

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. 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 forth and forevermore.

Psalm 121:1-8

In 1998 Genelle Guzman McMillan wanted a change from her home in Trinidad, so she moved to New York. In order to stay in New York, McMillan knew she needed to get a good, steady job. And so she couldn't believe it when she was hired at one of the World Trade Towers and was excited as she began her first day there on January 19, 2001. She made many friends through work, including Roger, her live-in boyfriend - and they spent each weekend partying together. On the morning of September 11, 2001 she, as always, went to her job on the 64th floor. Not long after she arrived she and her coworkers heard a loud crash and the building moved - and they stayed on the 64th floor until it became known what had happened. It was then Genelle and a co-worker started down one of the stairwells and just as they got to the 13th floor, the whole building collapsed on top of her. Amazingly, when all the dust was settled, while injured, she was still alive. Unable to move, covered and pinned down by steel and concrete, Genelle began to rethink the life she had been living without God. Twenty-seven hours after the building collapsed, she heard a voice and was able to push her hand through a few inches of rubble above her head, where she felt someone's warm hand close around hers. Then she heard a male voice say to her: "I've got you, Genelle. My name is Paul. You're going to be okay. They're going to get you out soon." She then heard other voices and sirens and then a light. "They're here," Paul said. "I'm going to go and let them do their jobs and get you out." Genelle was the last survivor pulled from the World Trade Center. This event changed her life. There were three things she promised God she would do as soon as she got out of the hospital: get baptized, marry her boyfriend Roger, and find Paul, the one who first held her hand. On November 7, after 6 weeks in the hospital, 4 surgeries and hours of physical therapy and rehabilitation, Genelle kept two promises she made while trapped under the rubble. She and Roger got married at City Hall; that same evening Genelle was baptized in Jesus name. But Paul? She never found him. No one knew him; no one had ever heard of him. So she called her pastor and they discussed another Paul, who had also fought against God until he saw the light.

While very few of us will ever go through a tragic disaster such as Genelle McMillan on 9/11, most of us many will face times in life when we find ourselves in situations where we desperately don't know what to do or where to turn for help. This is even a reality for us in Christ. Though we say we believe that God is sovereign over everything, we still find ourselves stunned and lost in the midst of personal tragic disasters. Act 17:28 tells us *“In him we live and move and have our being”* but until we leave this earth - our inherent fallen nature will often cause us to wander away from God when faced with trials and struggles. But God's Word tells us we should not do so. Psalm 9:9: *“The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.”* Psalm 32:7: *“You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.”* Psalm 34:4-6: *“I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.”*

Our text for today opens with the words: *“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?”* These are the words of God's people who have gone before us. But they are not spoken in the midst of painful confusion, but rather they are a profession of faith in God in the midst of the struggle of life. These words are a *“song”* of worship, a *“song”* that was sang as God's people gathered together to worship Him. Specifically, this is a *“Song of Ascents”* which is one the 15 Songs of Ascents (120-134) that were sang as the people of God gathered together to celebrate the three annual feasts.

These feasts - the Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tents/Booths - were always held in Jerusalem, which was built on the highest point in Israel, the high ground of Mount Moriah – which meant getting to Jerusalem from any direction meant that you had to travel *up* - “ascend” - to get there. These are the “songs” God’s people sang as they “ascended” to worship Him in the City of God.

Psalm 121 is the second of the “*Songs of Ascents*”. The first is Psalm 120, which sets the stage for the others. It begins with the phrase “*In my distress*” and ends with the word “*war.*” In between those words the psalmist confesses his constant struggle against the spirit of the world in his own heart. Eugene Peterson defines the spirit of our fallen world as, “an atmosphere, a mood, a spiritual atmosphere in which we live that erodes faith, dissipates hope, and corrupts love, but it is hard to put your finger on what is wrong.” This first Song of Ascent confesses that *before we can say yes to God, we must first say no to the world.* Again, Eugene Peterson speaks of this when he says that, “a person has to get fed up with the ways of the world before he, before she, acquires an appetite for the world of God’s grace.” The first song that was sang as God’s people leaned forward in their uphill walk toward God, a song of worshipping the grace of God we receive when we repent, when we turn back to God. In other words confessing our need to turn back to God is the starting point that leads us upward towards God!

