

The LORD, Our Keeper

Lesson Text—Psalm 23; 121

Background Text—Psalm 23; 80; 121

Verses to Remember—Psalm 121:1-2

- (1) I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from?
- (2) My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 23 is one of the most familiar in the Bible. People of all walks of life and persuasion, whether Christian or not, have often taken much comfort in its words. Known commonly as “The Shepherd Psalm,” it is often called upon to offer healing and hope to the bereaved. But that is not the limit to which this beautiful text may be rightly applied. We can study Psalm 23 to learn about life and living, about wholehearted commitment to God, and about fostering healthy human relationships.

This lesson will also consider Psalm 121. In this second text, the psalmist deals with trust and security from the perspective of a relationship of faith with the LORD.

THE WORD—THE LORD, OUR SHEPHERD

Psalm 23:1-4



(1) The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. (2) He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, (3) he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. (4) Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

The image of the shepherd (v. 1) was a powerful symbol in the largely agrarian society of ancient Israel and in the Western world during the centuries prior to the industrial and technical revolutions. Even in our own era, the figure of the shepherd remains as a beloved symbol of care, protection, and security. The Hebrews used the shepherd’s image to affirm that God is

in control. Just as the shepherd has total charge over the flock, the psalmist testifies to the truth of God's care and protection over his "flock"—his people. The phrase, "I shall not be in want," affirms that God provides what is necessary for life. The psalmist knows that God's people can trust the LORD to meet their needs. Those in the Shepherd's care will lack nothing that is necessary to faithful living.

In verses 2-4, the psalmist describes how the LORD cares for the "flock." Verses 2 and 3 in particular celebrate God's personal concern for and care of the people. The pastoral scene of sheep grazing and resting without fear in lush fields, at peace next to fresh and quietly flowing waters, has inspired innumerable works of art, poetic refrains, literary references, and hymns. God's people are at rest within the shepherd's full provision. This rest is not laziness, but rather purposeful, active, and confident trust. The flock's relationship to the divine shepherd is redemptive and restorative. Each day is a new day to embrace God's will and to be made anew in God's image.

As they move from pasture to pasture, from one of life's moments to the next, God's people willingly follow his leadership (v. 3). There is no large sense of mystery regarding God's will: It is always that his people reflect the righteousness of God's own character. Consequently, God's leadership is along paths in life that lead to conclusions of right, to ends that are holy. Love for the shepherd means to seek to honor the LORD's name by keeping to the paths of righteousness in which they are led. Believers know that the LORD not only leads, but also walks by their side.

If one should regard the psalmist's faith as naive, or that it fails to deal seriously with the challenges of life, this verse defies that notion. The psalmist is not ignoring the difficulties of living. He fully acknowledges the sorrow and suffering that visit every person. It is, declares the psalmist, in the deepest sorrows and among life's greatest hazards that the shepherd's provision is most apparent. Those who are the LORD's may boldly go where others dare not, certain that God will not abandon his people to the wiles of evil.

The shepherd's presence is strength to oppose those who would harm the sheep. The shepherd's rod and staff are instruments of discipline for the sheep, but weapons against those who intend evil against the flock. For that reason, even God's correcting discipline is received as security, affirmation, and comfort by the sheep.

Then and Now

Many in our own day have heard Psalm 23 since their youth and can recite it from memory. Its particularly appealing declaration of faith and timeless perspective of hope has long been a source of strength and consolation to countless believers and non-believers alike. Christians know that it is more than the words of the psalm that are at work in this ageless comforting: it is grace and faith, gifts from the Father, that are touching people at the source of their greatest needs.

THE WORD—THE LORD, OUR HOST

Psalm 23:5-6



(5) You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. (6) Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The psalm introduces another image in verse 5 to express deep faith and trust in God. The shepherding God is also a glorious host who provides a feast for those in his care. The reality of God's sovereignty is emphasized by the provision of the celebration banquet, as well as in its timing and location. There is a sense of victory in the mood of the feast. The precious oils of anointing are poured generously over the head of the psalmist. Pouring fragrant oils over one's head was a special and luxurious ritual of hospitality, a sign of great esteem and favor.

