

We live in a dangerous world. Would you agree? Just a few years back, General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, "I can't impress upon you that in my personal military judgment, formed over 38 years, we're living in the most dangerous time in my lifetime." A year later, he upped the ante and said: "I will personally attest to the fact that [the world is] more dangerous than it has ever been." Today, there are two major wars in progress. We endure threats to our well-being that people 200 years ago never even thought of: nuclear war, climate change, cyber-mischief, assault rifles, Fentanyl poisoning, and terrorism. Most of us would agree with General Dempsey.

The truth is we're beset daily by an endless array of threats and dangers. As a result, one of the realities is that many of us live with a degree of fear and anxiety. Studies show that, in any given year, 18 percent of Americans suffer from an anxiety disorder. That's twice the number of those who suffer from depression. If you broaden the study to include anyone with an anxiety disorder at any time in their lifetime, the number increases to nearly 30 percent. According to psychologist Robert Leahy, "The average American child today exhibits the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient did in the 1950s." Material comfort and lifespan may be higher than back then, but these other issues are why Leahy says, "We live in the Age of Anxiety. We've become a nation of nervous wrecks."

You'd think the older we get, the more we'd be able to get a handle on this. I wish that were true. I'm in the final quarter of my life on this planet, and I've found living without fear and anxiety gets not easier but harder as the years pass. And it's because of this that I've found great comfort and help in the Old Testament Book of Psalms.

One of those psalms, Psalm 121, has become my go-to when fear and anxiety are getting the best of me. This psalm is meant to show us where to find the help we need in anxious times. It's part of a collection of 15 Psalms of Ascent. They're often called "pilgrimage psalms" because the Jewish people recited them as they traveled to Jerusalem for one of their festivals. Later, they were used as they returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. They'd sing these same psalms as they went. Sometimes, as people traveled along, a leader would sing one part, and others would respond. That's probably why Psalm 121 shifts from the 1st person to 2nd person. But the truth is we're on a journey, too. On my own journey, this psalm, in particular, has helped me navigate the anxious times in which we live.

**I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
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. Psalm
121**

Travel Advisory

You can't help but hear this psalm and recognize there is danger on this journey. In verse 3, the writer speaks of our feet slipping or stumbling. Certainly, on a long journey made on foot, there are all kinds of things that can trip you up: rocks, ravines, and slippery surfaces. You want to avoid these hazards because they can keep you from getting where you want to go.

Years ago, I was on a river fishing with my Dad. He'd taken his fly rod upstream and left me to fend for myself. I needed to climb the riverbank to get to a better fishing hole, and about halfway up, my foot slipped on some shale, and I came down hard on my hand to soften my fall. Unfortunately, the shale sliced open my palm like a tender fillet. Needless to say, I never got where I intended to go; my fishing was over for the day. There are things we all face on our journey, both physical and spiritual, that can trip us up or cause us to stumble and seriously impede our progress along the way.

In verse 6, we read of more danger. He points to the sun that harms you by day. We enjoy the sunshine here in the Bay Area, especially this time of year, but in the Middle East, the sun is dangerous. The heat is blinding; sunstroke can kill you. I've only really experienced that kind of heat once—in the West African country of Niger, where CPC built a hospital for women suffering from injuries while giving birth. I visited at the wrong time of the year when the temperature rose to 120 degrees. That kind of heat is more than just an inconvenience; it's life-threatening!

But that's not all; the psalmist also mentions harm from "the moon by night." What does that mean? There was a time when people believed there was such a thing as being moonstruck. That's where we get the term lunatic. Not only that but there are also the dangers of traveling by night. Back then, nighttime could mean encounters with bandits and thieves. To some extent, it's still true. The psalmist says on this journey we face dangers both in the daytime and nighttime.

