



HG225: God's Promise Of: **Protection**

Psalm 121:1-7

Home Group Study Notes

11 July 2021 - Rachel Orford



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group
with you, along with any previous notes and other
resources which might be helpful for your discussions.*



Welcome (10 mins) *Ice Breaker*

How did you pass the time on long journeys when you were a child? Did you play games? Sing songs? Do you still do this now?



Looking Upwards (10 mins) *Worship*

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



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A Blessing For Our Journey

I imagine we all feel like we could do with a blessing at the moment. We thought that we would be free from all lockdown restrictions by now and it feels like we are so near - but not quite there - and we are all just fed up with it now. Well this psalm is for all of us, because it is literally a real blessing. One of things that I know is on a lot of people's minds and has been for much of lockdown is when can we safely go on holiday? Foreign travel in particular is the big uncertainty because it doesn't just depend on how we are doing here in this country. Our destination country has to be comfortable about welcoming visitors too. And what about getting back? But if you are lucky enough to be travelling any time soon then this psalm is an especially good one for you.

It is one of the 15 psalms (Psalms 120 - 134) called the Songs of the Ascents - sometimes also referred to as gradual psalms, the Songs of Degrees, Songs of Steps or Pilgrim Songs. Most scholars agree that they are likely to have been sung by travellers as they "ascended" on the road towards Jerusalem for one of the three pilgrim festivals. The first one (Psalm 120) which precedes our psalm is actually a lament and begins "I call on the Lord in may distress". It is asking for deliverance from the evil and deceit in the place they are about to leave, and I suppose that this feeling is an easy one to identify with in a culture which is often dishonest and sometimes hostile to people who are trying to seek a better way of living. The one which follows it though (Psalm 122) is celebratory song as it mark their safe arrival - "Our feet are standing in your gates O Jerusalem" it says and the ones which follow after that would have been read or sung during the journey to encourage the pilgrims on their way. They focus on various aspects of God's character; his mercy, forgiveness, power, deliverance and firm foundation for example.

But Psalm 121 is a blessing specifically for someone about to set out on a journey. It reads almost like a liturgy for a leaving ceremony - promising protection while travelling. In fact David Livingstone is said to have read Psalm 121 with his father and his sister the night before he set out for Africa in 1840 and they regularly prayed it whilst he was on his travels to reassure them that he was safe in God's hands.

I would probably have said, even before the beginning of this home group series, that this psalm was my favourite and there are a few reasons for this. One of the main ones is that I know all the words; this and Psalm 23 are the only two that I know by heart and this dates way back to when was a child. I went to a very traditional prep school and every school day began with assembly which we called Prayers. During Prayers we would always sing a hymn and a psalm - not just the choir - everyone would sing the psalm. And psalm 121 (which luckily was one we sung quite often) was my out and out favourite. Mainly because it was short - and therefore easy to learn. Which meant that I was able to look very holy and pious by singing it without even opening my book and I thought this was very impressive. It also had quite a nice tune. I am sure that there are several versions, but the one we sung was quite tuneful and memorable, so I didn't have to look at the notes either. Also I loved the imagery in it. The opening two verses, had me convinced that God lived up a hill.

Unlike the bible translation which we read from, the one we used at school (the King James Version) doesn't have any punctuation. The first two verses read "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help". It then goes on to say that my help comes "even from the Lord" and so my logical 8 year old mind worked out that the Lord must therefore live in the hills. Of course, it is now commonly agreed that the psalm in fact opens with a statement (I lift my eyes to the hills) followed by a question (where does my help come from?)

In the case of the Old Testament pilgrims the hills would have been the distant hills of Jerusalem, but it could easily mean the final destination of any journey and the anticipation of arrival. And this imagery of a journey is a common metaphor in life isn't it? In fact our whole lives are often seen as a journey, with different stages, detours along the way, hazards and difficult terrain to be negotiated as well as other travellers being met on the way. So it is perfectly natural for the traveller knowing that things are probably not always going to go smoothly to ask "Where does my help come from?" Who will protect me?

