

# PSALMS

songs for all of life

## PSALMS: MY HELPER AND KEEPER – PSALM 121

*August 20, 2023*

Alex Early

### Psalms 121:1-8

The Psalms of the Bible are a collection of songs from different writers, functioning like a hymnal for the full expression of human emotion. There are psalms of joy and psalms of pain, psalms of anger, and psalms of peace. Join us for our third installment, asking the Psalms to teach us about God's heart, the heart of the scriptures, and the heart inside you and I. Visit [doxa-church.com](http://doxa-church.com) for service times or more details on how we make disciples in the everyday stuff of life.

Hi Doxa. We'll be reading out of Psalm 121, a Song of Ascents. I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does 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. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. This is the word of the Lord. You can be seated.

So today is week five in our six week series in the Psalms. And as you know, over the last several weeks we've been hearing from different voices, from teaching pastors in different churches around the Seattle area and the Eastside. Today we're going to hear from Pastor Alex Early, and he leads Redemption Church across the water over in the Green Lake neighborhood; has been there for a number of years. He and I actually served together on a pastoral team in Reno, Nevada for a number of years. So, we have some history and I think he's gonna be a huge blessing to you today. He's a good man. He's a very educated man. He has two master's degrees and a doctorate. He is the most talented culinary person I know, he cooks food like you would not believe, and his wife is a talented photographer. So when you mix the cooking and the photography together, you get some really special stuff. But we're really grateful to have him with us. He's also an author. He's written books on substitutionary atonement. He's written a fantastic theology book for kids, as well as a book that's really aimed at new believers that want to understand, sort of, what they're getting themselves into when they start following Jesus. All those are available on Amazon. I commend them to you. I'd like to invite him up. Would you join me in welcoming Pastor Alex Early?

Hey bud. I'd love just to pray for him as he continues our Psalm series and preaches to us from Psalm 121. Jesus, thanks for this man. Thank you for his family and his life and his commitment to you and your church. I would pray that today that he would speak to us in the way that your Spirit leads. Thank you for just the joy and gratitude in his heart. I know it's there because of your faithfulness to him, and I pray that as he unpacks these passages that we would understand that our help comes from you. That you really do keep us. Though our circumstances may rise and fall, that you are faithful in all of that, and that you, you watch over us and our good to us. Thank you for our time together. We pray for Redemption Church. We pray that you continue to provide for them and meet their needs and that there would just be so many people in the future that know who you are and experience your love and mercy and gentleness because of the great people at Redemption. We pray these things for your glory. Amen.

Thank you Pastor. Morning Doxa. Good to see you all. My name's Alex and I'm really thankful to be here. My wife is here at the second service, so this is my wife Janice. She's over here. You have to say hi to her at some point. We've been married for 19 years. We have two kids. Tove, our daughter is almost 14, and our son Jude is 12. I had to think about that one for a minute. <laugh>. But they're not here today, so that's okay. They wanted to go to church at our church over in Seattle and they just got up this morning, last night. They were saying, we just want to go to church with our friends. We want to hang out with them. Like, great, if your 14- and 12-year-old want to go to church and hang out with their friends, you're like, thank you Jesus. Just go there. That's great. So, we also have a Bernadoodle, his name is Dempsey, after the great Clint Dempsey, and go Sounders.

Alright, so we are thankful to be here today. As Pastor Donald mentioned a moment ago I've known him for, gosh, and his wife Kelly for I think ten years. I've recently got to know Pastor Eddie and I've watched him preach online. In fact, the first time I heard Pastor Eddie preaching, the first clip I saw, he was talking about gluttony <laugh> and I was like, oh my gosh, they will let this man get away with anything on the Eastside. Like, you can preach about all kinds of sins, like there's just some sins Christians don't talk about, that one too. It's like, right on. I'm stoked I get to go here. So I'm just gonna preach from the whole book today because your pastor paved the path for it. So thank you though Pastor for the invitation. Feel very much so honored to be here. Thank you. All right, so I want to be mindful of our time and jump right in a couple of introductory points to the background of this passage. So, some of the verses might have stood out to you as we heard it read a moment ago. I lift my eyes to the hills. That's kind of a famous line in the Psalms. The other one, at the end, the Lord will keep you as you go out and come in. Those are kind of passages that stand out, like, maybe one of those that keeping out, going in might've been like crocheted and framed like by your grandma's back door off the kitchen kind of thing. It's kind of one of those things. These are things that Christians frame and put on cups and things like that. And they're very, very powerful sayings.

