

RUF Bible Study – Songs of Ascents
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Psalm 121 – Providence

*I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does my help come?
2 My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
3 He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
4 Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither
slumber nor sleep.
5 The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.
6 The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
7 The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
8 The LORD will keep your going out and your
coming in from this time forth and forevermore.*
English Standard Version

*I look up to the mountains;
Does my strength come from mountains?
No, my strength comes from God,
Who made heaven, and earth, and mountains.
He won't let you stumble,
Your Guardian God won't fall asleep.
Not on your life!
Israel's Guardian will never doze or sleep.
God's your Guardian,
Right at your side to protect you –
Shielding you from sunstroke,
Sheltering you from moonstroke.
God guards you from every evil,
He guards your very life.
He guards you when you leave and when you return,
He guards you now, he guards you always.*
The Message

In Psalm 120, we looked at repentance as the thing that get us going, or gets us back to going on the Christian road. We see our need, we recognize the lies and our need for the truth; we cry out for God's truth to be made real to us, and we begin our journey, for the first time or again, to worship God. We leave the tents of Meshech and Kedar and head toward Jerusalem. All is well.

But then we encounter something we did not expect. Many of us, once on the road, expect everything to be nice and easy, rosy and pleasing, happy and fun. So when it's not like that, when we do encounter difficulty, we panic. We blame other things. We balk at God's lack of care for us. We give up.

Psalm 121 is like a neighbor who comes over to check on you. He sees you, offers some advice, and you gain a perspective you didn't have before. You may be turning the lugnuts on your tires the wrong way. Or have forgotten that when the faucet is upside down, you have to reverse the spin to get it off. Or that your chainsaw blade needs to be oiled. Or that there's a red shirt in the load of whites.

I spent two hours putting up a gutter over the back door four days ago. It looks beautiful.

So the next day, brimming with confidence, I took on the front porch, which is twice as long. The Moyni came over to help, leaving his RUF studies behind for the day. So, with my previous day's expertise, we put up the gutter in about two hours. Then realized it was not going to work, so we took it down. Up again. Then we tested it. Down. Then I went to Lowes and bought some shims, which entailed a ton of work affixing them onto the facing of the porch. Then the gutters on..

It looked awful. Terrible. Pitiful. Pathetic. And didn't work. It didn't catch the water from the roof, which I'm thinking is an essential part of being a gutter.

Then Clint came over to drop something off, and played the role of the aforementioned neighbor. Clint helped me for 90 minutes to take down the shims and the gutters and put them back up again (like they were the second time). I told him he was the wind beneath my wings. Unfortunately, the gutters still weren't quite right.

However, Russ Edwards came into town for Clint's wedding and did yeoman's work to take the project into his hands – and the gutter went down for the fourth time and up for the fifth. With a little tweaking, I think it just may work.

Getting help from a neighbor, learning you're doing it wrong, can be a big relief so you can start doing it right. Eugene Peterson writes, "[Psalm 121] is a necessary sequel to the previous psalm, which gets us started on the Christian way. It put a name to the confused and bewildering feeling of alienation and distrust that made us dissatisfied and restless in a way of life that ignores or rejects God, and prodded us into repentance that renounces the "devil and his works" and affirms the way of faith in Jesus Christ." (38)²

Psalm 121 is a psalm about providence. What is providence?

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² All designations at the end of quotes that are from Peterson will merely have the page number from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1980, 2000).

It is proper to perhaps begin with the Westminster Catechisms, which are usually so helpful guiding our thoughts. The Shorter Catechism asks and answers the question this way:

Q11: What are God's works of providence?

A11: God's works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.

J.I. Packer in his *Concise Theology* puts the same things in his own words: "Of the evils that infect God's world (moral and spiritual perversity, waste of good, and the physical disorders and disruptions of a spoiled cosmos), it can summarily be said: God permits evil (Acts 14:16); he punishes evil with evil (Ps. 81:11-12, Rom. 1:26-32); he brings good out of evil (Gen. 50:20, Acts 2:23, 4:27-28, 13:27, 1 Cor. 2:7-8); he uses evil to test and discipline those he loves (Matt. 4:1-11, Heb. 12:4-14); and one day he will redeem his people from the power and presence of evil altogether (Rev. 21:27, 22:14-15)."³ "The doctrine of providence teaches Christians that they are never in the grip of blind forces (fortune, change, luck, fate); all that happens to them is divinely planned, and each event comes as a new summons to trust, obey and rejoice, knowing that all is for one's spiritual and eternal good."⁴

And RC Sproul writes: "The central point of the doctrine of providence is the stress on God's government of the universe. He rules his creation with absolute sovereignty and authority. He governs everything that comes to pass, from the greatest to the least. Nothing ever happens beyond the scope of his sovereign providential government. He makes the rain to fall and the sun to shine. He raises up kingdoms and brings them down. He numbers the hairs on our head and the days of our life."⁵

Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) wrote or said: "He has not led me so tenderly thus far to forsake me at the very gate of heaven."⁶ And I can remember Russ Taff, when he was with The Imperials, sing to me: "He didn't bring us this far to leave us; he didn't teach us to swim to let us drown."

