

## Psalm 121 – Kept! – The Rt Revd Dr Richard Condie – Bishop of Tasmania – March 29, 2020

It has been another surreal week, as we have seen more and more closures and the shut down of many activities. I said to my son this week, that I felt like I was living in a movie script. There is a great sense of unreality to it all. Pictures on the TV, of the busiest cities in the world, ground to a halt. The queues of newly unemployed people outside Centrelink and a mixture of stories of heartache and difficulty, and intense kindness.

The dominant themes of the week for me are grief and fear. I have been so tired, and I think it is carrying both of these things in myself and in others. Grief about the relentless change, and the losses of all that we hold dear, not to mention jobs and livelihoods and the like. And fear about what the future might bring. Fears about illness and death, fears about the unknown future, fears about the economy, fears about employment, fears about living and working at home for a long period with no obvious end.

So when that happens, I want to ask:

### Where do you go for help? vv 1-2

Psalm 121 is a pilgrim Psalm, one of the Psalms of Ascent, used by the people of Israel as they went up to Jerusalem to the feasts in the temple.

Imagine the scene, wandering through the desert wilderness perhaps on the way up from the Jordan Valley, or down from the northern country or up from the Negev – the desert in the south. The pilgrims are walking along trudging through the hot and dusty land and they would have been filled with all kinds of feelings. So they sang these songs. Pss 120-134 are the songs of ascent

And we can especially identify with our Psalm this morning. In v 1 – they sing – *I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?*

You can almost see it in your minds eyes trudging through a hot dusty valley looking up at the mountains all around towering over you, perhaps feeling a bit afraid and wondering where help was going to come from. There is a sense of helplessness, when they see the mountains all around them and they cry out for assistance. Who is going to help on this road? Where can they put their trust when the going is tough, when they are afraid or unsure? *from where will my help come?*

But the Psalm is something more than a travelogue, it actually speaks about LIFE. Like the pilgrims on the road to Jerusalem we often find ourselves dished up something that makes us feel helpless like those foreboding mountains. Troubles and uncertainties, unknowns and dangers. We can only imagine what they might have been in the lives of those Pilgrims.

But we know our situation well enough: even before Coronavirus, troubles at work, troubles in relationships, projects that seem impossible, a health challenge, grief from a broken relationship. You know what I mean, Don't you? And I look up at the mountain and say – where am I going to get help?

There are lots of temptations at this point aren't there? Mine is – work harder and smarter to manage the situation. If I can just nut it out, then I will know what to do. I rely on my competence. But Coronavirus makes that almost impossible. Others of us run the self-help books on relationships or management techniques. Still others of us don't even know where to look and we end up – despairing – being anxious, worrying about tomorrow, fretting over the situation.

We've seen examples of that in the last few weeks haven't we? The only explanation for all the toilet paper purchasing is that people are trying to wrest back control in an anxious time. Where do we go for help?

Well the Pilgrim Psalmist had the answer in v 2 *My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.*

This is the real answer to where we flee for help. There IS no place to flee other than into the arms of the Lord God; Yahweh our creator. If you have the access to the one who made the world, then surely any obstacle that the world

throws up at you, like mountains and valleys and relationships and workplaces and even viruses; then the best place for help is with the one who made it all.

Jeremiah says: Jeremiah 32:17 Ah Lord GOD! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.

The pilgrim Psalmist knows this too. He knows that the mountains around him are mountains that have been put there by this God that he knows and worships; and that this God is the origin of his help.

*My help comes from the Lord*

I wonder if that is the first cry of your heart when you look for help? To look first to the Lord. To seek help from the one who made the world in the first place.

### **You are Kept vv 3-8**

The Psalm changes voice in v 3 from the voice of the Pilgrim, to the voice of a teacher. And in particular he talks about being KEPT. In fact, a derivative of the word “keep” appears in all but one of the remaining verses.

Look for a moment at verse 5. “The Lord is your Keeper” – what does this mean? To be a keeper is to be a guard or a watchman or an attendant. You know those Ads on the TV for safety of children around water, that say if you take your eyes off the child for a second, that they may drown? They are trying to make parents vigilant, responsible; watchful guardians of their children’s safety. This is who God is for his people. He is your guardian. Your watchman. Your keeper.