God's Help and Protection

We all need help on our journey and yet how often do we call upon God first? We are all good at trying to fix the problem first by ourselves - or at least asking other people.

There's a story of a man who was out walking on a mountain, but lost his step and went off the edge. Fortunately a bush that was growing wild below caught him in his fall. In desperation he cried out, "Help! Is there anyone there." A few moments later, the man heard a voice saying "Don't worry, it's me God. I am here to help you - my right hand is here to protect you, so just step off and I will catch you. You won't fall". The man was amazed to hear the voice, and wasn't sure what to do so, thinking that he was just imagining things he cried out for help again. The voice of God answered again, reassuring him that if he would just trust in Him and roll off the bush, God would pick him up and bring him to safe ground. There was a slight pause....and then the man shouted out, "Is there anyone else who could help me?"

Is this not often a very accurate picture of our lives? Where are we willing to go to for our help? Where does our help come from? Why do we find it so hard to prioritise God as our "go to" helper and trust in him, despite all his assurances? Jesus tells us time and again that if we have faith we can rely on God. In Matthew 21:22 he says "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." and John 16:23 "Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."

Well the psalmist at least is very clear about this and answers his own question. "My help comes from the Lord, the maker of Heaven and Earth." Not from nature, or anything or anyone in it - not from the hills, but from the one who made them. This puts all of the other sources of help that we might have considered into perspective doesn't it? We are told right in the very first verse of the very first chapter of the very first book of scripture - "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth." He made all of this. He caused all of this to happen. I can't even fix the leaky tap in our kitchen. How on earth do I imagine I could navigate my way through life without the help of the one who created it? We can be sure - God really has got this.

So the blessing begins with the next verse. This is where God's promises start. From now on, the language of the song changes from Me ("my eyes" and "my help") to being all about You. So far it has been the traveller or pilgrim who's been speaking, but we can now imagine the rest of the verses being said by someone else - possibly even a priest or someone acting in this role.

Another reason why I loved this psalm is that it was my dad's favourite too. My dad was a man of great faith and in fact this was one of his favourite passages in scripture. One of the reasons I have never had difficulty understanding the idea of God as a loving and nurturing father is simply that I had such good frame of reference from my own dad - a loving and protective parent who always made me feel safe and cared for.

But I know that this is not everyone's experience and I can imagine that if someone's actual father figure has been cold or distant or even cruel, it is not inconceivable that their view of God may be coloured in this way too - perhaps seeing him as one who punishes, judges or withholds favours and is to be feared. If this is the case, then they really could do no better than to read psalm 121, which sets out the promises of a loving and protective father who will always help you to feel safe. So - let's look at what these promises are. What are the ways in which God will protect us?

A Firm Foundation

Right off we are told "He will not let your foot slip." To me - a slip of the foot sounds like just that - a slip up, a mistake or an accident. So will God will prevent us from making mistakes? Of course we know that this is simply not true. God does not control us or the world in this way. We make our own choices (not always the right ones) and hopefully learn from our mistakes. Accidents happen. The KJV has slightly different words. It says "He will not suffer thy foot to be moved." In other words our feet are on solid ground and he will make sure that they stay that way - we have a firm foundation. Unlike the original pilgrims, we are able to read these words from a New Testament perspective, with the additional assurance of knowing that Jesus, the cornerstone, has grounded us firmly in the protection of God.

Paul reminds us many time in his letters of this standing which we have as believers in Christ. In Romans 5:2 he tells us that "...we have gained access by faith [in Jesus] in to this grace in which we now stand." In Ephesians 6 he tells us emphatically that we should "put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes you will be able to stand your ground." As long as we wear this armour, this shield offered by our acceptance of Christ - we are on firm ground. No mistakes, no accidents and no slip ups will change this. They will happen and when they do, we should be able to weather them with confidence because of this firm foundation.

