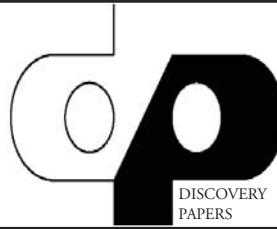


# GOD, OUR PROTECTOR

*SERIES: ASCEND*



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Psalm 121  
2nd Message  
Paul Taylor  
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Imagine that you were born a little pig. Not just a little pig, but the runt of the litter. What would your life be like? Would you have a life at all?

We're going to start this morning by talking about a scene from the movie *Charlotte's Web*. It's about a little pig, Wilbur, born the runt of the litter. He may be the runt of the litter, but he is a very special little pig. In fact, the whole movie is about just how special this pig is. In this scene Wilbur is about to be axed by the farmer because he is the eleventh pig when ten is the limit. Before he can kill him, the farmer's daughter, Fern, comes to his rescue. She proceeds to save Wilbur's life and promises to love him, feed him, and take care of him. It's a beautiful scene. So starts the story of Wilbur; a story about a vulnerable pig: the eleventh pig of a mother who can only support ten. But at every turn this piglet is protected. First by a little girl named Fern, then by a spider named Charlotte.

I think we can identify with the story of Wilbur. Some of us feel like the eleventh pig at times. We might feel like it if it comes down to it and God has to choose ten of his little pigs to take care of, then we are going to get the axe. Maybe you feel that right now. And so we ask ourselves, who is going to watch over us? Who is going to step in and rescue us? Who is going to be there to help?

This morning is the second week in our summer series that we are calling *Ascend*. After spending nine months working our way through the entire story that the Bible tells, the most natural response is simply to worship God. There is a collection of 15 Psalms (Psalms 120-134) that were traditionally sung by travelers on their way to Jerusalem for times of worship. They are called the Psalms of Ascent and they are our guide this summer as we move toward God in worship. This morning we're looking at the second of these Psalms, Psalm 121. But if we're going to worship God, there are some questions that we might ask before we're ready to worship.

There are probably three main things that we ask of God. In fact, it might be safe to say that across all religions throughout history, people have asked these three things of whatever god they think can answer them. The first is for blessings. We ask God to give us good things. Maybe it's rain for our crops or success for our business or good

grades in school. We want God to bless us.

The second is for deliverance. When bad things happen to us, we want someone to save us. When we get sick or addicted or bankrupt or rejected, we ask God to help us out of the situation. We ask for healing or forgiveness or restoration or justice. We want God to deliver us.

The third thing we ask for is protection. Not for good things to come our way and not being saved from the bad things that are happening, but protection from bad things that could happen. We ask for safe travels; we ask for good defenses from our enemies; we ask to be spared conflict and stress and problems. We want God to protect us.

Psalm 121 is all about the third question that people tend to ask God. It's not about blessing. It's not about deliverance. This psalm is about protection. It's about a God who is there to make sure bad things don't happen. It's about a little girl stepping in to protect the eleventh pig. It's about whether God really is up there protecting us. This Psalm tells us that **God is our Protector**.

That's a critical question to answer if we're going to be led into worship. I can't worship a God who won't protect me. I can't worship a God who doesn't know I exist. So if I'm going to be free to worship God, I need to know that he is watching over me. I need to know that he cares.

As we read through this psalm, we'll find the psalmist addressing three main questions. The first is the question that we've started with. Where does my help come from? Who is there that is going to help me? Who will protect me? Of course, the answer is God.

But that leaves two more questions. The second question is whether God is really capable of helping me. Just saying God will help me doesn't do much unless God can help me. The third question is what God's help looks like. Is it the kind of help that I want? Will it be enough?

We'll find that these questions are the same ones we have. Who is going to help me? Can he help me? And what does that help look like? Once those questions are answered, then we can turn to God and worship.

## Who Will Help Me?

Psalm 121 begins with some words that might be familiar to a lot of people. We often sing them and we'll do so later this morning. It's a great question and answer.

