

The Keeping God

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[0 : 00] Turning to Psalm 121, and along with Psalm 23, this is probably the two most familiar Psalms in the Bible.

We're very, very familiar with them. And sometimes our familiarity is such that we maybe lose, because we're so used to them, so used to singing them, and we have memorized them, and I'm sure everybody here can sing this with their eyes closed and repeated.

Certainly from the metric, because we're so used to it. But it's always worth going over these again and again. As we know, it's a pilgrim psalm from Psalm 120 through to Psalm 134.

They're termed a song of ascent. And these psalms were sung by the people as they made their way up to Jerusalem for the various feasts. That's why they're termed songs of ascent.

And the great theme in this psalm is the idea of being kept. Very recently, a prayer meeting, just maybe the last one I did one before, we're also looking at that theme where we saw in 1 Peter chapter 5, 1 Peter chapter 1, verse 5, where we're kept by the power of God unto salvation, ready to be revealed at the last time.

[1 : 24] And here again, we have this great idea and this great theme of being kept. And you and I know it is the one thing, it is one of the things above all that we constantly pray for, to be kept.

Every day, we might pray for many things, and we do pray for many things, and about many things. But we always pray to be kept, to be kept safe, to be kept from falling, to be kept from danger.

We pray to be kept from hurt, from committing grievous sin, to be kept from shame, to be kept.

The list is endless. Every day we pray, and we might not be conscious of the fact we do, but it is almost an automatic part of our prayer life that we pray in order to be kept.

And so, this is a really wonderful psalm. It is such an encouragement to us, because we live in such an uncertain, such a difficult world, such a threatening world, a world that is just so full of surprises, and often not good surprises, that sometimes we fear, what will happen to me?

[2 : 43] The Lord assures us of his keeping. In this psalm, really, you could say that there are two aspects to it, that the Lord, it proclaims that he is the keeper, and he promises to keep.

Now, the opening verse here, verse 1, is not really clear, because it just says, I lift up my eyes to the hills. And it doesn't, in a sense, expand on that, because we don't know exactly what was in the psalmist's mind.

It could very well be that the hills were in his view. Maybe he was nearing Jerusalem, and he was seeing the hills all around. I don't know. Maybe the psalmist felt oppressed, and that he wanted to run away.

You know, sometimes you feel hemmed in, feel claustrophobic, and you feel you want to get away. You feel everything is in on top of you. And we know that David, like in Psalm 11, he says, he expressed the desire that he might, like a bird, flee to the mountains.

That's the way he felt. And I'm sure there are times that we felt like that as well. I wish I could just fly away. I wish I could just get away for a little, because everything is pressing down upon you.

[4:12] And, of course, again, the hills and mountains, they're great places. I'm sure we've all, at different times, gone up into the hills. And when you get up into the hills or into the mountains, your perspective on life changes, because you see things from a different perspective.

You're looking down on things. And quite often, your whole, it's not just that the vision of what you're seeing changes, but sometimes it's almost therapeutic to your mind, because you begin to see things, maybe even issues and problems that you had.

You begin to see things more clearly. And it's interesting how often, in fact, in Scripture, we find God's people in the hills and in the mountains. We find Jesus himself, that he used to go up into the mountain.

He would go apart into the mountain in order to pray. It was in a mountain that he was transfigured. It was in a mountain that Moses met with God.

And he met with God in such a powerful way that when he came back down, his face shone so brightly from being in the presence of God that he had to wear a veil on his face.

[5:28] The people couldn't look at him. His face was shining so brightly. It was on a mountain we find that Elijah had his great prayer battle with the Lord. It was in the mountain again that Elijah discovered through the still, small voice the presence of God.

And right throughout the Bible, you will find the huge part that mountains and hills have to play in the lives of God's people. But when the psalmist is looking to the hills, he's not looking to the hills as his place of help and strength.

Now, we know that there is an element of what you would say the hills are strong in the sense that if you went away for 30 or 40 years, supposing you went to live in Australia or Canada or somewhere and you came back, you would see massive change here in Stornoway.

But if you went around the island, you would say, well, you know, there's so many changes, so many new houses, places that were used to be there, they're no longer there. Gallows Hill is the same.

And the Oog Hills are the same. And the Harris Hills are the same. These are the things that are always foundational. They're unchanging. But again, the first psalm that we sang, Psalm 125, again talks of the hills.

[6:53] Remember how it says there, that as the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people from this time forth and forevermore.

But as a psalmist looks to the hills, he's looking way beyond the hills to where his help comes from. His help doesn't come from the hills.

And he's not making any statement that his help comes from the hills. But it's quite possible as he lifted up his eyes to the hills and he saw the creative power of God in the formation of these hills.

That his mind went out and he began to think of the creator God. Because it is God. We read in Jeremiah in chapter 10, verse 11, Thus shall you say to them, The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens.

It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.

[8 : 07] And you know, I'm sure there are many times as a Christian that we stop because the Bible makes it very clear to us that the special revelation that we have is in the word of God.