The banquet's sweet wine, drawn from God's own vineyards, is so plentiful and lavished upon the psalmist in such

generous portions that the liquid brims and spills over the cup meant to hold it. Such is the ready generosity of God's blessings for those who are his people in faith. The call of God, the confirmation of covenant with God, and the providence and protection of God are all evidence of abundance rather than of lack.

The victory celebrated in this feast is declared in the midst of the psalmist's adversities (v. 4a) in the sight and hearing of his adversaries (v. 5a). This is a celebration of what is and what is yet to be—God is present; God's people will be redeemed and their faithfulness vindicated.

The final verse of Psalm 23 speaks of the believer's confidence in God. Wholehearted faith in the living God causes hope to swell and overflow into the psalmist's declaration of praise to the LORD. It emphasizes that God's caring reflects the nature of the LORD's own character and love: It is forever. The joyful future the psalmist envisions is "to dwell in the house of the LORD," to enjoy God's presence forever. In the present life, there is no greater joy than to worship God among the congregation. In the life that is to come, there will be no greater joy than to share eternity with the LORD and his redeemed.

Then and Now

At one time or another, most people struggle with their sense of self-worth. We are too often tempted to measure our worth by the economic standards of the marketplace: how much we possess and how much we can produce. Psalm 23 is a comforting reminder that God loves us just because of who we are—his own children, chosen in Christ. Consider again the words of Jesus in John 15:16-17 and give God praise.



Overflowing Cups

If you don't know what to be thankful for, be thankful for all the trouble you haven't had.
—Anonymous

THE WORD—THE LORD, OUR PROTECTOR

Psalm 121:1-8



(1) I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? (2) My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. (3) He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; (4) indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. (5) The LORD watches over you—the LORD is your shade at your right hand; (6) the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. (7) The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; (8) the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

Psalm 121 begins by asking a common question: How will I be helped in my troubles? The psalmist looked to the hills beyond ancient Jerusalem and saw enemy territory. The feeling of being surrounded by danger led to the cry, “Where does my help come from?” The psalmist voiced the people’s concern for security in the midst of uncertain times and perilous surroundings.

Having asked the question, the psalmist discloses the answer in verses 2-4. Help that is truly help comes directly from God, the Maker and Redeemer of heaven and earth. The idea behind the verb “watches over”(v. 7, “will keep you”) is used five times (vv. 3-5, 7, 8) in this hymn of trust to convey the reality of God’s presence and protection. God is the powerful keeper of the nation as well as an intimate companion to the individual believer. Not so much as one small stumble, one slip of the foot, escapes the vigilant notice of “he who watches over Israel.” The God of Israel was ever wakeful, watching constantly over his people.



A Hill Called Calvary

The Christian looks to the events on Calvary’s hill to answer the most important questions in life. Who I am, what I am to do, how I am to respond to others, and what is my eternal purpose, are all answered by the death of Jesus on that hill—and confirmed in his resurrection on the third day.

The provision of divine security to the believer is also portrayed by the image of God “at your right hand” (v. 5). The right side was the traditional Semitic side of favor. To say that God stands at one’s right side indicated that a person enjoyed the blessing of God’s favor. As a consequence, the psalmist offers the assurance that ultimately all threats to the believer’s well-being will fail. No mere part of creation, such as the sun or moon (v. 6)—associated by some with the concepts of punishment and curse—can undo God’s people. The LORD, able to protect Israel from celestial forces, will certainly prevail on behalf of his own against the onslaught of adversarial circumstances or evil foes.

These last two verses of Psalm 121 summarize the compelling faith indicated in verse 2. The question—“Where does my help come from?”—is answered. It is the LORD who responds to the believer’s concern for well-being and security. It is the LORD who deserves the believer’s trust, who calls on the believer to have faith. The Maker of heaven and earth also watches over life. His watching and caring do not end; they are forever.