Psalm 121:1-2:

**<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.**

The psalm begins in the first person. The author is talking to us, describing what he is doing. We can imagine him standing outside, staff in hand. He's looking up at the hills surrounding him. The geography of Israel is actually pretty similar to what's around here. The highest peaks are a little over 3000 feet. So think about yourself standing in our area looking up to the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The psalmist is asking the question that we often ask: who will help me? Where will my protection come from? He looks up at the hills because he thinks he might find some help up there. He might be looking for some military help: looking to see if Egypt or some other ally is coming down the mountain with chariots to help him out.

Our psalmist might be thinking about the altars to foreign gods that are up on the hills. Altars to Baal and Asherah poles among others. He could be wondering which of the gods up there might be able to help him out. He is anticipating some kind of trouble and wondering which god can help him.

Where do you look when you need help? When you face a challenge, you probably don't look up at the Santa Cruz Mountains and hope to see horse chariots sweeping down to save the day. But there are other places you probably look.

Maybe you look at your family. You know that when the going gets tough, even if everyone else deserts you, your family will be there to support you.

Maybe you look at your bank account. You feel secure knowing that you have enough stored away if you lose your job.

Maybe you look at your friends. You have people in your life that you can ask for anything. You know that if you call them or text them or tweet them or whatever, they'll be right there to help you.

Maybe you look at your education, your experience, your network, or your intelligence. Maybe you look to all of these things at different times.

The psalmist is looking up at the hills wondering who is going to help him. And then it hits him. He remembers something really important. His help doesn't come from Egyptians on chariots coming down the hills. His help doesn't come from foreign gods who can be worshipped on the hills. His help comes from the One who made those hills. And not just those hills but all the hills and all the valleys. And not just all the hills and valleys but heaven as well. His help comes from the LORD—the one who made everything: heaven and earth and everything in between.

The same is true for us. Ultimately, our help doesn't come from our family or our money or our friends or our education. Our help comes from the God who gave us our family. The God who provided our money and our friends. Our help comes from the LORD—the Maker of heaven and earth.

That's huge. It changes everything. If God is our helper, then what do we have to worry about? The apostle Paul comes to this conclusion in Romans 8:31 when he says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Our helper is the One who made heaven and earth. Nothing beats that.

This probably isn't new information for any of us. I'm sure you've heard this before. I'm sure the psalmist had heard this before. This is not a fabulous insight that I've found in the Scripture because of my years of training. This is one of the most basic things to know about God. Our help comes from God. But sometimes it's not so much a matter of knowing as it a matter of remembering.

That's what the psalmist does. He wonders about some other kind of help and then remembers that his help comes from God. We're just like him. We need to remember too. We need to **Remember God is our Protector.**

One of our biggest problems is that we forget. We simply forget God. It's surprisingly easy to do. You come to church on Sunday and God seems real and everything makes sense. Or at least a lot of it makes sense. But then you go home. And you go to work. Or you go to school. And everything around you is based on a different set of assumptions. Everyone around you seems to operate based on different rules. So God just fades into the background. Then, when it's time to ask for help, of course God doesn't come to mind. What comes to mind is what we're surrounded by: money, friends, and family.

Sometimes we forget things when we need to remember them the most. We are basically very forgetful people. Think about all the things you have experienced in life. All the days you have lived. All the conversations you have had. All the classes you have sat through. All the sermons you have heard. How much do you really remember?

Worshipping God has to start with remembering God. That's where the psalmist starts. He asks the question that so many of us ask all the time. Who's going to help me out here? And then he remembers. Of course! God is going to help me out. Now I remember.

## Can God Help Me?

What happens next in this psalm is that the author changes perspective. He was wondering about his own help and then he remembered that his help comes from God. Now the language changes from first person to second person. Instead of talking about himself, he's telling other people what is true for them. He's answered the question who is there to help. Now he is reassuring them that God is capable of helping. He's talking about what makes God qualified to protect them.