In the following Song of Ascent (Psalm 121) the psalmist asks three questions in his upwards journey towards God. The first is the question, in the context of having recognized his constant failure to live for God in our fallen, sinful world, asks: “*From where does my help come?*” Of course, we already know that the answer is God. But that still leaves two more questions. And so the second questions then asks: “Can God really help me?” Just saying God can help us doesn’t mean much if God cannot really help us. And the third of the three questions asks: “If God can really help me - what can God’s do for me”. In other words – “Is God’s help the kind of help I really need?” This morning, in this song of worship, the Psalmist answers those three questions – and then worships the LORD, our Sovereign Helper.

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. Psalm 121:1-2

In the opening words of, “*I lift up my eyes to the hills*” the psalmist begins by describing what he is doing. He is on the road walking, hiking *upwards* toward Jerusalem, looking toward the mountainous region where the city lies. We can identify here in Port Alberni as Mount Arrowsmith, Klitza, Nimint and the Beaufort Range are within our eyesight. As the psalmist looks up and his “*eyes*” see “*hills*” and mountains he asks: “*From where does my help come?*” In the context of their day, they may have been look for military help, as wars were common throughout the Old Testament. They also may have been looking for help from the foreign gods, the pagan gods whose altars were built up on the hills. While we are not exactly sure what the psalmist was thinking here, but he clearly was concerned and anticipated some kind of trouble or struggle - and wondered: “*From where does my help come?*”

Where do we look when we need help? When troubles and struggles enter our lives we probably don’t look to the mountains around Port Alberni for help. When we need help, we tend to first look to our family or to our friends or to our colleagues or to professionals who are trained and experienced in dealing whatever trouble that we are struggling with. The real truth is, we most often we first look to *ourselves* – our wisdom, our skills, our experience, our opinions, our education, our intelligence. But as the psalmist is looking up at the hills wondering where his help will come from - it suddenly strikes him that his real help cannot not from any military force or other gods who are worshipped in this world. The only one who can really help him is “*the LORD who made heaven and earth*” who *made* the “*hills.*” We see the fullness of this in the psalmist’s use of the name “*the LORD*” - which is a translation of “*Yahweh*” which is the holy name of our sovereign God, who majestically created the universe and powerfully reigns over all – and who also intimately created us and faithfully loves us and cares for us.

In the midst of the struggle of life we can look to “*the hills*” for God’s “*help*” because “*the LORD*” is Creator “*the hills*” – and he sovereignly reigns over all of our personal struggles and tragic disasters, whether they be in heaven or on earth, and everything in between. “*From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*” The greatest help we need in life cannot come from our families, our friends, our colleagues or professionals. The greatest help we need in life does not come from ourselves. Our greatest help comes from “the LORD” God who mercifully and graciously created us and gave us life. Our help comes from the LORD, “*who made heaven and earth.*” This reality should change everything. If God is truly our helper, we should never get worried or angry bitter or afraid. This is what apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8:31 when he says, “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*” Now, we know this - and I am sure the psalmist knew this before he wrote these things. But this is not a matter of knowing God is our greatest help we need; this is about *remembering*.

The biggest issue we have as God’s people is forgetting. We see this in the psalmist; as he looks to the mountains for some other kind of help, he is *reminded* that God is his only help. We see this in the people of God during their exodus out of Egypt. Even though they were freed from slavery by great miracles of God and they experienced the manifest presence of God in their midst while they were traveling to a new home - they continued to grumble, complain and rebel, because they *forgot* who God was, what He had done and was doing, and what God promised them. And as a result, out of those who had originally left Egypt, only Joshua, Caleb and the Levites survived to see the promised land. We see this in our own lives too. We are just as self-focused as those who left Egypt and those who journeyed uphill towards the hills of Jerusalem, and we need to be reminded that God is our only help in this life.

