

Psalm 121:5-8

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The Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, is constantly watching over humanity, seeking to guide, protect and deliver His beloved charges from the grasp of evil which would see each individual and whole nations destroyed—flesh, bone, marrow and soul. The Lord is the saving keeper of our souls.

While verses 3-4 offer insight regarding the dedicated character of God's constant presence and protection, verses 5-8 give poetic color to how the nature of God's eternal vigilance is experienced. *The Lord is your keeper* sets the stage for the verses to follow. The noun in Hebrew, "shamar,"—first rendered as *keeper*—will be applied in differing forms four times in the remainder of the psalm. "Shamar" is variously translated in the infinitive verbal form as "to protect, to guard, to preserve, to watch." Paired with the noun *keeper* are the verbs "is" and "will." The former, "is," discloses an accomplished and ongoing state of being. The latter, "will," indicates a future response or condition of action.

The faithful are assured that the Lord is and will continue to act as *keeper*, a protector who carefully and constantly maintains watch over His charge. At this point readers perhaps will hear echos of the Shepherd emanating from Psalm 23 or John 10:11. This *keeper*, Yahweh, is no incarcerating or punitive warden, but a wholly dedicated and love-directed guardian seeking only that which is ultimately best for the crown of His creation: humanity.

This Hebrew word translated *keeper* first appears in Genesis 2, when God appoints Adam to be the keeper of the garden. Humanity was appointed to steward the earth in God's original design as its *keeper*. In like manner, God is the *keeper* of His people. When we serve one another, we reflect the image of God in this respect. The ungodly alternative is to be like Abel who claimed he was not appointed to be his brothers *keeper* (same root word).

The last half of verse 5 and the entirety of verse 6 work together to create a single image. *The Lord is your shade* is a message that most certainly would appeal to the experiences of those fortunate enough to embark on the exciting pilgrimage adventures that ultimately would deliver them to Jerusalem and reconnect them with the faith that shaped the whole of their Jewish history. Traveling on foot in the open, exposed to the heat and piercing sunlight of the day would cause any person to appreciate the value of shade's cooling relief.

The Lord, Yahweh, provides that benefit of relief to the weary pilgrim trudging forward in life and looking for a moment of respite along the way. Similarly, Jesus offered the succor of God's comforting care along life's journeys to any who would follow Him (Matthew 11:28-29).

On your right hand is a direct reference to the acceptable and honored status of the Lord. The *right hand*, or the right side, was long considered the place that marked honor or privilege and indicated God's blessings were to be had. In a stunning reply to Pilate, for example, Jesus drew upon Old Testament references to the right hand (found in Psalm 110:1) to describe the power and dominion (found in Daniel 7:13) that were rightly His own:

“Jesus said to him, ‘You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.’”

(Matthew 26:64)

Verse 6 utilizes the poetic strategy of referring back to the previous picture and expanding on the imagery of relief-giving shade. *The sun will not ... nor the moon*. The two orbs that dominate the skies—the sun during the day, the moon at night—were inescapably significant components of the ancient eastern world's cosmology. Each evoked a differing set of responses reflective of their own stark differences. One could easily see the need for the sun's warmth and light, but could just as easily understand the danger when warmth became repressive heat and light became so brilliant or glaring as to blind. The moon, often portrayed as silent and cold, was a prime representative of the mysterious and shadowy character that the world seemed to take on during the hours of the sun's absence.

The psalmist's wholehearted confidence in the Lord leads to the conclusion that not even the blazing sun nor the enigmatic moon can interfere with Yahweh's caring oversight of nations and individuals. God, Whose “lovingkindness is everlasting” (Psalm 136:7-9) created both the day and the night (Genesis 1:5). The Lord Yahweh, *your keeper*, is sovereign over periods of time (Psalm 74:16) just as the Lord is sovereign over all other aspects of life. There is no situation beyond God's redemptive reach; nothing that is too difficult for the Lord Yahweh to accomplish (Jeremiah 32:17). Likewise, there is no individual the Lord does not wish to love and bring into the healing and saving light of His kingdom (Psalm 67:2; Isaiah 45:22; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

The final two verses of Psalm 121 are a balanced poetic response to its opening two verses. They are beautifully crafted expressions of confidence and trust in the Lord's promises to *keep* those who *lift up* their *eyes to the mountains* (v. 1) in faith knowing that *help comes from the Lord* (v. 2). Sounding much like a liturgical benediction—prayers from the Scripture that send worshipers into the world and their lives with God's blessings—verses 7-8 reaffirm God's protective guardianship over those especially who place their lives in His hands.

Verse 7 makes a crystal clear point: *The Lord will protect you from all evil*. The word “protect” is derived from another instance of the Hebrew “shamar” from which related terms in the psalm—*keep*, *keeps* and *keeper*—are also taken. That the root Hebrew word “shamar” takes differently conjugated verbal forms within the Hebrew text leads English translators to approach nuances of meaning. In each case, the principle is consistent, God

is our caretaker as we proceed on life's journey. Just as God cares for the pilgrims heading to Jerusalem's temple, God also cares for His people as they journey through life.