It's easy to see that Egyptian chariots can help when your city is surrounded. It's easy to see that money can help when you need to buy food. It's easy to see that friends can help when you need emotional support. But can God help when you need it?

Psalm 121:3-5:

**<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;**

These verses are a great collection of images of God. There's a lot here to unpack.

First of all, we are introduced to a very important term here. The NIV has "he who watches over." That's a translation of the Hebrew word *shomer*.

That word is used to refer people who are the guardians or keepers of a city. It's used to refer to his people keeping his commandments. And it's used to refer to God keeping watch over his people. In these eight verses, it is used six times. Nowhere else in Scripture is this one word used so frequently. That's the big idea of this psalm—God is our

*shomer*. He is the one who watches over you.

In these several verses, the psalmist gives us three pictures of how God is capable of watching over us. First, he says that God will not let your foot slip. This literally reads, "He will not allow your foot a shaking." The same word is used in Numbers 17:23 when the Israelite scouts are carrying back huge fruit from the Promised Land. They are carrying this fruit on a pole between two men and it is so heavy that it shakes as they are walking. Can you see those huge grapes bouncing on a pole as two guys carry it?

That shaking is what doesn't happen to your foot when God watches over you. He won't allow that kind of fear or anxiety.

Then the psalmist twice says that God won't fall asleep on the job. This is really important. Imagine you're a watchman for a city. You're up on a high wall. You're looking out across the land to see if there is any danger approaching. Your job is not too complicated. But there's one thing you absolutely cannot do. You can't fall asleep. You have to stay awake. That's the basic requirement of the job. It's not complicated.

Have you ever tried to stay awake for a long time? I think my personal record is around 40 hours and that was in high school on a youth group trip. You know that feeling when you are so tired that you could fall asleep at any moment? Some of you are feeling that right now. My preaching tends to have that effect on people.

The psalmist says that God never has that feeling. He never gets sleepy. Can you imagine that? I don't think we realize how incredible it is that God doesn't need sleep. 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 blossom during the spring and rest in the winter. The grocery store stays open 24 hours a day but only because it cycles through different people.

Nothing in the created order operates at the same level all the time without rest and 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 stands above it. He never gets tired. He never gets distracted. We have coffee and energy drinks and Mountain Dew to keep us awake. God doesn't need it. God can focus on you with 100% of his energy and attention and still have 100% left to focus on the person sitting next to you. That's what being infinite means. He watches your every move and still

has enough left over for everyone else in the world. There is nothing else and no one else that can do that.

The final picture that the psalmist uses is to say that God is your shade at your right hand. This picture is a little hard to grasp at first. But once you do, it's cool. It's a military image. Imagine I'm an ancient Israelite warrior and I am standing ready with my sword. If someone wants to sneak up on me, they are going to come up on my left side. If I see a shadow on my left side, I'll turn and attack because it will probably be an enemy.

But if someone wants to help me, they'll come up on my right side. I'll see them coming because I'm already facing that way. I'll know they are a friend. And I'll be glad for their help.

That's what the psalmist is saying here. God is a shade at our right hand. He comes up alongside us to help us, not to attack us.

OK. So God is our *shomer*. He won't let our foot shake. He won't fall asleep. He comes alongside us on our right side. God is capable of helping us. In fact, he's the only one that really can help us. Everyone else has limitations. Everything else can fail at some point. Money runs out. Family gives up on you. Friends move away. But God doesn't sleep. He is at your right hand. God can be your helper.

Here's the problem. We don't always believe this. The first problem was that we forgot about God. Our second problem is that we don't really believe that God can be our protector. So if the solution to the first problem was to remember, the solution to this problem is to believe. **Believe that God is our Protector.**

There are lots of reasons that we don't believe this. But there's one big reason. A watchman's job is to watch the city and make sure bad things don't happen. That's what we're asking of God here: make sure bad things don't happen to us. We've just read that God doesn't ever fall asleep on the job. That he's always there.

But there's a problem. Sometimes the eleventh pig gets killed. Sometimes your child gets sick and dies. Sometimes you lose your job. Sometimes people with guns start shooting innocent people. This is the big problem.