Perhaps the quintessential source to see God's providence is the book of Esther, which is a book in the Bible filled to the brim with God's moving hand behind everything that happens, and yet God's name is never once mentioned.

We've now defined the doctrine of providence.

But do we have a theoretical definition, or a working definition?

We Look to God in our Trials

When we do encounter trials and troubles, what do we do? Where do we turn? The Bible never, ever says that we'll be shielded from all hard things. It does say that ultimately, no matter how hard the trials, that God will always be with us. That's a difference. The health and wealth gospel is not Biblical. There will be stubbed toes and bad things in the Christian life. "For many, the first great surprise of the Christian life is in the form of troubles we meet." We thought we were instantly headed to Eden or the New Jerusalem. But instead, we're on the journey, the road as pilgrims to worship God in all of fullness someday.

In a sense, we can say that the Christian life is taken under a Traveler's Advisory. Although there is an ultimate safety, things can go wrong along the way.

According to our psalm, and using its words:

He will not let your foot be moved; We can step on a loose stone and sprain his ankle – provisions for law and order can break down with dismaying ease.

The LORD is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day We can have a protracted exposure to a hot sun which burns and hurts us – disease can break through and invade our bodies.

Nor the moon by night. We can become emotionally ill – an accident can without warning interrupt our carefully laid plans.

We take precautions but we cannot guarantee safety. We can get lulled into even a false sense of safety, thinking that things are far more dangerous "over there" than they are here.⁷

So where do we turn when we get laid off? When we don't get the grade we want? When the sport, or practice, or art, or discipline, or conversation, or work is harder than we expected? When someone calls us something that's not nice? When our marriage is in trouble? When our kids wander off from the truth? When our orderly lives suddenly become disordered? When we get sick?

Where do you go? What are the options?

You could turn to substances to mask the pain. You could turn to experiences, to give you adrenaline rushes to make up for the numb feeling you have. You could turn to sleep to you won't have to face it in the morning. You could turn to a vacation, so you can get away from it all. You could turn to parties, cars, sex, money, career, golf, business – anything.

The Psalm says, *I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?*

It's tempting to look to things that appear to provide security, that look strong and helpful. What could be more secure and imposing than mountains? When you're in the mountains, you feel the weight of them around you. My kids haven't ever seen them yet, and I had thought to take them last week but didn't feel I had enough time. I want them to see the glory, strength, majesty and massiveness of the mountains. A fortress high in the mountains is seemingly impenetrable. That's why they build the castles there.

³ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 56.

⁴ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 56.

⁵ RC Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, 62

⁶ Found in *Treasury of David*, 1284

⁷ Case in point – Oklahoma City Murrah Building bombing. Who would have expected that?

But the indigenous Hebrew reader of the Psalms would have something else in mind to go along with this other idea. He or she would know that there is also danger in the mountains. Thieves can hide there. It's a fortress for good and for evil. The mountains are where Baal worship happened and the pagan shrines were built.

Help! "We lift our eyes to the mountains, and offers of help, instant and numerous, appear.... A look to the hills for help ends in disappointment. For all their majesty and beauty, for all their quiet strength and firmness, they are finally just hills. And for all their promises of safety against the perils of the road, for all the allurements of their priests and priestesses, they are all finally, lies. As Jeremiah put it: 'Truly the hills are a delusion, the orgies on the mountains.' (Jer. 3:23)" (41)

Our strategies for help, if not rooted in God, will fail. Charles Spurgeon writes, "Help comes to saints only from above. We look elsewhere in vain. Let us lift our eyes with hope, expectancy, desire and confidence. Satan will try to keep our eyes on sorrow, to disquiet and discourage us, but let us firmly resolve to look up. For there is good cheer for the eyes, and those who lift up their eyes to the eternal hills will soon have their hearts lifted. The purposes of God, the divine attributes, the immutable promises, the covenant, in which all things are ordered and sure, and providence, predestination, and the proved faithfulness of the Lord – these are the hills to which we must lift our eyes, for from these our help must come. It is our resolve that we will not be bandaged and blindfolded but will lift up our eyes."⁸ Commentator Derek Kidner adds, "The thought of this verse leaps beyond the hills to the universe; beyond the universe to its Maker. Here is a living help: primary, personal, wise, immeasurable."⁹

When We Look to God in Our Trials, What Do We Find?