The psalmist establishes that the work of protection is the Lord's to accomplish. There is not even the slightest hint of a doubt about it in the psalmist's mind: the Lord is able to *protect*. What challenges contemporary readers is the phrase *from all evil*. Difficult circumstances will occur, but none of them will thwart God's purpose for our lives when we are walking in His ways.

The Bible never shies away from the truth: Evil exists in the world. It was invited in (Genesis 2:17; 3:14-19). Certainly even the faithful can be deeply wounded by that evil; Jesus would be a prime example, as He was convicted though innocent, and crucified though guiltless. However, God is our ever-present help in protecting us from that evil, when we trust in Him and walk in His ways.

We can see this reflected in "The Lord's Prayer." Jesus was instructing His disciples with respect to prayer. Among the examples of petitions to be offered we hear, "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matthew 6:13). Jesus knew that God the Father is not a tempter, dangling sin before mortals to watch as they succumb and plummet into the depths of perdition. Jesus said of the Father, "No one is good except God alone" (Matthew 10:18). Good has no cooperating correspondence with that which is not good; evil.

The New Testament bears witness with the Hebrew Scriptures (see, for example, 1 Samuel 2:2) to God's holiness and purity: "God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone" (James 1:13). It seems that in His model prayer, Jesus was demonstrating how His followers should ask for and recognize God's protection from their own propensities to prefer the easier evil over the more difficult good. "Do not lead us" can just as well infer "do not allow us to come near." The prayer serves as a reset of perspective, which leads to God's protection.

A shepherd cannot stop wolves from hunting the flock. Certainly, however, a shepherd can lead the flock away from and prevent their approach to where the wolves are most active. If need be, the good shepherd will give even what is most precious to protect the flock when wolves do attack: "The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Our part in this relationship is to enact God's promise that if we "resist the devil, he will flee from" us (James 4:7). Praying to God for help seems an integral part of resisting.

He will keep your soul. Protection from evil results in the soul's security under God's care. When we participate in evil, we incur the adverse consequences of evil (Romans 1:24,26,28; 6:23). When we rest in God's help, and seek His ways, looking up to Him rather than down to the world, we avoid these adverse consequences. As James tells us, our soul/life is preserved when we set aside the evil that is within us, and replace it with God's word (James 1:14-15,21).

The developing theme here is the distinction between one's being *subjected* to evil versus one's participating with evil, which involves our choice. Returning in this sentence to render "shamar" as *keep*, the psalm appeals to ideas of protection and deliverance from the domination of evil over one's soul, that is over their entire being— body, mind, character, and spirit. We enjoy this protection when we keep our eyes upward, trusting in God and His ways, as indicated by this psalm.

Jesus Himself was subjected to the worst that evil could inflict on a human being (Philippians 2:8), even the attempt to destroy His familial relationship to the Father through compromise with sin (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). Yet, though *subjected* to evil, He did not *participate* with evil (Hebrews 4:15). Further, Jesus had no vengeful retribution, asking His Father to forgive those who had wronged Him (Luke 23:34). In all ways, Jesus did only that which was God's will (John 5:19,30; Luke 22:42).

Indeed, Jesus prayed to be spared what He knew would be a devastating ordeal, the cross. Even so His prayer concluded with submission to the sovereign will of the Father, which Jesus knew to be the purest expression of love, in that God always has at heart the best interest of His people (Jeremiah 29:11; Luke 22:41-42; John 3:16). As a result, God the Father not only kept Jesus' soul, but exalted Him:

"For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."
(Philippians 2:9-11)

The New Testament is adamant that when we follow the same path of dependence upon God and His ways, we will likewise be exalted (1 Peter 5:6; Romans 8:17b).

The psalmist is thoroughly convinced that *The Lord will guard* each soul seeking His will and help. For the last time in the psalm, the author leans on the Hebrew word "shamar" (keep)—here rendered in verbal form, *will guard*—in order to give contextual color to the Lord's committed vigilance and care for those who are created in His image (Genesis 1:26-27) and walking in His ways. With lyrical flare every aspect of life is encompassed by the words *your going out and your coming in*. The day to day, the routine, the extraordinary events of life; all these occur while the Lord is on guard.

Though humans are imperfect beings prone to error, we will not be abandoned by God Who is faithful in all things (Lamentations 3:22-23; 2 Timothy 2:13). Those who sincerely seek the Lord will not become identified with nor experience the adverse consequence of life-and-soul-destroying evil. Regardless of injustices suffered, losses endured, heartbreaks experienced—along with all the other challenges we mortals may face in our imperfect lives—the Lord Yahweh will ensure redemption and deliverance for all who are in His care.

The Apostle Paul expressed this reality in his letter to the Romans: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Biblical Text

⁵ The Lord is your keeper;

The Lord is your shade on your right hand.

⁶ The sun will not smite you by day,

Nor the moon by night.

⁷ The Lord will protect you from all evil;

He will keep your soul.

⁸ The Lord will guard your going out and your coming in

From this time forth and forever.