How does he keep the pilgrim on the way? Let’s look at v 3 *He won’t let your foot be moved*, or better, he won’t let your foot slip and slide, tremble or stagger.

As the pilgrim went along the rough gravel paths on her way to Jerusalem, she’d get the metaphor. Last Friday Helen and I went bushwalking up Mt Wellington to get away for a few hours. A couple of times on the very rocky path – we lost our foothold for a second. My feeble attempt to protect her was “be careful”. But God won’t let your foot slip

Point is: The LORD God will not let your life lose its foothold, and go sliding down the embankment; he will hold you when you waver and stagger and tremble. God’s attention is acute.

But also constant v 3b-4. *“he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”*

Something lovely in these verses. The first line speaks of the individual – the “you” in v 3 is singular. The second line applies to the people of Israel as a whole. God’s protection of Israel is extended to the individual pilgrim. The promise to the people is the promise to the individual. It is a promise to us as the people of God, but also to each one of us sitting in our own seat.

And THAT promise is his hyper-vigilance over us. He won’t slumber – that is – he is not going to doze off in the chair on a Saturday afternoon – slumber, any more than he is likely to sleep soundly at night. God doesn’t snooze or take a nap. He doesn’t sleep at night.

Even the best parents like to get some sleep at night; but not God. There he is – sitting by your bed watching you constantly through the night and the day.

There is a lovely prayer service buried in the Prayer Book, called Prayer at the end of the day. Sometimes, when I am particularly anxious, I read these prayers before I go to sleep, to calm my anxious heart,

Save us, Lord, while we are awake, protect us while we are asleep that we may keep watch with Christ and rest with him at peace.

It ends with: *Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray: and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night, for the Love of your only Son our Saviour Jesus Christ.*

It is a reminder that he is up all night. When I am resting in my bed, I can leave my anxieties with him.

I wrote to the clergy this week, encouraging them to have a technology Sabbath. A full 24 hours each week without listening to the news or looking at social media, or fretting over email, or being anxious about Coronavirus news. Because God is always on the job!

The Lord is your keeper v 5. He is the shade at your right hand, the sun will not strike you by day nor the moon by night. Day and night, by sun and by moon; the Lord watches over you. He shades you from the burning sun. He protects you from the cold desert nights under the moonlight. The point is this. Life is full of all kinds of dangers; all kinds of inconveniences like the heat and cold. "The adversities and miseries of the human life" – as Calvin called them. But the Lord's help is a match for them all.

v 7 *The Lord will Keep you from all evil – from the jackals and bandits on the road. "He will keep your life"*

v8 – *The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.*

All your movements and forever, the Lord will guard, will keep, and attend to.

I think of the front door of my house. The latch on the inside, and the keyhole on the outside, and the amount of times the people in our house use that door, over the course of the year. And the Lord is watching. Even when the door is quiet as we are locked in isolation. He watches us.

The Lord – the creator of heaven and earth, the one who made the mountains, the one sent his Son to die for me is watching, keeping me, every time I come and go now and FOR ever.

As we step through the rhythms of daily life: waking and sleeping, eating and drinking, coming and going, walking running and sitting, laughing and crying, standing and sitting, loving, and being loved, worshipping, and sinning, thinking, and speaking working, and playing. He KEEPS your life.

Please note: that never ONCE in the Psalm does he say; that he makes the road easy, or that he takes away pain or that problems and calamities, mountains and pandemics will not strew your path. The scriptures are real – they know our lives will be filled with difficulties of one sort or another. But the assurance is he will be there. He will keep us.

When I was a young lad I had some fears, and when I had to face them, I taught myself how to get through the day. I imagined – putting my hand into God's hand, and like a little child, being able to face the difficulties and horrors that the world was able to dish up.

Like these words from Psalm 37:23-4 *Our steps are made firm by the LORD, when he delights in our way; though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the LORD holds us by the hand.*

He doesn't promise us a cushioned life, a comfortable life. But a kept life.

When you look to the mountains. When you watch the TV news. When you read the next instalment of the unfolding horror of COVID19. When you find yourself out of work or out money, or lonely and isolated. Filled with fear and wracked by grief. Where will your help come from? Your help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

We are sent into the world secure in the knowledge that in all our comings and goings the Lord of the universe is our guardian and watchman, and that we are Kept.