Again, we live in a dangerous world. We can update the list of dangers. A crazed person with an assault rifle can turn the plans for an

enjoyable evening at a concert into a bloodbath. A disease we've never even heard of can break through our medical expertise and invade our bodies with crippling and chronic pain. An accident in a car, on a bike, or a step ladder can interrupt our carefully made plans. Oh, and I failed to mention the famous New Testament triad of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Any one of those can trip us up. The world is the prevailing culture at odds with God; the flesh is our own sinful nature; the devil is our ancient and invisible enemy who the apostle Peter says "*prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*" 1 Peter 5:8

We Need Help

I think you'd agree that sooner or later, we all need what the psalmist talks about—HELP! That's the word that jumps out at us in verse 1: "Where does my help come from?" But some of us don't like that word. Some of us want to go to the back of the line when it comes to asking for help. "I can do this myself, thank you." In fact, that's one of the pitfalls we face on our journey—being unwilling to even ask for help. But, sooner or later, this is a word we must all come to terms with. In a dangerous world, we all need help. Step one is to admit that you can't get help unless you know you need help! Ask yourself, do I recognize my need for help? Where do I need help these days?

Where to find help?

Even more important than that, we need to know where our help comes from. The psalmist begins with the possibility that help is to be found in the mountains: "I lift my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from?" Why does he look to the mountains? We might think that the mountains are beautiful and awe-inspiring; their majesty and strength remind us of God. That's true, but a Jewish person would see something else. At that time, pagan religion was mainly practiced on the hills and mountains, which were called "the high places." God's people were often tempted to go to those places to find help from pagan gods. But the Lord had forbidden them from doing that. That was the wrong place to look for help. The prophet Jeremiah said,

“Surely the idolatrous commotion on the hills and mountains is a deception...” (Jeremiah 3:23).

Of course, we may not go up to the hills or high places for help, but we have our own forms of escape. John Calvin said Psalm 121 is addressed to those of us who “disregarding God, gaze to a distance all around them, and make long and devious circuits in quest of remedies to their troubles.” We think a different job might fix things. Maybe a new therapist is the remedy. Or we self-medicate with alcohol or Netflix, or social media. There are a lot of places we can go to for help these days. They might numb us for a while, but they’re deceptive, and they always end in disappointment.

You see, the point is our help doesn’t come from the mountains or anything else we might look to. Our help comes from the Lord our God. In some translations, he’s called “LORD.” The all-caps “LORD” is a translation of Yahweh, which is God’s covenant name given to Israel. Later in verse 4, he specifically mentions Israel because God had made covenant promises to Israel. He said, “They will be my people and I will be their God.”

Today, we who are in Christ are his covenant people. Our help comes from the LORD who made covenant promises to us. Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd and us his sheep. He once promised,

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. John 10:27-29

You see, in a dangerous world, he promised to securely hold you in his hand, and absolutely nothing could remove you from his grip.

Those words roll off my lips so easily. But do I really believe it? Again, notice how personal this is: “Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord.” This is theology at its most practical and personal level. We’re all theologians because theology is nothing more than thinking about God. And how we think about God is immensely practical. A.W. Tozer once said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” What do you think about

when you think of God? Fear? Judgement? Condemnation? The psalmist invites us to think of God as our help.

He is our Maker

And the rest of the psalm unpacks that help in beautiful imagery. It tells us why we can look to him for the help we need. First, he’s the Maker of all things. “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” Our help comes not from the mountains but from the Maker of the mountains! This means we’re seeking help from the One who can really give it. He can even bend nature itself to his will. I love how Isaiah put it to a weary nation of God’s people in exile:

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

**The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.**

**He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.**

**He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak. Isaiah 40:28-29**

You see, the Maker (the Creator) of the ends of the earth has no limits. You grow weary, he doesn’t! You lack understanding; he doesn’t! You lack strength; he doesn’t! So you can look to him, the Maker of the universe, for help.

He is our Watcher/Keeper

But this psalm goes on to tell us not only is the Lord our Maker, but he’s also our Watcher or our Keeper. The same word is used six times in verses 3-8. It’s translated in the NIV as “watch” or the “one who watches.” In the ESV, it’s translated as “keep” or “he who keeps you.” Yahweh is the One who watches or keeps us. He’s not an impersonal executive who barks orders from on high; he’s your Keeper who watches us at every turn. We don’t get to see God on this side of heaven. Perhaps that is why we so often look elsewhere for help, but he sees us. Do you believe that? That’s an important question because the price of an unwatched life is anxiety.