Yes, if we were truly honest, we would admit that quite often we do forget God. It’s easy to do. We come to church on Sunday and God seems real and a lot of things seem to make sense. But then we go home. And then we go to work or to school or go about our everyday lives, where almost everything is based on assumptions and principles that are not of God. Once we are in the world pretty much everyone around us operates by different beliefs and standards. And again, if we were truly honest, we would confess that we are influenced, swayed and persuaded by these things because we still possess a fallen nature. And so quite often, God just fades into the background, and the troubles come, God is not the first one we look to when we need help. What comes to mind is our family or our friends or our position or our possessions - or our wisdom, experience, opinion, education, or intelligence. Sometimes, most often, we forget God when we need to remember Him the most. Where does our help come from? We need to *always be reminded* that our help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

Psalm 121:3-5

After asking the question: “*From where does my help come?*” the psalmist now asks: “Can God really help me?” Here the author changes perspective. Once he is reminded that his help comes from “*the LORD*” the language changes from first person to second person. Instead of talking about himself, he’s telling God’s people what is true for all of us. He’s answered the question *who* can help us. Now he is reassuring us how God is *capable* of helping us. He gives us a number of images to help us see that.

First of all, the psalmist introduces a highly significant word to us. The word “*keeps*” is the English translation of the Hebrew word “*shawmar*” which means “to keep, guard, watch over.” The word *shawmar* was used in a secular sense in reference to people who were watchman/guardians of a city. And *shawmar* was also used in a spiritual sense in reference to those who kept God’s commandments. And *shawmar* was used in reference to God’s protective keeping, guarding and watchcare over His people. In these eight verses, it is used six times. Nowhere else in Scripture is this one word used so frequently. Psalm 121 declares God is *shawmer* - our sovereign “*keeper*” – our guardian protector!

We read that God is our *shawmar* in three different ways. First, the psalmist tells us that God “*will not let your foot be moved.*” The literal translation of the Hebrew is: “He will not allow your foot to shake.” This same Hebrew word for the English word “*moved*” (shaking) is used in Numbers 13:23 when the Israelite scouts carried back massive bunches of grapes, pomegranates and figs from the Promised Land. The clusters of fruit were so huge and heavy that the two men who carried the fruit in on a pole between them were “*moved*” (shaking) as they walked. *The psalmist is telling us that God keeps, protects us from the weight of fear and anxiety when we look to Him for help.* When we look to God in the midst of our trials and struggles, we will find ourselves standing on solid ground. In Psalm 16:8 King David declares: “*I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.*”

Second, the psalmist tells us that God is our *shawmar* in that He will *always protect and watch over us* because never grows tired or falls asleep: “*He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*” This would have spoken to not only the psalmist, but to all who lived during the times of the Old Testament. Every city had watchman on duty whose sole purpose was to stand guard for the city. Watchman stood on high walls, looking out across the land to see if there was any danger approaching. The job wasn’t very complicated. But it was essential and because it was essential, there’s one thing a watchman could not do – and that was fall asleep. If a watchman did not stay awake, the entire city was in danger. But we need to sleep - because we are human and not God.

But God is our *shawmar* because, in the words of Isaiah 40:28: “*The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.*” God never gets tired or sleepy. Everything that we know of operates on a cycle of work and rest. We work during the day and sleep at night. The sun rises and then it sets. Trees produce leaves in the spring, they shrivel and fall off in the fall. Nothing in the created order operates at the same level all the time without deterioration. Everything either rests or gets tired or breaks down or needs to be replaced. But God is not in the created order. He is the Creator. He never gets tired. He never gets distracted. He doesn’t need coffee and energy drinks and caffeinated soft drinks to stay awake. God is infinite. He is aware of everything and awake every moment of every day. And He knows and watches everything that every person in our world thinks, says and does. *God keeps us - He protects us all the time.*

