

**God as Our Good Shepherd**  
**Psalm 121**  
**July 9, 2023**

This summer we are in the book of Psalms, exploring metaphors that describe the different ways we approach God. So far we've looked at how we approach the God who transcends us and the King who rules over us. Today gets more personal as we look at the God who watches over us as our Good Shepherd.

Psalm 80 identifies God as "The Shepherd of Israel" who leads them like a flock and rescues them from harm. In 127 we learn that, while the watchmen may be in their towers, it is actually the LORD who guards and protects the city. And then there is the famous description in Psalm 23.

"The LORD is my shepherd; I have all I need." King David goes on to explain how his Shepherd-God provides him with rest, food, water, peace, renewed strength and helpful guidance. But the Shepherd is not just there when times are good.

Even when we walk through the most difficult valleys, we are not afraid because the Shepherd is right there with us. His rod beats off predators and His staff guides and rescues us. With God as our shepherd, we lack nothing and have nothing to fear.

God as our shepherd is a common theme in scripture with too many images to cover today. So, we will focus on only one—how God, our Good Shepherd, watches over us.

The Psalm I'd like to use for this is Psalm 121. This is one of the songs of ascent and it was likely sung by pilgrims as they were on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the festivals. Try to imagine it for a moment.

Anyone who traveled to Jerusalem was said to "go up to Jerusalem" because the city was on a mountain, about 2,400 feet above sea level. So, if your home is in Capernaum, which is about 700 feet below sea level, you know you will have a distance of about 80 miles to walk and an elevation of about 3,000 feet to climb.

As you set out you can see the mountains before you. You know the challenges and uncertainties of the journey ahead. So, as you ascend the hills, on the way to worship God, you sing a song to remind you of what is true. Psalm 121.

- <sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills— where does my help come from?
- <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.
- <sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot slip— he who watches over you will not slumber;
- <sup>4</sup> indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
- <sup>5</sup> The LORD watches over you— the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
- <sup>6</sup> the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.
- <sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all harm— he will watch over your life;
- <sup>8</sup> the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

Our pilgrim has worship on his mind. He knows the trip ahead will be difficult and that he will need help to make it. Yes, there will be others along the path who can assist him, but he knows that his ultimate help comes from the God whom he is going to worship, the one who will watch over his every step. He also knows that this God is not his only option.

From the earliest days people believed that they could get closer to any god by increasing their elevation. That is why worship centers were built on top of mountains and were referred to as "high places."

So, when our pilgrim looks at the hills he doesn't just see mountains, he sees other worship centers, other gods to whom he could call out for help. They may promise the same benefits and even be easier to access. He looks to the hills and asks, "Where does my help come from?" He then affirms, "My help comes from the LORD [from Yahweh], the maker of heaven and earth."

This is a marvelous reminder that the God who watches over us as shepherd is the same God who transcends us as our Maker and rules over us as our King. He is immeasurable, powerful, personal and yet loves and cares specifically for you. I say this because the "you" here is singular. This song is to encourage the heart of an individual by reminding that person of what is true for them.

Rather than a song one person sang to encourage themselves, this could have been a responsive song where the leader spoke the opening line, and the group responded by expanding that thought. Whether sung alone, responsively by a group or in both ways, this song encouraged pilgrims to trust in their Shepherd-God. And the journey gave them reason to trust.

If you have ever seen some of the paths they had to walk to get to Jerusalem you know how treacherous that journey could be. There were places where one slip could result in terrible injury or death. What a comfort to know that Yahweh will not let your foot slip. In fact, since He does not slumber or sleep, you can be sure He watches over you even at night. But there is more here too.

The phrase "to lose one's footing" was another way to say the person experienced disaster. So, deeper than just the technical aspect of taking a walk along a mountain path, a person's foot could slip if they made a bad moral decision or did anything that pulled them away from faithfulness to God.

At the same time, stating that God does not slumber or sleep also means more than just saying God is always alert. At that time a sleeping god was one who is unresponsive to a prayer for help.<sup>i</sup> So this is saying, if you are in a difficult place, call out to God. He will be there for you because He is always watching over you.