I remember when my kids were small, and we’d be around a swimming pool. I mean, as

a parent, you literally don't take your eyes off of them in that situation. The Lord watches us with the same vigilance. And there are several ways in which this plays out in this psalm. First, we learn this God who watches does not slumber nor sleep (v. 3). When Elijah taunted the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel, he challenged them to cry out to their god because Baal was known to take long naps and needed to be awakened.

So Elijah said to the priests, "Shout louder! ... Maybe he's sleeping and must be awakened." 1 Kings 18:27

But our God doesn't sleep. He's forever awake, and you're forever in his line of sight. He stands guard over you, eyes wide open, and as such, he'll not let your foot slip.

I like how the tiny New Testament letter of Jude describes God as the One "who is able to keep you from stumbling." Why? Because he's your Keeper, and he'll never fall asleep on you. But how often do we act as if he is asleep? I think of a child who's anxious at night. Her Dad sits at her bedside and promises, "Don't be afraid. I'll stay here and watch you." Now, let's be honest: he might eventually fall asleep, but our Heavenly Father doesn't. We can sleep because he does not sleep! And the God who does not sleep will not let your foot slip.

Second, we learn in verse 5 that the Lord who watches us is the shade at our right hand. Again, in the tortuous heat of the Middle East, shade is not just a nice spot for a picnic; it's a necessity for survival. "The Lord is your shade at your right hand" because in battle your shield was held in your left hand and your right-hand needed protecting. The word shade sometimes translates as a shadow.

Psalm 91:1 says, "*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.*" Another psalm says, "*Because you are my help, I will sing in the shadow of your wings*" (Psalm 63:7). Though he's unseen, the Lord is your shade, and you needn't fear the dangers of either the hottest day or the scariest night. You have divine sunscreen by day and protection from the terrors of the night.

Spurgeon put it this way, "Day and night make up all time: thus the ever-present protection

never ceases. All evil may be ranked as under the sun or the moon, and if neither of these can smite us we are indeed secure." So, instead of being overwhelmed with fear and anxiety, you can sing in the shadow of his wings!

A Final Promise: Is It True?

And then the psalmist concludes in verses 7-8 with something astounding, almost too good to be true.

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. vv. 7-8

Another translation says, "The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will watch over your soul..." (ESV). Either way, this is an astounding statement in its comprehensiveness: The Lord will keep you from all harm, in all places, at all times.

Now, if we're honest, we have to ask: Is this really true? Is this whole psalm really true, or is it just some kind of sentimental cross-stitch we put on our wall to make us feel better? Is it true we have total protection from all harm or evil in every place we go and at every moment, now through eternity? That's what it says.

I wonder what Joseph would have said about that—betrayed by his brothers, cast into a pit, sold into slavery, falsely accused, and then thrown into prison. "The Lord will keep you from all harm." Really?

I wonder what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would have said about that. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor imprisoned and killed for resisting the Nazis during WWII. "The Lord will keep you from all harm." Really?

Or I wonder what Jim and Elizabeth Elliott would have said about that? Jim was killed with a spear in Ecuador by the Huaorani Indians as he was trying to reach them with the Good News about Jesus. Elizabeth was left a widow, and her daughter was an orphan. "The Lord will keep you from all harm." Really?

Or I wonder what Matt Reynolds would say about that. He and my son were 8-year-old best friends growing up together. They found a tumor in Matt's leg. Soon after having it amputated, the cancer spread, and Matt died.

"The Lord will keep you from all harm." Come on!