Third, the psalmist tells us that God is our *shawmar* in that “*The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.*” This picture is a bit foreign to us, but again would have made a great deal of sense to one who is walking toward Jerusalem. This is military image of an ancient Israelite warrior who is standing ready to do battle with his sword in his right hand. If an enemy were to sneak up on that warrior during a battle, he would do so on the warrior’s left side, the opposite side of the warrior’s sword. The left side was considered to be the weaker side, as it was the side warriors carried their shield. If a warrior saw a shadow on his left side, he usually assumed it would be the enemy. But God, the psalmist tells us, is our *shawmar*, our “*keeper.*” He is, “*your shade on your right hand.*” He comes up alongside us to help us, not to attack us. God protects our strong side and joins His strength with our strength to fight with Him. *God is our keeper - He protects us by empowering us with Himself.*

God is our keeper. God keeps us – He protects us from the weight of fear and anxiety when we look to Him for help; He protects us all the time; He protects us by empowering us with Himself. God is our *shawmar* in that while hard and difficult things do happen in life – God is sovereignly restraining much greater hard and difficult things than we could ever imagine. God is *keeping* much more evil at bay than we know about. We have no idea how many wildfires and earthquakes and tsunamis and car accidents and heart attacks and illnesses God has suppressed. We are unaware of the number of cancers that have never developed, how many children have not been kidnapped, how many airplanes have not crashed, how many wars have not started, how many times our lives and our families have been saved by the power and grace and mercy and love of God’s sovereign hand. God is our keeper!

And while we need to be reminded that God is our keeper, we also need to be reminded that we are not at the end of the story. You see, in God's world, no matter where we are in our lives right now, we cannot see how everything fits together. But we who know Jesus as our Lord and Savior - know how the story ends. It ends with bad things being changed into glorious things. It ends with no more pain and eternal joy. It ends with victory regardless of any failures we have experienced here on earth. At the heart of this story is the glorious work of God in *transforming sinful things meant for evil into good*. That's the surprise and the good news of the gospel. Jesus Christ, the son of God, took on the flesh of his creation and suffered death on a cross. Out of that evil came *incredible* good. Jesus' sacrifice offers new life for those who invite him into their hearts and lives. The darkest moment in history gave birth to the most brilliant light. And if God used the most terrible event in history for eternal good, He can do the same with less terrible events in our lives. God will keep us that way when look to Him for help.

The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. 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 forth and forevermore. Psalm 121:6-8

No longer does the psalmist try to convince us that God is our helper and keeper. Now he simply just proclaims it with stronger language. We've seen the psalmist ask where our help comes from and then remember that it comes from God. We've seen how God is divinely capable of being our helper in that He is our sovereign Keeper. Now we see what kind of help God, our sovereign keeper, will give us. We first read that, "*The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.*" In ancient times the sun and the moon were regarded as threats. The sun was clearly a threat in that it can do a lot of harm in a desert-like environment of the Middle East. The moon was a bit different in that it was believed to have powerful influence over mood and mental ability. Modern research gives some credence today that there is a lunar effect on everything on earth. The point the psalmist is making is that when we look to "*the LORD*" as our Helper and Keeper, He will protect us from physical, mental, emotional and spiritual harm – which covers everything here on earth. The writer builds on this statement by saying that explicitly: "*The LORD will keep you from ALL evil; he will keep your LIFE.*" The English word for "*life*" here is the Hebrew word for *soul*, which is the deepest, the most intimate part of our identity.

"The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore." In the days that this was written, cities were small and relatively safe from crime. It was when you *came into a city* and when you were *leaving a city* that you were most vulnerable. Traveling was dangerous. So we are told that God will watch over us when we are most vulnerable. The psalm concludes by saying this is true *forever* for those who embrace God as their Helper and Keeper. His protection starts now, and it will last forever. God is our helper and keeper from everything, when we are most vulnerable. In Job 10:12 Job told God: "*You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit.*"

In the early afternoon of Sunday, June 27, 1976 a white Air France Airbus lifted off the runway at the Athens International Airport. It banked west, then began the flight over the brilliant blue gulf of Corinth and on to the Aegean Sea. Suddenly, the serenity of the early moments of the flight was shattered by a scream as a man and a woman jumped to their feet, brandishing hand grenades and hand guns. The man stepped toward the pilot's cabin and ordered the plane taken to the airport at Entebbe, the capital of Uganda. The goal—to force Israel and four other nations to release fifty-three Palestinian terrorists from jail. The two made it clear that if the jailed terrorists were not freed, the 102 hostages on the plane would be slaughtered. Two days later, 2,000 miles away - military, political and spiritual leaders of Israel sat in the Cabinet Room of the Israeli Knesset. Weary and anxious, they once again faced another deadly threat against the people of God, as they had throughout their history. In hopes that this might end peaceably, they explored the possibility of negotiating a release without bloodshed. But in also knowing their enemies were hard-core terrorists, they made an all-out effort to come up with a military option, in knowing the terrorists would not negotiate honorably.