The foot not slipping and God not sleeping is a picture of personal stability that can be found in any journey of life, even the one you are on today.

The path was not their only concern. If you have ever traveled in the Middle East (or even in southern states this summer), you know how brutal the sun can be. Finding shade can mean the difference between life and death.

To say that God is your shade at your right hand is to affirm that God's shade is in a place of your strength. It doesn't just defend and protect you; it also refreshes and moves you forward. God's shade allows you to shift from defense to offense in this journey.

By including the moon in this the psalmist may have been alluding to the belief that too much exposure to the moon could cause debilitating problems as well.<sup>ii</sup>

And while the meaning here can be this directly connected to the impact of the sun and moon on a person's physical or mental health, I think the psalmist also had in mind the full scope of God's care over the entire course of every day and night. God is with you during the day and, unlike other gods, He does not disappear at night. The Good Shepherd is always vigilant and available as He watches over His people 24/7.

The final verses expand the scope of God's care, taking us off the pilgrim trail and into the full experience of life. God's care is not static. It is not a safe house to which we have to run. Wherever life may take you, the LORD is there, watching over your coming and going both now...and forevermore. In other words, He will continue to watch over you through all of eternity. You are safe and secure in Him...forever.

This all-encompassing promise needs some attention. Verse 7, "The LORD will keep you from all harm." Really? All harm? The Hebrew word here can include distress, adversity and evil of any kind.

There are two ways to view this kind of promise. Those in a developed, western world tend to read this and think of a safe and cushy life. A promise like this means that nothing bad will happen to me. I can always access WiFi. Cars won't break down. Planes won't be delayed. Jobs won't be lost. Health will be regained. My loved one will recover.

But we all know that this is not the norm so when something negative occurs we may question God. "How could He let this happen to me? I thought He was watching over my life!" Can I really trust His promise?" This response comes from our control-oriented, science-driven, Western culture perspective, but it is not the only perspective.

For the pilgrim on the road to Jerusalem, a problem-free option did not exist. Difficulty, loss, tragedy and trial were a regular part of their lives. For them, to be kept from harm did not mean they had a cushy life; it meant they had a well-resourced life.

Remember that famous passage in Psalm 23? "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil." The word "evil" there is the same word translated "harm" in 121. Why is there no fear? Because I am well-resourced. "For you are with me."

I may not like where I am or what is happening to me, but I am not afraid because the one who watches over me never slumbers or sleeps. Dark and difficult valleys are going to come and when they do, I will be kept from all harm because my Good Shepherd watches over my life.

This sounds nice, but what does it actually mean? How does this play out at ground level? Well, to start peeling this back, I think it would help us to listen to the Good Shepherd Himself—Jesus.

The reality of being kept from all harm as God watches over your life finds a direct connection with Luke 21. Here, Jesus gives His disciples details about the dark, evil, harm-filled valleys they will encounter. Our Lord tells them they will be persecuted, imprisoned, hated, betrayed by family and even put to death.

Then comes verse 18 where Jesus said, “But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life.”

That is an interesting combination of statements as God’s detailed care and our ultimate fulfillment are combined within the context of our suffering. Christ’s disciples will be watched over and kept, not as a soft-cushy life, but as a well-resourced life, able to engage any difficulty with the certainty that they are not alone and will prevail.

This brings Jesus’ perspective into greater clarity. When we focus on protecting, preserving and benefiting this life, we want the Lord to remove the pain and make life easier. But if we pull the lens back and bring the bigger picture into view, we begin to catch a glimpse of what Jesus saw.

In John 12:24 Jesus said,

<sup>24</sup> I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives. <sup>25</sup> Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who care nothing for their life in this world will keep it for eternity.

Like a butterfly struggling to escape its chrysalis, there is purpose in the trial that goes far beyond that moment. So Paul tells the Corinthians,

<sup>16</sup> Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. <sup>18</sup> So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

When we focus on protecting, preserving and benefiting *this* life, we want the Lord to remove the pain and make life easier. But there is a more significant reality playing out here and that is what our Good Shepherd sees and what He operates from.

