

Now he goes on and says in verse 8,

8 The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

There's more to those closing verses than might initially meet the eye. Going out and coming in, yeah, sure, you can think about it just in geographic destination, "I'm going out to go someplace. I'm going on a literal trip and I'm going to come back." And you could think about it in those terms. Fair enough, true enough. In the context of the Songs of Ascent, it would include going to Jerusalem and coming back, having the sense of, "I'm going up to Jerusalem and when I come back, the Lord is going to be with me." That's all good and fair, but isn't it obvious that the Psalmist intends more than that? Isn't it obvious that when he says your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore, he's looking into the indefinite future. The promise is immediate. God is with you to keep you in your going out and your coming in right now. He is with you right now to care for you and to protect you, even to minister to your aching heart and the sorrows of family and loss that you've felt. The aching heart of unrepentant children who have forsaken the way that you tried to teach them when they were little ones at your knee. The Lord is with you to keep you even in that right now. The Lord is with you to work out all of those things for good right now.

It is immediate from this time forth, and yet the promise is not only immediate, it's eternal. He will keep you forevermore. This never ends. There is no expiration date on these promises from God. We put things in our refrigerator that have all kinds of expiration dates and they have to be thrown out because they go bad. Do you know what? The promises of God never expire. The promises of God never go bad. The promises of

God are always good, they are always sweet, they are always fresh, and they are there for us to appropriate day after day, moment by moment in the midst of the greatest sorrows and hardships of all of life, in the midst of the most challenging conflicts, the deepest disappointments. We're meant to come back to this promise and come back with a spiritual resolve that says, "Whatever else is happening around me, whatever else men and women may be saying against me, no matter what losses I have just recently sustained, I see that, I acknowledge it, and in the midst of it and through it all, I'm being safely kept. I'm being safely kept. The Lord is my keeper. The One who keeps me does not slumber. He is the shade on my right hand. He will ultimately keep me from all evil. He's going to keep my life and he's going to keep it from this time forth and forevermore."

So a Psalm like this calls for very careful meditation. A Psalm like this you can't just go through, you can't just read it once or hear one message on it and have fully appropriated it. This is the kind of Psalm that takes applied wisdom to think about, to come back to again and again, you know, maybe even to reinterpret some of the things in your life. So I look back at my life and I see that time of heartbreaking sorrow, now in light of Psalm 121, I look at that and I say, "The Lord was with me and was keeping me even then. It wasn't what I thought at the time. I had not been abandoned. He was with me." That time of spiritual darkness that you went through, the times of depression and discouragement, you look back and say, "As dark as those times were, do you know what? The Lord was with me and kept me and brought me to a better place." The time when people you thought were your friends betrayed you, do you know what? "The Lord was safely keeping me. The Lord was with me. The Lord didn't abandon me. Even though everyone else, it seems like, did, the Lord didn't." I suddenly have a whole different perspective on the way that I look at everything in my life up until now, and then as I properly interpret it in light of these things from Psalm 121, I look forward to the future with a new sense of confidence and faith that says what God was doing back then he'll continue to do going forward because the Lord never changes, so much so that I can anticipate my deathbed knowing that life is ebbing out of me and I can come back to a verse like this and have on my dying lips, "The Lord will keep my going out and my coming in from this time forth and forevermore." Let's be expansive in the way that we view it. The Lord will keep you in your going out of this earthly life, and he will keep you as come into heaven. What could be more sweet, more precious, more valuable than that? That is the ultimate answer to life.

So my friends, if you're vexed by life, guilty in sin, take this journey with the Psalmist. I ask you where your help comes from? Who is it? What is it that you trust in? The one who knows Christ has this as his own personal possession. It makes it pretty important, doesn't it, to know Christ, to know that you know Christ, because it is in Christ alone where these blessings are found. Charles Spurgeon said this. He said, "The purposes of God, the divine attributes, the immutable promises, the covenant ordered in all things and sure, the providence, predestination and proven faithfulness of the Lord, these are the hills to which we must lift up our eyes and from these our help must come."

My friend, if you belong to Christ, Scripture tells you, tells you what your personal existence is defined by when it says this in the final two verses of Jude. "Now to Him who is able to keep you," there it is again. He keeps you. He "is able to keep you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen." Amen.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for the wonder of Your love. You sought us, You saved us, and now You keep us. You keep our going out and our coming in from this time forth and forevermore. I pray, Father, by the mercy and grace of Your wonderful Holy Spirit, that that would be the true and vibrant testimony of everyone under the sound of my voice. Thank You, Lord Jesus, it's Your shed blood that secured this for us. It was Your love that brought us to Calvary and Your Spirit that gave us new life that we could come to You by faith. Now in union with You we are safe forevermore. and for that we give You all of our praise. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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