But there is a general revelation that is given to us in the creation. And we see God's power and we see God's handiwork in the sky. It tells us from the Psalms as well very clearly that when we look up into the sky on a starry night and we see the way that his fingers framed.

God's handiwork in the sky and there's nothing random. Whatever people will tell you today about explosions and this and that and just coming together, God had a deliberate plan. God is a God of wisdom and a God of order.

And he ordered and planned and structured this world, this whole universe. And it is there as a great display of his creative power. And that's why there is such an attempt made to undermine the creative power of God.

Because when we do that, we take God out of the picture. And of course, it's been one of the most powerful weapons in Satan's toolbox where there's this attack upon the creation of God as a creator God.

[9 : 27] And when we look at the power and the majesty and the glory of our creation and then we see the wisdom, the intricacy of everything, just go to the human body. And we look at ourselves and we marvel at just how everything works.

It's quite extraordinary. And so the psalmist is realizing as he's thinking about the great wisdom that planned and the great power that brought into being.

He says, that's where my help comes from. And that's where your help and my help comes from as well. And I suppose we've always got to ask ourselves this question.

Is this God, the God that I lean upon every single day in all the situations in my life? Or do I depend often on others?

Or do I depend on myself, my own wisdom, my own structures, my own plans, my own guidance? And it's only when I'm completely stuck that I turn to the Lord.

[10 : 34] You know, all the time, every day, we should begin the day with the Lord and ask him as a great, wise, altogether, wonderful God who loves us.

Let's not forget that. The Lord loves us more than ever we could ever begin to understand. You know, sometimes we find it difficult to understand how much the Lord loves us because sometimes we have real difficulty loving ourselves because of our sin.

Sometimes when we look in at our own lives and we see the failure and we see all that we've done wrong and all these things and sometimes we say, oh, what an awful person I am.

But we've got to remember that we are his treasure in this world. We are his possession. He's going to take nobody and nothing else out from this world but you and me.

All his people. And we mustn't lose sight of that. And it's important to the Lord because he is our keeper because of that.

[11 : 39] So we should every day depend upon him. And he is our covenant God. He has entered into covenant with us through his son. With us an ending faithfulness.

Despite the fact we disappoint him. Despite the fact we let him down. And the Bible is full of God's people who let him down. And you see your Davids and you see your Peters and all these.

And yet the Lord brings them back. And then in verse 3 after saying, where my help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. And then he says, he will not let your foot be moved.

He who keeps you will not slumber. And then in verse 4, behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. And in a sense, if you could hear people singing this, it's almost like verse 3 is making a statement.

He who keeps you will not slumber. And then the affirmative is coming back in verse 4. How right you are. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

[12:47] And so we are promised this constant assurance that we are being kept by a God who is constantly on guard, constantly watching us, never sleeps.

We know that a sentry, when they were put on guard, a sentry had to remain vigilant, had to stay awake back, in the way back, in the old days, if you slept on duty, you would be shot.

It was such because the whole camp depended upon your vigilance, upon you being alert, on you being awake.

And so the watchman, wherever the watchman is, it's an extraordinarily important duty. You've got to be, you've got to be alert, you've got to be watching.

And often the watchman's place can be very difficult. I remember my father telling me during the war, he was on the destroyers and up above the bridge, it wasn't like the crow's nest as such, like in the old sailing boats, but it was something similar.

[13:58] And he used to take turns of watch up there, irrespective. And he was telling me like that in the North Atlantic, he was involved in the Arctic convoys. And you say sometimes, and that would be a fearful day, and you'd be up there, the rain and the wind and the ice and everything like that.

But you had to be, because you on that spot were able to see beyond what anybody else would be able to see. There's a, in a sense, almost a, quite a, when I say that, I remember him telling me, and this was earlier on in the war, when he was up there, the first time he had been up there, it was a really, really wild night.

And when he was coming down or an evening, the other sailor who was going up to relieve him said, Captain wants to see you.

So we thought, what I wonder what this is. So he went to the bridge and the captain said to him, you were up there these last four hours, yes? Well, he said, in future, stop that screeching.

And you see, there was a, like a tannoy or whatever, where you could get in touch from there down to the bridge. And what would happen was, my father, to pass the time, was presenting to himself in Gaelic.

[15:26] And he was putting out the line and he was never the best singer, but he would give full volume. So for these four hours, the captain was getting this, blasting.

And he said, I forbid you, he said, again, to ever do that. And my father said to him, well, I'm sorry, but he said, I was singing psalms and the psalms I was singing were actually prayers, asking for God's protection.

And the captain said, oh, right, in future, do it quietly, he said. So, and it was, it was also interesting that from that point, and I'm totally digressing, before the war, my father felt being called into the ministry, he had never preached.

And he thought to himself, well, if I go forward and present myself, people will think I'm trying to get out of going to the war. So he said to the Lord, Lord, and nobody knew then how long the war would last.

