

Psalm 121: God guards us



Psalm 121 (120) (Mode 3. 3....12 / 4.....271)

The psalmist has a particularly fine sensitivity to rhythm. Among other elements, he picks up the final phrase of one verse and uses it to introduce the following verse, which expands the idea. The key theme is the Lord as the one who guards [Hebrew *shamar*] Israel. This belief is expressed in the name 'Samaria', given to the capital city of the northern kingdom.

The psalmist also uses polarity (sun-moon, day-night, going-coming, now-forever) to emphasise the all-encompassing nature of his trust in the Lord.

I lift up my eyes to the mountains.

Will my help come from there?

My help comes from the Lord,

who made heaven and earth.

The Lord, our guard, is not limited by space.

‘To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!’(Psalm 123:1).

‘Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth’(Psalm 124:8).

‘My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net’(Psalm 25:15).

The Lord will not let you stumble.

Your guardian does not sleep.

This and the following verses seem to be words of reassurance spoken by the person leading the pilgrimage.

‘The Lord will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone’(Psalm 91:11-12).

‘The Lord has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip’(Psalm 66:9).

By way of contrast note the following:

‘Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria;
your nobles slumber’(Nahum 3:18)

‘Israel’s sentinels are blind, they are all
without knowledge; they are all silent dogs
that cannot bark; dreaming, lying down,
loving to slumber’(Isaiah 56:10).

Israel's guard neither slumbers nor sleeps.

Special vigilance was expected of the guard during the hours of darkness. Everyone can sleep securely, because the Lord watches! The people call on God 'Awake, awake!' (Isaiah 51:9), but it is they who have not been vigilant, and so God responds 'Rouse yourself, rouse yourself!' (Isaiah 51:17), 'Awake, awake!' (Isaiah 52:1). That the Lord is watching over us is a theme often found in the psalms:

‘Guard me as the apple of the eye;
hide me in the shadow of your wings’(Psalm 17:8).

‘O guard my life, and deliver me; do not let me be
put to shame, for I take refuge in you’(Psalm 25:20).

‘He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be
broken’(Psalm 34:20).

‘The Lord guards the lives of his faithful’(Psalm 97:10).

‘Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your
servant who trusts in you. You are my God’(Psalm 86:2).

‘Guard me, Lord, from the hands of the wicked; protect me from the violent who have planned my downfall.’

(Psalm 140:4)

‘The Lord watches over strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow’(Psalm 146:9).

‘Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you’(Genesis 28:15 – God to Jacob at Bethel)

‘May the Lord bless you and keep you’(Numbers 6:24).

‘He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock’(Jeremiah 31:10).

The Lord is your guard, your shade,
always at your side.

This is the is the central verse of the psalm and expresses its central theme.

‘You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shade of the Almighty’(Psalm 91:1).

‘They shall again live beneath my shade, they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom like the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon’(Hosea 14:7).

‘You have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress ... a shade from the heat’(Isaiah 25:4).

The sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon in the night.

The Lord will keep you from evil,
watching over you always.

‘You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday ...
no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your
tent’(Psalm 91:5-6,10).

The Lord will guard your going out and returning,
now and for ever.

In verse one the psalmist reassured us that the Lord, our guard, is not limited by space. Here he states that the Lord's protection is not limited by time.

'The Lord will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways'(Psalm 91:11).

‘Now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them’(John 17:11-12).

‘The Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one’(2Thessalonians 3:3).

‘An inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you’(1Peter 1:4).