# Psalm 121 | Pilgrimage

*Session 4 · October 23, 2025 · Singing in the Dark · Epiphany Seattle*

## Context — When, Where, and Who

- **Book:** Book V (Psalms 107–150). Psalm 121 is the second of the fifteen Psalms of Ascent (120–134) — a pilgrimage collection within the collection.
- **Date:** Anonymous. Likely in liturgical use for centuries, 10th to 5th century BCE. Composed for the three annual pilgrimage festivals to Jerusalem: Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot.
- **Author:** Anonymous. No superscription. This belongs to no individual. It is the psalm of the road, for whoever is walking it.
- **Type:** Psalm of Trust / Liturgy of Departure. Both a personal confession (vv.1–2) and a communal blessing (vv.3–8).

*The fifteen Psalms of Ascent were sung antiphonally by pilgrims climbing to Jerusalem — the Mishnah (Pesachim) describes responsive singing on the road. The collection begins in exile and ends in arrival, moving from Psalm 120 ("I am for peace, but they are for war") to Psalm 134 ("Bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD"). Psalm 121 is near the beginning, still on the road.*

## Poetic Structure — How the Psalm Is Built

- **Form:** Antiphonal dialogue. Verses 1–2 are first person (I, my): the pilgrim speaks. Verses 3–8 shift to second person (you, your): a second voice — priest, companion, or congregation — responds with blessing.
- **Movement:** Question to declaration to blessing. Anxiety becomes assurance. The structure enacts the journey: you begin with a question and arrive at a promise.
- **Sounds Like:** The Aaronic Blessing of Numbers 6:24–26: "The LORD bless you and keep you." The verb shamar (keep) appears in both. Psalm 121 is the Aaronic Blessing in motion — not spoken in the Temple but on the road.
- **Notice:** Shamar (keep, guard, watch over) appears six times in six verses — once per line after the opening. Not a theme. A drumbeat. The repetition is the theological point: the Keeper does not stop keeping.
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## Four Words Worth Sitting With

### Shamar (vv.3–8, six times)

Keep / guard / watch over / preserve. The psalm's one dominant verb, applied to the pilgrim six times in succession. Shamar is not keeping as in possessing. It is keeping as in protecting, tending, guarding. The same word used when God commands Adam to "tend and keep" the garden (Genesis 2:15). God is the keeper of the garden of the world, and you are being kept within it.

### Ezri (vv.1–2)

"My help comes from the LORD." The personal pronoun is load-bearing: not help in general, but my help. Ezri comes from the root azar — to help, to support, to come alongside. God does not help from a distance. God comes alongside. The name Ezra derives from the same root: his name means "God helps."

### Tzel (v.5)

Shade / shadow. "The LORD is your shade at your right hand." In Palestinian landscape with no trees on pilgrimage routes, shade was survival. In ancient warfare, the right hand was the sword hand — the most exposed side in combat. God stands at the pilgrim's most vulnerable place. This is not metaphor. It is practical theology: God as the thing between you and what would kill you.

### Ma'alot (superscription)

Ascents / goings-up / steps. The title of Psalms 120–134. Three meanings in play: the physical climb to Jerusalem (which sits at 2,500 feet elevation); the fifteen Temple steps where Levites stood to sing; and the "staircase parallelism" in which these psalms build by repeating key words from one line to the next.

## The Shape of the Psalm — Into the Text

- **vv.1–2 The Question and Answer:** "I lift up my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come?" NRSV reads it as a question; KJV as a statement. The hills were sites of pagan worship. The psalm quietly answers: my help comes not from the gods worshipped on the hills, but from the one who made them.
- **vv.3–4 The Keeper Does Not Sleep:** A second voice enters. "He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber." The scope widens from personal (you) to communal (Israel). Your individual journey is held inside the journey of the whole people.
- **v.5 Shade at Your Right Hand:** "The LORD is your shade at your right hand." God at the pilgrim's most exposed side. The contrast with Baal is implicit: Elijah mocked Baal's prophets: "Perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened" (1 Kings 18:27). Israel's God neither slumbers nor sleeps.
- **v.6 Sun and Moon:** "The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night." Both the obvious danger and the one you cannot name. Ancient peoples genuinely feared the moon's influence — hence "lunacy," from luna. The psalm covers known and unknown threats.
- **vv.7–8 Going Out and Coming In:** "The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore." Everything. Every departure and every return. Not just the dramatic moments — all of life's passages, including the final ones.