God Never Sleeps On The Job

And God will not fall asleep on the job of protecting us. He will neither "slumber nor sleep." He won't even nod off for a minute or two like we do in dull meetings. Everything is of vital importance to God and he doesn't need to sleep. He is not like us, or apparently like the pagan gods who shared human characteristics. Remember the scene in 1 Kings 18 when Elijah challenges the worshippers of Baal to prove the superior power of their god over the God of Israel by asking him to spontaneously ignite the sacrificial bull they had prepared for their altar. When nothing happens despite their shouting all morning, Elijah taunts them that "Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." Not so our God, whose fire fell immediately on the altar he had prepared. God was not asleep when Elijah called on him and he will not be asleep when we need him either. And because God's watchful eye is always open looking with love and care upon His people, we don't have to be constantly checking and worrying and going back over things and wearing ourselves out. (Note to Self!)

God Is With Us ... Wherever We Go

He is our shade at our right hand. Often when we are worried about things we can only see what is ahead of us and forget that God accompanies us every step of the way. In Psalm139 (another favourite of mine) David asks the question "Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?...If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me. Your right hand will hold me fast." It is maybe a bit of a daunting concept to think that God is there all the time - that he sees whatever we do. But just think - when that important test is looming or the day of that operation comes we should never forget that God is beside us. And he is with us now "so that the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night." God protects us at all times - both day and night and anytime in between.

... Whatever Happens

The Lord will keep you from all harm. Doesn't this also sound a bit like God will stop bad things from happening to us? Well we know, don't we that this isn't true. This last year and a half in itself has given us plenty of evidence that bad things happen and the psalms themselves are full of calamity. People get sick, loved ones die, we lose jobs and have family crises.

Once again though the KJV uses different words. It says “The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil”. Preserving means to keep something in its original state. In other words God will keep us in our true and original state as his children no matter what might happen. And they can be bad things. It is not teaching us that we will never have problems or trouble in our lives, but rather that evil will never win out - that nothing can thwart God’s purpose for our lives and nothing can separate us from God’s love. “He will preserve thy soul” it continues and again, we can read this from a new Testament perspective, knowing that this “preservation” continues forever. It’s not just now, on our life’s journey. We have this promise, that because of Jesus, we will always be in his kingdom, preserved in this state of grace, freely given. In the very last verse of Matthew’s gospel Jesus says “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

... Forever

God will watch over our coming and going which means not only when we leave our houses, or when we return from journeys, but from the time we come into this life to the time we leave it and even beyond. In fact although the psalm is often read to provide words of comfort at funerals, it is also common for Jewish families to post Psalm 121 in the delivery room when children are born, or in a child’s own room. Because of its association with life’s journey, the words of blessing remind us of God’s protection from its beginning to its end.

This psalm makes a life enhancing promise - that God will be our protector, our keeper, preserver, our watchman (depending on the translation you are reading) always, wherever we might go - there is no getting away from it. Bad things will continue to happen, but God has got our backs! We are preserved by our faith in Him in the most profound ways - forever.

Emmanuel Text 2021

WE HAVE
this **HOPE**
as an anchor
for the
SOUL
firm and secure.
Hebrews 6:19

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Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1. The traveller in v1 is looking to the hills of Jerusalem as he sets out. What milestones on your life's journey that you have your sights set on? Can you see difficulties reaching them? How does it make a difference knowing that you have God as your protector?

2. In times of trouble, do you call on God first or someone else? Why do you think we might not always seek God first?

3. How does it feel knowing that God is always at your right hand?

4. In what ways do you think that our reading of the psalm is different from the original travellers, now that we have the perspective of the New Testament?

5. At what times in your life have you been particularly aware that your feet are on solid ground because of your faith? How has this helped you?

6. What other passages in scripture might you call upon to bless you or remind you of God's protection?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards (15 mins) *Caring For Each Other*

Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) *Concern For Others*

Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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