If God is supposed to be our protector, why do bad things happen? It sure seems like God does fall asleep on the job. It even seems that way to some of the biblical authors. Here's what it says in Habakkuk.

Habakkuk 1:2-3:

**<sup>2</sup>How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? <sup>3</sup>Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.**

The prophet is asking this very question. If God is watching over me, why do bad things happen? Why doesn't he stop them?

This is a huge question. It's a good question and it's a hard question. But there are good answers. Not perfect answers, but good answers. Answers that are at least as good as any other system of belief or disbelief has. Because the truth is that no one has all the answers to why bad things happen.

But here are a few things to think about.

First of all, it's true that bad things happen. But we only know about the bad things that do happen. We have no idea what bad things don't happen. In 2 Thessalonians 2:7, Paul says, "the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way." God is perhaps restraining more evil than we know about. We have no idea how many earthquakes don't happen, how much cancer never develops, or how much evil is suppressed.

Second of all, we're not at the end of the story. That's one of the things that we saw as we worked our way through the story during our *EPIC* series. In the middle of the story, it's really hard to see how everything fits together. But we know how the story ends. It ends with bad things being done away with. It ends with no more tears.

That's why no one has a great answer to the question of why bad things happen. Because when people ask that question, they don't want an answer. When people ask that question, they want the bad things to stop. Knowing why they happen doesn't really help—they still happen. We don't really want to know why bad things happen, we want bad things to stop happening.

And that's exactly where the story of God's work in the world is headed. That's the answer that we want and that's the answer that God gives us.

So we don't know about what evil God is preventing in the world. We do know that the story ends with the end of evil. One final thought: at the heart of this story of God's

work in the world is the transformation of things meant for evil into good. That's the surprise and the good news of the gospel. Jesus Christ, the God-man who himself is life, took on the flesh of his creation and suffered death. Out of that evil came incredible good. The darkest moment in history gave birth to the most brilliant light.

That's the way our God works. He doesn't just hold evil back; it's not just that he will end evil at the end of time. Our God redeems evil. He is our *shomer*—our protector. But he is also our deliverer. He permits evil, at times, and redeems it.

Here's how author Randy Alcorn's book *If God is Good: Why do We Hurt?* puts it:

*If God used the most terrible event in history for eternal good, might he not use less terrible events in our lives for eternal good?*

God protects us from evil. He holds evil back. He will put an end to all evil. But in the meantime, he redeems evil. Given that evil exists, I think these are some of the best answers to the difficult question of why bad things happen.

Yes, sometimes it seems like God is sleeping. But he isn't. We are not called to understand everything. We are simply called to believe. The amazing truth is that belief is more powerful than understanding. Faith is stronger than knowledge.

## What kind of help?

That's why in the last few verses of this Psalm, the author doesn't try to convince us that God is our helper. He simply declares it, with stronger and stronger language. We've seen the psalmist ask where our help comes from and remember that it comes from God. We've seen how God is uniquely capable of being our helper. Now we're going to see what kind of help he gives. Here's the end of the psalm.

Psalm 121:6-8:

**<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.**

These last verses talk about what God is going to protect his people from. He starts out small and builds bigger and

bigger, up to a grand climax in the final verse.

First off he says that we won't be hurt by the sun during the day or the moon at night. Both the sun and the moon were regarded as threats in ancient times. Obviously the sun can do a lot of harm in a desert-like environment.

It's a little harder to imagine how the moon could do harm, but it helps to remember that the ancients thought of the moon as having powerful influence over mood and mental ability. Some thought that the moon was responsible for insanity. You can still see that since our word for lunatic comes from the root word for moon.

So God will protect us from physical harm and from mental and emotional harm. That's basically everything. The psalmist builds on this statement by saying that explicitly: "The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life." The word used for life there is the Hebrew word for soul—your deepest identity.

