

“The LORD Our Keeper”

Introduction: Over the last couple of Sundays we have been looking at psalms that come from the collection known as the “psalms of ascent.” There are fifteen of them, running from 120-134. We’ve said that they are prayers and songs that pilgrims would sing and pray to prepare their hearts on their way to Jerusalem for a major feast, and perhaps even on their way up the fifteen steps to the great Temple located there.

The first of these psalms (120) finds the pilgrim crying out to the LORD from a distant place in the midst of distressing circumstances, but by the next psalm (121) he seems to have found his footing and has identified, and maybe even experienced, the LORD as the single, all-sufficient source of his help.

In the psalm, there is a term our writer uses six times to describe this God - *samar*. It is translated in the NIV, from which Fred read, as “watch over.” And so the sermon title I initially sent Lisa was “The Lord Who Watches Over You.” But as I sat with this psalm for awhile this past week, I became attracted to the more literal translation of this term which is “keep” or “keeper.”

The NRSV and ESV both use this translation, and it reads this way (NRSV):

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will 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 He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
- ⁵ The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at 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 on and forevermore.

What I appreciate about keep or keeper, is that it moves us beyond just thinking about the LORD as the God who watches over us, observing us as we sojourn through this life, to the God who can and does actually respond to our needs. So let’s reflect on some of what is conveyed to us by this pilgrim. We can break it down to the identity of the source of our help – who is our keeper? – (vv. 1-2), followed by a description of the character of that keeper (vv. 3-8).

I. The Source of Our Help (vv. 1-2)

A. The pilgrim begins by posing a question about the source of his help as he gazes at the hills, or mountains around him. These could be the mountains that surround Jerusalem, as he draws close to his end goal of the city, or mountains he notices earlier in his journey. Either way, the mountains could represent the homes (“high places”) of the various local gods, or a place of safety, or a place where danger lurked. It is not always true that “the hills are alive with the sound of music.” They might also be alive with bandits and other bad guys!

B. Whatever this pilgrim’s immediate circumstance, his gaze reminds him that the best source of his help comes from the one who created the mountains in the first place. What better source of help could there be? Creation cannot provide complete protection. The Creator, the one who brought nature into being, must fill that role, he is our keeper, the pilgrim recognizes. If that is so, what is the character of that keeper? Let’s consider three traits.

II. The Character of Our Keeper (vv. 3-8)

A. “He will not let your foot be moved,” or slip, is the pilgrim’s first description. Footing, when on a pilgrimage, is important, as is the path that we choose to take. So, we hear the psalmist pray, on several occasions,

Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life. . . Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.” [143:10]

Illustration: When my youngest daughter, Iela and I, go hiking, we always say as we start out, “So who’s going to take a tumble today?!” We say that because you don’t get much level ground in the White Mountains, and one of us (usually, but not always, me), trips over a rock or a root and goes down. Fortunately, neither of us has ever badly hurt ourselves, but we’ve come close!

Notice that level ground here described by the psalmist has a literal aspect to be sure, but it is also doing God’s will. Doing such will keep us from falling on a path that is not level but is filled with rocks and roots. Another psalm makes this more specific by contrasting the level ground on which he is standing with sitting with the deceitful and the wicked, associating with hypocrites, and assembling with evildoers (26:4-5, 12), company that if we keep it, is sure to trip us up. And then there’s this description of the righteous: “The law of their God is in their hearts; their feet do not slip” (Ps. 37:31). This follows: “The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand” (37:23f).

Do you see a pattern here? This is not the promise of a trouble-free life. It does not guarantee that we will never have an accident, or an illness, or experience relational strife or problems with our children! But it does suggest if we allow the LORD who is our keeper to direct us, if we make his word our guide, if we make him our delight, then we might stumble or stub our toes from time to time, but he will keep us from falling beyond repair.

B. “He who keeps you will not slumber or sleep” is the next aspect of the keeper’s character highlighted by the pilgrim. Our keeper, in other words, is vigilant. This is a challenging aspect of our keeper’s character because on more than one occasion we hear his people demanding that he wake up when it feels like their needs are not being met! “Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.” (Ps. 44:23; 36:23). Or, in the prophet Isaiah: “Awake, awake arm of the LORD, clothe yourself with strength” (Isa. 51:9). Then there are the disciples who wondered if he cared as they had to wake Jesus up from the nap he was taking in the stern of their boat as a life-

threatening storm raged all around them (Mk. 4:38). And of course, there is Jesus himself who cried out from the cross to his Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk. 15:34).

Then there is the episode that was the story of our opening night of vbs last Thursday when the prophet Elijah took on the priests of Baal in a sacrifice burning contest. To make a long story short, Baal, the god of the wicked King Ahab, was unable to cause the sacrifice to be consumed by fire, and when Baal failed, Elijah cried out: “Perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” By way of contrast, the LORD, the God of Elijah, was not sleeping and he was able to cause the sacrifice to be consumed, even after Elijah had doused it with water (1 Kings 18:20-40).

I have no easy answer as to why it sometimes seems that God is asleep! I do know that when it does, the pilgrim, the prophet, the disciples, and Jesus, all invite us to join them in crying out, “Awake!” and also in the way in which we began our worship today: “How long O Lord?!” And then, as we cry, to trust that though it may seem that God is sleeping, he is the keeper who never slumbers or sleeps. He is the one, as Paul goes on to say in Romans 8, whose Son came to die for us, who rose and ascended and lives to intercede for us, and who will not allow us to be separated from him ever, no way, no how, no matter what!

C. And then one more character trait of the LORD who is our keeper: “The LORD is your shade at your right hand.” Shade is certainly something we’ve all been seeking in these hot and steamy days! We want shade where we park our car or eat our lunch. We pull down shades to keep the sun from shining into our windows. Shade protects us not only from the heat, but from what can be the harmful effects of the sun. It’s a little harder to assess what could be harmful about the moon - possibly the cause of emotional illness, the ancients thought. Perhaps the pilgrim, using a poetic device called a merism, in which one mentions both extremes as way of saying everything is included, is just rounding out the promise of our keeper’s protection over us both day and night, that he will actively protect us from evil in all places (“your going out and your coming in”), and on all occasions (“from this time on and forevermore”).

Again, this is not a promise of an easy life! The Israelites certainly experienced life’s difficulties. But they also held the conviction that in the midst of it all, God was still walking with them and that the whole of one’s life was safe in his keeping.

If you were to continue on and read Psalm 122 when you get home, you’ll see that the pilgrim has arrived in Jerusalem, and that his feet are standing firmly within the gates of the holy city. The LORD, who is his keeper, has been the single, all-sufficient source of help that he needed. May we find him to be our keeper, too, as we journey along the path that he has set for us.