But we must stand back and read this in light of what the rest of the Bible tells us about the place of suffering in our lives. The apostle Paul tells us, "...in all things God works for the good of those who love him..." (Romans 8:28). He doesn't say all things are good, but in all things, God works for the good. When Paul says "all things," he means all things, including suffering and evil. That's why he could also say in the same chapter, "Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

So Bonhoeffer and Elliott and my son's best friend might have lost their lives, but they gained so much more. I guess there are worse things than being imprisoned or mistreated or even dying. There are worse things than losing your job, getting rejected by a friend, or fighting a debilitating illness. Listen to what Jesus said to his disciples:

You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me.

No harm? That sounds pretty harmful to me. Yet, then, in the next breath, Jesus says,

But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life. Luke 21:16-19

How do you make sense of that? First, he says, "Some of you will be put to death." Then, he says, "Not a hair on our head will perish, and you'll win life!"

He's saying we will experience suffering, but it can't really harm us in ways that ultimately matter. Think of a physician getting ready for surgery. He knows he's about to do his patient some harm. He'll cut his body open; the patient will bleed; without anesthetic, he'd scream in pain. Sounds harmful. But that surgeon is still following the Hippocratic oath to "do no harm." Harm isn't evil when it leads to good. That's what this psalm is saying: Yes, there are many dangers out there. You'll experience difficulty and suffering on this journey. That's why you ask for help. But no injury, illness, accident, or distress can separate you

from God's good purposes for you. As Eugene Peterson writes, "All the water in the ocean cannot sink a ship unless it gets inside. Nor can all the trouble in the world harm us unless it gets inside of us." That's the promise of this psalm: "The Lord will keep you from all harm."

Isn't that what Jesus taught us? Do you think Jesus could sing Psalm 121? He was betrayed by a friend, abandoned by his disciples, falsely accused by the Jewish leaders, mocked and spat upon, and condemned to die naked on a cross. Would he dare sing this song to himself, "The Lord will keep you from all harm"? Absolutely! In fact, I believe he did. As Jesus and his disciples headed to the Garden of Gethsemane, Matthew's gospel says they sang a hymn (Matthew 26:30), which was almost certainly a psalm. I like to think they sang this very song—Psalm 121. In fact, I'd venture to say Jesus was the only person to ever fully live this psalm out. So often, when I turn to this psalm, it's because I've lost the perspective it gives me, but Jesus never wavered. And it's because he lived Psalm 121 that all these promises are true for us today. So, let's keep coming back to this psalm, and like Jesus, not look to the mountains, but look to the Lord who made the mountains. He is our Keeper; not a hair on our head will perish!

Pilgrim's Progress, written in 1678 by John Bunyan, is an allegory about the Christian life. It follows the journey of Christian and his fellow pilgrim, Hopeful, from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. It tells of all the dangers they faced along the way. At one point, they notice a pleasant meadow that runs parallel to the path they're on. Thinking it would make their journey easier, they climbed the wall to walk in that meadow.

Initially, all is well, but soon the sky darkens, a storm gathers, and it starts pouring rain. By morning they're completely lost. And that's when they meet up with a bad guy named The Giant Despair. He captures them, beats them up, and throws them in a dungeon in a place called Doubting Castle. All hope is lost of ever making it to the Celestial City.

But, after languishing for days, Christian and Hopeful decide to pray. In fact, they spent the whole night in prayer, and finally, when

morning came, Christian cried out, "What a fool, am I, thus to lie in a stinking dungeon, when I may as well walk in liberty. I have a key in my bosom, called Promise, that I'm persuaded will open any lock in Doubting Castle." Within a few minutes, Christian and Hopeful unlock the chains and doors, escape Doubting Castle, and get back on the right path to the Celestial City.

My hope is that Psalm 121 might be for you what it has been for me: a key called Promise. It's not a key I've used just once and then moved on in my journey. It's a key I keep in my bosom and pull out on a regular basis. "I lift my eyes to the mountains..." My encouragement to you is to get this psalm in your head and then in your heart and pull it out often.

We live in dangerous times. When we are anxious and fearful and doubting, don't look to the mountains; look to the Maker of the mountains, the One who not only watches us but keeps us from all harm in every place we go, at every moment, now through eternity.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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