In the last verse, we read that the LORD will watch over our coming and going. In the ancient world, this is when you needed to be watched most carefully. The 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. Literally, "from now until eternity." This protection from God starts now and it will last forever. God is our helper from the sun, from the moon, from everything, when we are most vulnerable, from now until forever.

Notice how the psalmist doesn't try to convince us of this. The psalmist simply remembers that this is true for him and proclaims that it is true for you as well. This addresses another one of our problems. First, we forget God. Then we disbelieve God. Finally, we get confused because we can't put all the pieces together. And we stay in a state of confusion rather than resting in God as our helper and telling others who God is to us. That's the last step for this psalm: **Proclaim God as our Protector.**

I can't convince you that this is true. I can't prove it to you. All I can do is what the Scriptures do: declare it. I can proclaim this to be true and invite you into it to experience it for yourself. We follow the same path as the psalmist. We start by remembering God because it is so easy to forget. Then, we turn to those around us and declare to them just who this God is.

It's comforting to me that you almost never see anyone trying to prove God in the Bible. You don't have to defend God or explain him or cover up for anything that seems confusing. All you need to do—all you can do—is to declare what you know to be true about God. And here we are reminded that God really is our protector.

It helps me to remember that this is what I believe about God. This is what I believe, even when I can't believe it. It's what I believe, even when I question it. It's what I believe, even when I'm not comfortable proclaiming it. This is really what I believe.

What you might find is that the very act of proclaiming it does something to you as well. There is a reason this psalm was sung by travelers going up to worship. As we proclaim truth, we take it in and it sinks in deeper. It helps us to remember. It helps us to believe, which helps us to declare it and the process starts all over again.

## Conclusion

We started off this morning talking about a scene from the movie *Charlotte's Web*. It was a cute scene about a little girl who saved the life of a runt piglet. She was Wilbur's protector. But what I didn't show was what happened just after that scene. She walks into the kitchen and sits down to a plate of bacon.

She may have protected Wilbur, but not that pig. She only has protection enough for one little pig.

But God is our protector. He is our *shomer*. He watches over you and you and you and me. It's an easy thing to forget, but then we remember. Sometimes it seems that the Spirit reminds us at just the right time.

But after I remember, I have questions. Can this really be true? Is God capable of watching over me? What if he misses something? Will it be enough? What about the times that it seems like something slips through? Does that mean God didn't notice? Or is there something going on that I can't quite fathom? I have questions. But I believe. I choose to believe that God can help me. I believe that he is my *shomer*.

And finally, I am invited into the process that the psalmist models for me. Having remembered and believed,

I proclaim this to be true. Not just for me, but for you as well. God will watch over you. He will not let your foot shake like huge grapes on a pole. He will protect you from the heat of the sun and the insanity of the moon. He will protect you when you are at your most vulnerable. And he will do it forever.

This is what I believe and this is the truth that I proclaim. As you remember and believe, you can proclaim it too.

## Communion Introduction

The pilgrims traveling up to Jerusalem sang this song as a way to prepare for worship. They had a particular way of worshipping that God had given them and it involved going to the temple in Jerusalem. We have a different way of worshipping that Jesus gave us. It involves gathering around a table in a ceremonial meal. We call it communion. It's one of the highest acts of worship that Jesus gave us as the church.

We're going to celebrate that meal now. As we do, I'll invite you to reflect on this Psalm that we've just talked about. This meal actually helps us do all the things that we've talked about in this Psalm. This meal is given to us to help us remember. It's hard to forget Jesus when you're eating bread that represents his body and drinking juice that represents his blood.

This meal is given to us to help us believe. It tells the story of what we believe. It's a way that we can experience that belief in a physical encounter.

And by taking this meal, we proclaim our belief to others. If you're not sure what you believe about Jesus, then feel free to hold off on taking communion. This is an activity that proclaims to others—Jesus is who I trust. I trust God to be my protector. I trust Jesus as my Savior. If that's not a proclamation that you want to make, then don't. But if that's what you believe, then this is a chance to proclaim that to others.

Come to the table. Remember God. Believe God. Proclaim God.