And so, a strike force was assembled on a military base in the Israeli desert to begin planning what was considered to be the impossible: a raid on Entebbe to save the hostages. Israel slipped secret agents into Uganda to analyze the situation, and as the information came in, Israeli intelligence learned the hostages were being kept and how they were being guarded. On June 30 and July 1, the terrorists released all non-Jewish passengers. This was good news, as fewer hostages increased the chances of success. The raiding party was selected and honed to a strike force specially trained in air-assault operations. They were among the finest para-military men in the world, led by thirty-year-old Col. Jonathan Netanyahu, who had moved to Israel from the United States when he was only two. Deep in the desert his team practiced the raid again and again, shaving the rescue time down to 45 minutes.

On the night of July 3rd the strike team and support forces boarded their planes and made their way from Israel to Ethiopia to Kenya and then to the airport in Entebbe, Uganda. As one of their cargo planes rolled to a stop in the darkness—as yet undetected because the airport was not being used—its huge tail ramp dropped and out came a long, black Mercedes Benz limousine, followed by two Land Rovers filled with Israeli commandos dressed in Palestinian uniforms. In the back of the limousine was bulky Israeli officer dressed like Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. The license plate on the limousine was identical to that of Amin’s car. As the party drove up to the terminal building, the Ugandan guards snapped to attention, allowing the Israeli commandos to get within a few yards of the building before the first shots were fired. It was then that bullets rained on the airport like hail in a thunderstorm.

Within twenty minutes, the shooting was over. The commandos ordered the hostages onto the planes that were waiting in takeoff position, engines still running. As the hostages ran to the planes, great fireballs erupted in the distance as Israeli commandos blew up the eleven parked MIG jets fighters that would have scrambled to intercept the escaping Israeli planes. As the hostages and commandos rushed onto a C-130, the rear hatch slammed shut. Fifty-three minutes after the raid began, the planes began moving into position for takeoff. The hostages were saved. But the rescue was not letter perfect. Sadly, three hostages lost their lives, but if not for the rescue, all of them may have died. Remarkably, only one Israeli commando lost his life—the assault-force commander, Col. Jonathan Netanyahu. A sniper in the control tower killed him with a bullet in the back. Netanyahu gave his life to save others.

There is another Jew, just about Colonel Netanyahu’s age, who also came from a far-away place, to sacrifice his life for the people of God. God the Father sent His son Jesus Christ into the world to die on a cross in our place for our sin, so we might be rescued from the deadly terrorism of sin that leads to eternal death, so we might be forgiven and redeemed and restored back to God - so we might know the joy of new life here on earth, and the joy of eternal life forever with God in the glory of heaven. Jesus is our *shawmar*. Jesus is our *keeper* – he protects us from the weight of fear and anxiety when we look to Him for help in times of trouble. In John 6:33 Jesus said: *“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”* Jesus is our *keeper* – he protects us all the time. In John 14:16 Jesus said: *“I will ask the Father, and he will give you a Helper, to be with you forever.”* Jesus is our *keeper* – he protects us by empowering us with Himself. In Acts 1:8 Jesus said: *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* While very few of us will ever go through a tragic disaster like 9/11 or an impossible rescue like the Raid on Entebbe we all will face times in life when we find ourselves in situations where we desperately don’t know what to do or where to turn for help. This will be our lot in life as Job 5:7 tells us: *“Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.”* In the midst of the sparks of the struggle and trials of life, we need to *remember* that in Jesus Christ - God is our Helper and Keeper! He is the LORD, our Sovereign Helper! In Romans 8:38-39 the apostle Paul declares: *“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Amen!

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