

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Online Bible Study Starter

**Psalm 121 – Where will my help come from?**

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
from where will my help come?*

From ancient times, people have often looked to earth's high places for divine help, for something above the level of human life. We want to be lifted out of trouble and distress, raised above routine and drudgery, elevated in our understandings of life and self.

*My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.*

This simple, two-part identification of the one who will help speaks volumes and could be expounded for volumes. Yahweh (the LORD) is the name of Israel's covenant God, the one who sent Moses and brought the enslaved children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt. Yahweh is their savior, redeemer God who made covenant with Israel at Sinai, naming Israel as "my people" and taking the self-designation of "your God." So, this God and no other – the one to be trusted and obeyed in trust rather than in guilty fear or greedy desire – is the God "who made heaven and earth." The Redeemer is also the Creator. The One who loves me is the same One who created all things. The personal and the cosmic are joined in trust.

The Maker is no impersonal force, no "unmoved Mover," no dispassionate "First Cause." It's like learning from Jesus that the divine Judge who has the authority to cast body and soul into the fire is the very Father who cares about the lone sparrow that falls from its flight and, Jesus assures us ironically (I think with a smile), cares far more for each of us. *Don't worry, you are worth more than many sparrows.* (Matthew 10:31)

Neither personal life nor history will end in futility. The Creator is also our Redeemer. The creation is loved. And so are you and I.

*He will not let your foot be moved;  
he who keeps you will not slumber.  
He who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

*The LORD is your keeper;  
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.  
The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.*

The first image comes from combat: to have your foot moved is to be thrown off balance or made to slip. Another psalmist thanks God for setting his enemies' feet on slippery places. Firm ground was a great advantage in combat; it is also a great advantage in life.

The psalm identifies Yahweh as guardian or keeper (either translation is right) of Israel and of the individual, the people and the person. This guardian does not doze off or slumber but is awake and vigilant. No enemy can sneak up, no danger surprise.

The sun and moon were rulers of the day and night in the world-view of ancient peoples and the religions of Israel's neighbors. Notice that in the first chapter of Genesis, in the creation of heaven and earth, the sun and moon are not named. After having called light into being and separated the day from the night, God finally (on the fourth day!) gets around to setting two lamps in the heaven, the greater to rule the day and the lesser to run the night. These lamps are not deities; they do not even have to be named. So, in Psalm 121, the person who looks to Yahweh for help and safety does not need to fear the ruler of the day or the ruler of the night. There are dangers in both day and night, but the covenant God, who is also the Creator, will stand guard.

Paul (Romans 8) asks who can separate us from the love of Christ, then names life and death, today and tomorrow, earthly and heavenly powers, but negates them all. Nothing in all creation can take us away from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

*The LORD will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.  
The LORD will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and forevermore.*

The Hebrew word translated "your life" used to be translated "your soul." Neither translation is completely wrong or quite right. The Old Testament has no word for "soul" as the concept would develop in Greek philosophy — as something divine and immortal imprisoned within the mortal flesh of the body. That idea is unbiblical. We have no immortal part. Life is completely and always God's gracious gift to us. The Hebrew word is *nephesh*, and it is related to the throat or gullet and so to the creature that receives life from the breath of God (Genesis 2, "And the LORD breathed into the human the breath of life, and the human became a living *nephesh*).

When the psalmists speak to their own "souls," they are speaking to their deepest selves, their very selves. "Bless the LORD, O my soul (*nephesh*)" is paralleled in Psalm 103 in the next line, "and all that is within me, bless his holy name." So "all that is within me" corresponds to the self/soul in the first line.

*Nephesh* can also be understood as "life." When the breath of God is withdrawn, the creature dies. Life is a very personal gift, received with each breath.

So, “he will keep your life” should be understood as promising more than merely, “God will keep you alive.” Yahweh God will guard and keep your very self, the you that is deeply and personally you. In the Bible, life is not about existence; it is about love – God’s steadfast, covenant love and God’s faithfulness. The human being is not immortal but loved. Therefore we have life, and therefore we have hope.

Resurrection is not immortality or the release of something divine/immortal within us. It is the triumph of God’s love for us. So, the person and not just the missing chunk of immortal stuff is what matters. Early in our confirmation course, we talk about the word “who” and the personal, relational identity for which it speaks. “Who are you?” is a very different question from “What are you?” I tell the kids that, until they understand the importance of the word “who,” they will not understand the resurrection. It’s not about existence; it’s about love. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Isaiah 43:1b NRSV)

Because God loves and because the Redeemer God is also the Creator God, we will be kept safe in our going out and our coming in. This assurance refers, of course, to the comings and goings of daily life. “Have a safe trip,” we say. And “Come back to me safe and sound.” The same assurance, based upon God’s faithful covenant love, is carried forward by the promise of resurrection to include the last “going out” of all mortal creatures: “and your coming in.” There is nothing immortal in us, but love holds. “Because I live, you will live also.” (John 14:19b)