So we don't look to the hills. Instead, we look not to nature but *the LORD, who made heaven and earth*. And what do we find there?

We find that this Creator is always awake: "*He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*"

And we find that this Creator is Lord over natural and supernatural forces: "*3 He will not let your foot be moved... 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.*"

When you put these aspects of God from this psalm together, you see what the psalmist means when he refers to God over and over again as *Shamar*. This word occurs six times and means "guard, protector, watchman, keeper." Peterson attempts to retain its force by repeating it as Guardian over and over again. God is our guardian, our protector, keeper, our watchman. God will keep us from all harm. God will watch over our lives. God will watch over our comings and goings. God will do all of that both now and forever.

Let's look at these briefly.

We find that this Creator/Guardian is always awake: "*He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*"

Having the hero fall asleep is a common fiction device to advance the action. Everyone gets tired. You can have a shotgun or special powers or an army behind you, but if you fall asleep, harm can be done. Bad things can happen. Good can go wrong. You're defenseless. But God is still at watch. He never sleeps. You cannot catch him napping.

"The Lord is closer than they, and His protection as refreshing as it is complete. It avails against the known and the unknown; perils of day and night; the most overpowering of forces and the most insidious."¹⁰

This gives us tremendous assurance. Alexander was once asked how he could sleep so soundly and securely in the midst of danger. He answered, "Parmenio watched."¹¹ How can we sleep soundly? God is our watchman.

We find that this Creator is Lord over natural and supernatural forces: "*3 He will not let your foot be moved... 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.*"

He is not surprised by mishaps, mistakes, wrongdoing or evil. "The promise of the psalm – and both Hebrews and Christians have always read it this way – is not that we shall never stub our toes but that no injury, no illness, no accident, no distress will have evil power over us, that is, will be able to separate us from God's purposes in us." (42) "No literature is more realistic and honest in facing the hard facts of life than the Bible. At no time is there the faintest suggestion that the life of faith exempts us from difficulties. What it promises is preservation from all the evil in them. (42)

"The Christian life is not a quiet escape to a garden where we can walk and talk uninterruptedly with our Lord, not a fantasy trip to a heavenly city where we can compare our blue ribbons and gold medals with those of others who have made it to the winners' circle. To suppose that, or to expect that, is to turn the nut the wrong way. The Christian life is going to God. In going

⁸Spurgeon, TOD, 1281

⁹Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1973), 431.

¹⁰Kidner, 432

¹¹*Dictionary of Illustrations*, 18731; found in TOD, 1282

to God Christians travel the same ground that everyone else walks on, breathe the same air, drink the same water, shop in the same stores, read the same newspapers, are citizens under the same governments, pay the same prices for groceries and gasoline, fear the same dangers, are subject to the same pressures, get the same distresses, are buried in the same ground.

The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God, we know we are accompanied by God, we know we are ruled by God; and therefore no matter what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will guard us from every evil, he guards our very life.” (44-45)

“The only serious mistake we can make when illness comes, when anxiety threatens, when conflict disturbs our relationships with others is to conclude that God has gotten bored looking after us and has shifted his attention to a more exciting Christian, or that God has become disgusted with our meandering obedience and decided to let us fend for ourselves for a while, or that God has gotten too busy fulfilling prophecy in the Middle East to take time now to sort out the complicated mess we have gotten ourselves into.” (43)

I think Peterson is expounding on Paul’s point when he writes in Romans 8:31-39

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 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.

We will encounter trials along the way of our pilgrimage. We will stumble along the way. Our foot may slip. We may have forgotten the SPF 40 and get sunburned. We may get dizzy and emotional. We may want to give up our pilgrimage to worship Christ. We may want to head back to the way we used to live. We may be tempted, tried in every way.

But may that never, ever, ever separate us from the love of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul writes more encouraging words: *13 No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.*

When we think of God’s providence in our lives, we could tell many stories. We could tell of how God brought Clint and Nicole Rule, just married yesterday together. We could tell the same of Aaron Payne and Kelly Gill, to be married this next weekend. Or of how Christ the King or RUF here at OU began.