Let's play this idea out a little further.

When I think of God watching over me, I think of two ways God does this. He can watch over me by protecting me from the harmful things that come my way. This is a reactive stance as the shepherd responds to the dangers I encounter.

At the same time watching over contains a proactive stance, as the shepherd guides me to the things I need. There are obvious needs, like food, water and shelter. But what of the needs that are not so obvious to me or to you? What if there are things we need for life but we are not yet aware that we need them? Can the shepherd take us there as well?

What if the Good Shepherd could lead you to places beyond what you see as your immediate need? What would life be like if you no longer feared the things you currently fear? What would it be like if you gained such a new perspective on life that you no longer desired or feared the things that impact you today?

This is what Jesus teaches. Matthew 6. Do worry about what you will wear or what you will eat....but seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness and all these things you think you need will be given to you. Focus on what is beyond the immediate need or fear.

I have things I want that are not good for me. I also have things I want that, while not bad, are not the best. There is something beyond that is better, but I don't even see it, so I don't know that I need it.

At the same time, I carry anxiety and fears for many things. The things I want and the things I fear can keep me from entering the life God made me to know.

As our Good Shepherd, God protects us and guides us. Years ago, I was introduced to the refrain from a song that became an important prayer in my own life. It goes like this:

Shepherd me O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.

I have desires and fears that I need God's help with. At the same time, I know that there is life beyond my immediate needs, and I need a Good Shepherd to take me there.

*Shepherd me O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.*

Would you sing that with me?

*Shepherd me O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.*

I want to close this message by joining together in prayer. The words I offer will be in the first person. Even though we are a flock, the Good Shepherd knows you by name and is watching over you as one He deeply cares for. In this prayer I will ask the Lord to deliver us from wants and fears and to give us the grace to love well. When I pause, I invite you to join me by singing that shepherding prayer.

Along the way, be aware if any of the requests cause an internal response in you and bring that back to the Lord later in the day.

O Jesus, hear us as we pray.

Deliver me...

from the desire of being praised...from the desire of being preferred to others...from the desire of being consulted by others...from the desire of being approved by people, Deliver me, O Jesus.

*Shepherd me O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.*

Deliver me...

From the fear of being forgotten...from the fear of being ridiculed...from the fear of being wronged... from the fear of being suspected, Deliver me, O Jesus.

*Shepherd me O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.*

Grant me the grace to desire...

That others may be loved more than me...that others may be esteemed more than me...that, in the opinion of the world, others may increase more than me...that others may be preferred over me...that I might love others in the same way that you have loved me. Grant me the grace to desire these things.

*Shepherd me O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.*

I am one of your sheep; you are my Shepherd. I am needy; you provide. I am vulnerable; you watch over and protect me. Lord, there is a place beyond my wants and fears that you desire me to know. It is the green pasture, still water, well-resourced life that you intend for me to experience. I surrender my will to you and ask you to take me there.

*Shepherd me O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.*

In Jesus' Name, Amen.

In the week ahead I encourage each of us to weave this prayer into your prayer times or to sing this simple prayer twice each day. Give yourself 45 seconds after you sing to listen for the Spirit to speak and then be open to what the beyond may be for you.

God is your good Shepherd. He is not a hired hand who runs at the first sign of trouble. He is with you through every valley and trial and He has already laid down His life to preserve yours.

## **The Sacrament of Communion**

---

<sup>i</sup> This is one of the taunts that Elijah used to suggest why Baal was not responding to his prophet's prayers. "Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." 1 Kings 18:27.

<sup>ii</sup> Archaeologists have found medical records from Assyria and Babylonia that identify several conditions which doctors concluded were the result of the "hand of Sen", the moon god. One of those descriptions sounds like a grand-mal seizure. Like dehydration and heat stroke, this would be devastating for any journey.

This idea of the moon's impact is not that far removed from us either. The word moonstruck describes a person who is unable to think or act normally and the word lunatic comes from Latin and points to the belief that changes in the moon caused moments of insanity.