

Psalm 121

29th Sunday Year C
Evening Prayer Friday Week 2

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 YHWH as the one who guards [Hebrew *šamar*; שָׁמַר] Israel. This belief is expressed in the name ‘Samaria’, given to the capital city of the northern kingdom. The statement ‘YHWH is your keeper’(verse 5) is exactly at the centre of the psalm. The psalmist also uses polarity (sun-moon, day-night, going-coming, now-forever) to emphasise the all-encompassing nature of his trust in YHWH. This is the second of the psalms that bear the title: ‘A Song of Ascents’(Psalms 120-134).

¹I lift up my eyes to the mountains. Will help come to me from there?

YHWH, our guard, is not limited by space.

I lift up my eyes to you who are enthroned in the heavens!

– Psalm 123:1

²My help comes from YHWH*, who made heaven and earth.

Our help is in the name of YHWH, who made heaven and earth.

– Psalm 124:8

My eyes are fixed on YHWH, yes, he will disentangle my feet from the net.

– Psalm 25:15

³He 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.

YHWH will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. They will bear you up on their hands, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

– Psalm 91:11-12

YHWH has kept us among the living. He has not let our feet slip.

– Psalm 66:9

By way of contrast note the following:

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

Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria; your nobles slumber.

– Nahum 3:18

Special vigilance was expected of the guard during the hours of darkness. Everyone can sleep securely, because YHWH 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 YHWH is watching over us is a theme often found in the psalms:

⁴Israel’s guard neither slumbers nor sleeps.

Guard me as the pupil of your eye;
hide me in the shade 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 guard over all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.
– Psalm 34:20

Preserve my being, for I am devoted to you;
save your servant who trusts in you.
You are my God.
– Psalm 86:2

YHWH guards the lives of his faithful.
– Psalm 97:10

Guard me, YHWH, from the hands of the wicked;
protect me from the violent
who have planned my downfall.
– Psalm 140:4

YHWH watches over strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow.
– Psalm 146:9

Know that I am with you and will keep you wher-
ever 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 YHWH 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

YHWH is watching over us

**⁵YHWH is your guard.
YHWH is your shade. He
stands at your right hand.**

**⁶The sun shall not harm you
by day, nor the moon by
night.**

**⁷YHWH will keep you from
all evil; he will watch over
all that you are*.**

**⁸YHWH will keep guard
over you when you go out
and when you return, now
and forever.**

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

You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow
that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in dark-
ness, or the destruction that strikes at noonday ... no
evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.

– Psalm 91:5-6,10

‘All that you are’ translates the Hebrew *nepeï*. See
the article ‘Being’ in the Introduction.

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

YHWH will command his angels concerning you to
guard you in all your ways.

– Psalm 91:11

Compare the following from the New Testament:

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