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## Jesus and the Holy Spirit in Psalm 121

### Jesus as Pilgrim

Luke 2:41–52: Jesus makes the pilgrimage to Jerusalem at age twelve. He is a Psalm 121 pilgrim — the songs of ascent were in his formation from childhood. His final journey to Jerusalem is the ultimate pilgrimage. Luke 9:51 captures it with precision: "He set his face to go to Jerusalem." The determined, upward gaze of the pilgrim, knowing what the climb will cost.

*Jesus walks Psalm 121 toward the cross. The psalm's promise of the Keeper who does not sleep is not protection from suffering but accompaniment through it. The psalm is fulfilled not by Jesus being kept from death but by God keeping him through death into resurrection.*

### Jesus as the Keeper

John 17:12: "While I was with them, I protected them and kept them... I kept them safe." Jesus uses keeping language to describe his ministry to the disciples. He is both the pilgrim praying the psalm and the Keeper the psalm describes. John 10:28–29: "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." The grip of Psalm 121's Keeper is the grip of Christ.

### The Holy Spirit as Ezri

Romans 8:26: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness." The Greek word for "helps" carries the same sense as ezri — one who comes alongside. The Holy Spirit is the ezri of the New Testament: the one who takes up the pilgrim's journey and intercedes "with sighs too deep for words."

*The promise of the unsleeping Keeper finds its New Testament form in the Spirit who never ceases to intercede. The psalm's assurance that God does not slumber is, in Christian experience, the Spirit's unceasing prayer on our behalf.*

### Pilgrimage as the Shape of Christian Life

Hebrews 12:22: "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." The pilgrimage of Psalm 121 has become, in the New Testament, the entire arc of Christian existence. You are always on the road. The destination is not the Jerusalem of stone but the Jerusalem of glory. The LORD keeps your going out and your coming in all the way there.

## The BCP Translation — A Note

Coverdale renders shamar as "watches over" in verse 5 ("The LORD watches over you") where the NRSV uses "keeps." Both translate the same Hebrew verb. "Watches over" emphasizes active vigilance; "keeps" emphasizes relational custody. The BCP's choice makes God the guardian scanning the horizon; the NRSV's makes God the one who holds you safe. Both are true.

*Coverdale's "going forth and coming in" (v.8) adds a sense of active mission that the NRSV's "going out and coming in" does not quite carry. The pilgrim is not merely leaving and returning — she is going forth, which implies intention and purpose.*

## Cultural Uses — The Psalm in the World

Psalm 121 has one of the broadest ranges of use of any psalm in the world. A few notable instances:

David Livingstone read Psalms 121 and 135 with his family at the dockside before departing for Africa in 1840. It was the last psalm he prayed with them.

Mendelssohn's trio "Hebe deine Augen auf" (Lift thine eyes) from Elijah (1846) sets Psalm 121 for three angelic voices — sung to Elijah in the wilderness at the moment of his total collapse. The pilgrimage psalm becomes the voice of God's care at the edge of despair.

Herbert Howells set Psalm 121 in his Requiem (composed 1932, first performed 1980) — music of stunning tenderness, written privately after the death of his son.

A setting by William McKie was sung at the wedding of Princess Margaret in 1960 and at the funeral of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in 2002. The same psalm for marriage and for burial — every threshold.

*The Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls (discovered 1979, dated 7th century BCE) contain the Aaronic Blessing — the oldest surviving biblical text, predating the Dead Sea Scrolls by 400 years. Psalm 121's echo of that blessing places it in the oldest stream of Israel's liturgical life.*

## A Word to Take Home

"The simplest psalm in our series. Eight verses. One word, six times. One question, one answer. But the simplicity is the point. When you are on the road, you do not need a systematic theology. You need to know that the maker of heaven and earth is your keeper. That is enough. That has always been enough."

**Next session: Psalm 22 | Jesus | October 30**