Singing in the Dark

Psalm 121

Pilgrimage

Session 3 · October 23, 2025

Epiphany Seattle

Psalm 121

"I lift up my eyes to the hills,
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber."

Psalm 121:1–3 (NRSV)

Notice who is speaking. Notice how the voice shifts. Notice what question is asked and how it is answered.

CONTEXT

When, Where, and Who

BOOK

DATE

AUTHOR

TYPE

CONTEXT

When, Where, and Who

BOOK

Book V (Psalms 107–150) — the most celebratory book. Psalm 121 is the second of the fifteen Psalms of Ascent (120–134), the pilgrimage collection.

DATE

Anonymous. Likely composed for Temple pilgrimage use, 10th–5th century BCE. The specific date is unknown — the psalm was probably in active liturgical use for centuries.

AUTHOR

Anonymous. No superscription naming an author — unusual among the Songs of Ascent. This belongs to no individual. It is a song of the road.

TYPE

Psalm of Trust (Confidence). Also classified as a Blessing or Liturgy of Departure. It is both a personal confession and a communal sending.

POETIC STRUCTURE

How the Psalm Is Built

Form

Movement

Biblical Connections

Notice

POETIC STRUCTURE

How the Psalm Is Built

Form

Antiphonal dialogue: verses 1–2 are a personal question and answer (I/my); verses 3–8 shift to second person singular (you/your/thee). One voice asks; another blesses. The psalm is two voices in conversation.

Movement

The psalm moves from question to declaration to blessing. Anxiety gives way to assurance. The structure enacts the journey: you begin with a question and arrive at a promise.

Biblical Connections

Psalm 121 echoes the Aaronic Blessing of Numbers 6:24–26 — "The LORD bless you and keep you." The word shamar (keep) appears in both. The psalm is a walking version of the priestly blessing.

Notice

Shamar (keep, guard, watch over) appears six times in eight verses — once every line, after the opening. It is not a theme. It is a drumbeat. Repetition is the point: the Keeper does not stop keeping.

WORD STUDY

Four Words Worth Sitting With

Shamar

vv.3–8 (6x)

Ezri

vv.1–2

Tzel

v.5

Ma'alot

superscription

WORD STUDY

Four Words Worth Sitting With

Shamar

vv.3–8 (6x)

Keep / guard / watch over / preserve. Appears six times in six verses. The verb that holds the whole psalm together. Not keeping as in possessing — keeping as in protecting. God is not your jailer. God is your guardian.

Ezri

vv.1–2

My help. Not help in general — my help. The personal pronoun is load-bearing. This is not a psalm about divine capability. It is a psalm about personal claim. The maker of heaven and earth is specifically yours.

Tzel

v.5

Shade / shadow. "The LORD is your shade at your right hand." In a landscape where sun exhaustion was a real danger, shade was survival. This is practical theology: God as the thing between you and what would kill you.

Ma'alot

superscription

Ascents / goings-up / steps. The title of the collection, Psalms 120–134. Three possible meanings: the physical climb to Jerusalem; the fifteen steps in the Temple where Levites stood to sing; or the ascending literary structure of the psalms themselves.

INTO THE TEXT

The Shape of the Psalm

vv.1–2	**The Question and Answer**
vv.3–4	**The Keeper Does Not Sleep**
v.5	**Shade at Your Right Hand**
v.6	**Sun and Moon**
vv.7–8	**Going Out and Coming In**

The Shape of the Psalm

vv.1–2	**The Question and Answer**	*One voice: "I lift my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come?" The same voice answers: "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth." The creator of the cosmos is the one I am counting on. That is the whole argument.*
vv.3–4	**The Keeper Does Not Sleep**	*A second voice enters, blessing the first. "He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber." Then the scope widens: he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. Personal, then communal. You, then all of us.*
v.5	**Shade at Your Right Hand**	*"The LORD is your shade at your right hand." In ancient Near Eastern culture, the right hand was the sword hand — the vulnerable side in battle. God stands at your most exposed place. Shade is survival in a landscape that can kill with heat.*
v.6	**Sun and Moon**	*"The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night." Ancient peoples feared moon-stroke (hence "lunacy") as much as sunstroke. God keeps you from both the obvious danger and the one you do not see coming.*
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 included. The whole journey. Every departure and every return. Not just the dramatic moments — all of it.*

What in this psalm *provokes you?*

Psalm 121 — Coverdale Translation

*"I lift up my eyes to the hills; *
from where is my help to come?
My help comes from the LORD, *
the maker of heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved *
and he who watches over you will not fall asleep."*

Psalm 121:1–3 (BCP, Coverdale)

Note: "watches over" (BCP) vs. "keeps" (NRSV). The BCP uses the guardian image; the NRSV uses the keeper image.

The asterisk (*) marks where cantor and choir exchange verses in choral recitation.

How does this psalm speak to the world in which *we live right now?*

Where do we see Jesus and / or the Holy Spirit *in this psalm?*