But Psalm 121 makes me think of Ruth Elizabeth Serven.

I think most of you know Ruth’s story. Julie and I were living in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and were married on March 5, 1994. Ruth was scheduled to be born around Christmas of that year, a mere ten months after our wedding. We were nervous, but excited about her impending arrival, and bantered around names, never deciding on one since I refused to play fair and take it seriously so far ahead of time.

In September, Julie started having complications; she started bleeding, which was incredibly scary. The doctor seemed to ease the pain and stop the bleeding until one night, I awoke to a screaming wife. We rushed to the hospital and Julie cried, “I need to push,” the things the doctors and nurses least wanted to hear.

So they wheeled her out of the room into the ER, and I didn’t know what was happening.

Just a few moments later, she delivered Ruth Elizabeth Serven, named by Julie when asked, a name she’d been thinking about. I liked it and didn’t feel like it was quite the time to argue about it anyway. Ruth was born.

She weighed two pounds, five ounces. Two pounds, five ounces! Three months premature, barely making it. They life-flighted her to St. Francis Hospital in Tulsa, about a ninety minute drive away.

The craziness had just begun. We put ourselves together and drove to Tulsa. Thus began our three-month saga of scrubbing up to go into the neonatal unit, of fast food, of staying with the Roarks and at the Ronald McDonald house, of trying to figure out how much to be in Tulsa and how much to be in Stillwater, of watching and waiting Ruth develop when we couldn’t do anything for her at all.

We prayed. A lot. And we prayed Psalm 121 over and over. I wrote it on a piece of paper and put it in her warmer so she could see it, and we could be reminded of it every day. Over and over again, we prayed that God would watch over her, that he was her help, that when we went away, the nurses and doctors and *God* was still there protecting her and providing for her.

And of course, she made it. She came home with us that Christmas, and now is a healthy, almost eleven-year-old girl. Wow. God has been good to see us through.

One other thing happened through all of this – we changed too.

I had grown up in a different sort of theology than where I am now. And when Ruth was born prematurely, I had to ask the question, Why did this happen? The only answer I could think of was that it happened because I had done something wrong. Sin was the answer – my sin.

Someone suggested another strange possibility, one that I didn’t like at all. He posited that God is sovereign, and in control of everything in the whole world, and that he planned and ordained this for reasons that we may or may not ever know. That didn’t sit too well for me for quite some time. I wrestled with it. Hated it. Yelled at God about it.

And then gave in to it. How else could I pray? How else could I put my daughter in his hands? Wasn't I saying that he never slept nor slumbered? Was that true?

Psalm 121 and Ruth's birth started me on a path toward Reformed theology.

None of us want bad to happen in our lives. We don't seek it out. We don't embrace it. Yet it still comes. A theology that doesn't know what to do with the bad in our lives simply doesn't work.

Psalm 121 gives us perspective. It doesn't necessarily answer every question we have, but it gives us the context that someone is in control, and He has the answers.

Doug Seewald and I went to Wittenburg when we had Saturday off on our mission trip to Berlin. It was absolutely thrilling to see Luther's haunts, to see the documents he used and produced, to be in the very rooms he had been in. After this tour, we walked down the street (stopping for the best meal of the trip – eight small brats, kraut, potatoes and Luther beer) toward the church where he nailed his now-famous 95 theses. As we walked, we walked toward a tower, and on this tower you could see the words, Ein Feste Burg. A Mighty Fortress.

Doug and I decided to climb this tower, and we circled up the thousand or so steps, making it to the top seriously out of breath. And there we looked back down on the town we'd just walked through. We could see the town square, the Luther house, and even farther to bridges and farms we didn't know had been there. We gained a new perspective on the town, one we couldn't have on ground level. We learned things from a different point of view.

May Psalm 121 offer that to you today. May we trust in God's providence, believing that he is both sovereign and good, ordaining and governing all that comes to pass in our lives. May we trust in Christ.

A Mighty Fortress is Our God

1. A mighty fortress is our God,
A Bulwark never failing;
Our Helper He amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing;
For still our ancient Foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and pow'r are great,
And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

2. Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing;
Dost ask who that may be:
Christ Jesus it is He;
Lord Sabbaoth His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

3. And though this world with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us
We will not fear for God hath willed,
His truth to triumph through us
The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him
His rage we can endure,
For lo his doom is sure
One little word shall fell him

4. That Word above all earthly pow'r,
No thanks to them abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through Him who with us sideth;
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill;
God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever!