If you, if you mean me to come through, to go into the ministry, take me through this war. So he asked the captain, he said, would it be all right if we're quiet on the Lord's day, if I take some of the Lewis or Island men who have Gaelic and do a wee service?

[16:44] And the captain said, that's all right. So he got his permission. So that's where he, where he first started preaching, or as he said, trying to preach on the destroyer. So it all came from that night on, on watch with, what the captain termed, screeching.

But the thing is that it was, it was a vital, it was such an important place, the watchman. And even, the thing is a watchman might be very alert, but might also not be observant.

But here we have the greatest watchman of all, the Lord, who, who misses nothing. Nothing will ever come into your life.

Nothing will ever threaten you. Nothing will ever come near you, but he knows exactly what it is. And nothing will touch you. But by divine permission. Just as the Lord was the cloud of fire by day and the cloud of, pillar of fire by night in the desert with his people, so he is still with us as well.

And so he is this watchman who protects us constantly. And then it says, the Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

[18:02] And again, it's a beautiful idea because we're not, well, it's very timely because the doctor, Dr. Mosley, he died.

And there's probably, I don't know exactly, but it's reckoned it could be heat stroke that contributed to his death. We sometimes don't hear, do not understand the intensity of the heat that can be elsewhere.

But the Lord is, the Psalm is saying, and it's not, I will make you a shade. Like the Lord made Jonah. Remember how he made a shade for Jonah outside Nineveh.

The Lord is saying, I won't make you a shade. I am your shade. I'm your shelter. And when it says the sun and the moon, it really is talking about everything.

It means daytime and nighttime and everything in between. But we could almost, you know, we use the expression 24-7. And at my, at your right hand, that is a place of protection, the place of defense.

[19:15] And that's where the Lord is saying that he positions himself. And the Lord will, will keep you from all evil. He will keep your life.

Now, sometimes it's translated as soul. I'll keep your soul or keep your life. But both in a sense are the same because life involves everything.

Body, mind and soul. And as somebody said, if the soul is kept, then all is kept. Because as we know, there is nothing more precious to us than our soul.

You might have a bodyguard and you might have the best bodyguards. They might have been the best SAS soldiers and who went into, as we know, many of them go into security and work as bodyguards for people.

And you'd say to yourself, wow, this will be the best bodyguard in the world. Yes, he may keep your body, but he can't keep your soul. There's nobody that can protect your soul but the Lord.

[20:19] And so he is the protector of body, mind and soul. He's protecting everything with us that we have. The Lord will keep you from all evil.

In other words, keep you from evil and keep evil from you. Now, that doesn't mean that we live a cushioned life. We all know that we have struggles in it. But whatever struggles we go through, it is by divine permission with holy end in view.

And then it says, the Lord will keep you going out and you're coming in from this time forth and forevermore. You and I know that our life is filled with going out and coming in.

Going out to work, coming home afterwards. Going out on holiday, coming back. Going to school, coming back. Wherever it is, our life is involved in constants, constantly going out and going in.

And again, it really is this idea of encapsulating everything. Every day, going out and in. Every month, going out and in. It means that the Lord is with you at work, he's with you at home.

[21:26] He's with you during the day, he's with you at night. It means that he's with you wherever you go, whenever you go. It's this constant idea of his presence, his help, his keeping, his support.

It governs everything from the dawn of our life to the dusk, from our birth to the grave, all the time, all the way through. And the beauty of this psalm is that it deals with our past, it focuses on our present, and it is also speaking about the future, not just to the end of time, but time without end.

That's the Lord we have. That's the keeper we have. And we're doing tonight, all we're doing is refreshing our mind, helping us to remember who it is who is keeping us.

Nobody in the world has a greater keeper. Nobody in the world has a greater protector. Nobody in the whole wide world has a security like the Christian.

Let us pray. Lord our God, we give thanks again for your word and for reminding us so simply of just the marvel of who you are and what you do in us and for us.

[22:48] And we give thanks that you preserve us, that you keep us. And even when we can't keep ourselves, and how often that is, you still keep us. And we give thanks, Lord, for the fact that you renew us and you restore us.

And even when we wander off, you bring us back. You are the good shepherd, the good shepherd who knows and loves his sheep. So we pray your blessing upon each one of us tonight here.

Again, we pray for Norman McKenzie, remember him as he goes to hospital in Aberdeen. Pray that you'll be with surgeon and give him healing and restoration. We pray for Annabelle and Angelbraith, Lord, and we pray that your healing hand will be upon both of them and bring them home soon again.

Lord, we remember Christine McMillan and the boys, Andrew and John and respective families. Lord, we commit to your care and keeping and we're reminded just as we heard how suddenly our lives can change, how uncertain life is.

Help us to live in preparation for the great change that will come one day. Grant us your grace and be with us as we will soon make our way home. Part us with your blessing, O Lord, we pray.

[24:04] Take away our every sin in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to sing this psalm in the Scottish Psalter.