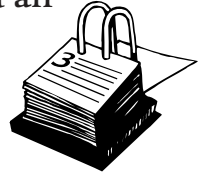
The faith of the psalmist is based upon a deep connection with God. Again and again, believers have experienced God as a source of constant help in time of trouble. The depth of this experience is found in the assurance that God brings us through dangers seen and unseen. I remember as a child the words of my parents in their fervent prayers. They prayed, “God, we thank you for bringing us through dangers seen and unseen.” They knew, like the psalmist and believers throughout the ages, that God is Protector.

Then and Now

When we are faced with danger on all sides, we can call on God and know that God is the source of help. That is the assurance of the psalmist. That is the faith to which Christians are called, confirmed in truth by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You can share that confidence this week with someone who is struggling with their sense of self-worth, and with fear about the future.

THIS WEEK IN PRAYER AND BIBLE STUDY *(June 17–22, 2002)*

Monday - Read Psalm 82:1-2. Many people spend an entire lifetime “searching” for God. The Bible describes God in clear, straightforward terms: He is the One God, sovereign, holy, just, and merciful. Pray that you may not only know God better today, but also share the joy of that knowledge with those who you encounter.



Tuesday - Read Psalm 82:3-4. When reading Psalm 82, the Christian will quickly recognize the values taught there as those that were proclaimed by Jesus Christ. The Lord also commanded that his disciples follow his example. Pray that your attitude will be one of compassion toward those who are vulnerable. Are you involved in a regular ministry of service to others?

Wednesday - Read Psalm 82:8. The psalmist boldly proclaims God’s sovereignty over all the nations. Do your spirit, attitude, and actions make bold declarations of the Lord’s rule over your life? Pray that your faith will continue to grow, that your attitude may be that of Christ’s disciple, and that your life will be a witness to God’s love for all.

Thursday - Read Psalm 113:5-6. This psalm asks a rhetorical question, “Who is like the Lord?” The answer is “No one!” The Apostle Paul affirmed God’s power in an ecstatic declaration of praise: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Ro 8:31b) Give thanks to God for his unique holiness and the gift of his grace in your life.

Friday - Read Psalm 113:7-9. The Old and New Testaments are consistent in their portrayal of God’s concern for the poor, the suffering, the lost, and the lonely. Christians have been called to be God’s hands at work in the world, helping to alleviate the hurt others experience and proclaiming the good news of the gospel. Pray that you soon will have opportunity to act on that good news.

Saturday - Read the *Uniform Study Guide* lesson dated Sunday, June 23, 2002. Pray especially for those who minister on a daily basis to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to visit prisoners, and to comfort the suffering.



Justice in the Land

It was primarily the prophets who sounded the charge that Israel's kings (e.g., Jer 22:13-19) and official leaders (e.g., Mic 3:1-12; cf. Jer 2:8; 5:31; 6:13-14; 8:8-12) had failed to live up to this high standard of justice. Certainly the prophetic condemnations focused on the breaking of the Law. This is especially clear in their attacks on such clearly prohibited offenses as bribery, idolatry, and murder (e.g., Jer 7:3-15). But it is also the case that the prophets concerned themselves with behavior which, under the letter of the law, may not have been illegal. They were particularly concerned, for example, with false attitudes that would permit one to observe faithfully the formalities of worship while at the same time plotting to defraud and cheat their neighbors (Amos 8:4-6; cf. 2:6-8; 5:10-12; Mic 3:9-12). Such behavior makes a mockery of justice (Amos 5:7; 6:12), and God will not abide it (cf. Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8). Gradually the prophets come to look toward the future when the ideal King will at last embody the true justice that is God's (Isa 11:1-4) and toward the new Jerusalem where programs of social reform will assure that justice can be achieved outside the Temple and not only within it (Ezek 45:8-17; 46:16-18) .

—Samuel E. Balentine, *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills, et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), p. 483.