And as we look through the Psalms, the Psalms are what the Protestant reformer John Calvin said one time, he said, the Psalms are essentially the anatomy of the human soul. That is, they run the whole gamut of all of life, your real life, your real self in this real world, with God. And there's moments where God feels very real and very close and very near and very present. And there's moments where God feels like he could not be further. And there's moments where you find yourself reading the psalmist going, can you pray that, like, God kill my enemies? And things like that. You're like, I don't know if I can say that. You can say that like, well what about Jesus? Hold on, hold on, hold on. We gotta forgive everybody. Right. Yeah.

And God sees the real you, your real self, your real story, and the presence of God is not a place to pretend. It's the place to process who you really are, which includes the uglier parts of our own experience in this world, which God says, come on in. I know, I see, I know everything. I literally, everything I see you're angry with this. Let's work on that together. The presence of God is not a place to pretend. It is a place to process your real self so you don't have to get your thees and thou arts and

everything just right in the presence of God. In fact, the only one that is just right in the presence of God is his son. And he makes you just right through the Spirit. Okay? So the Psalms, CS Lewis, by the way, famous scholar, he said this about the Psalms which is kind of funny. He said, the Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung, not doctrinal, treatises, or even sermons.

It's like, well, here's your sermon on Psalm 121 <laugh>. But he's right. He's right. The Psalms are the things that we sing and it gets down into our soul. And I wonder why that is sometimes. Why is it that even if you've never been to church a day in your life, and if you haven't, I'm seriously thankful to you for being here this morning and hope you feel welcome. Uh, but even if you've never cracked this book open, you might've heard something like, "the Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want". Like, well, how did that get into your mind? And why does it stick <laugh>? In fact, here's my hunch is that you can get more accomplished in poetry than you can in prose. That is, songs get into you, they get into you, and they say things the way they really are.

And so these psalms become invaluable over the course of your life. And I love these psalms because as we said a moment ago, they're not, the writers aren't concerned with giving a total whole robust theology all in one go. That is the Psalms don't tie theological niceties, little bows, onto life. They say things the way they are, whether that's great despair or in great glory and enjoying the favor of God. I love that about it. That's probably why you return to the Psalms more often than maybe any other book.

One of my favorite scholars, his name is Walter Brueggemann, and he talks about the Psalms and he boils all 150 psalms down into three buckets, essentially. And here they are, psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of reorientation. So the psalm of orientation is what we're gonna cover today. Psalm 121, a psalm of orientation, is like Psalm 8, where someone is rightly oriented to God, where they say things like, when I consider the works of your hand, the moon and the stars, who is man that you would consider him? That's a person that's oriented to God.

Psalms of disorientation are like Psalm 13: how long, oh Lord, <laugh>, how long is it gonna be like this? You know, there's a place for that. Do you know that if you're feeling disoriented this morning, that you're welcome in the presence of God, the disoriented, confused, frustrated, discouraged, God I can't find you? You belong in the presence of God too with all that intact. And you don't have to walk it off or maybe till you feel better, and then feel like you can participate in worship or life with God. But your disoriented self also counts for worship because worship is simply showing up and that's it. To become present is not an easy thing, you know.

Then there's psalms of reorientation, Psalm 73: my foot almost slipped <laugh>, but God caught me and put me back on the rock. That's somebody that's like reoriented to God. I think that's helpful to think about the Psalms in those ways. So today we're covering what's known as one of the ascension psalms, and so the ascension psalms, and I encourage you to read, to read 'em this week, it's Psalm chapter 120 all the way through 134. So there's 15 of them, and they're not very long, but they tell a beautiful story.

The people of God would sing the ascension psalms three times a year as they would go to the city of Jerusalem. And we'll pull up the first slide here to show you the times and places in which the people would sing these songs. As they traveled to the city of Jerusalem, they would ascend up the mountain that's 2,700 feet in elevation, they would ascend singing these songs. In April, they would celebrate Passover, the Exodus, and they would remember how God took his people out of slavery and bondage in Egypt and led them into the Promised Land. And they would sing these songs .at Pentecost in June they would celebrate the feast after the harvest. And lastly, the Tabernacles is celebrated in September. It's where the people remember that God preserved them through the 40 years as they wandered in the wilderness.

And so they're going back in time and they're using their memory and they're telling a story, not their own story, divorce from God, but the story that they have because of God. And they would do this each

year. And as they approach the city of Jerusalem, they actually begin. And you can watch, if you go and read Psalm 120, Jerusalem's not mentioned, they're out in the pagan, outskirts, Meshek and Kedar, and it's kind of dark. And as you read, and as you get closer and closer and closer to Psalm 134, they get more and more closer. And they, as you approach the Holy of Holies inside the temple, out here it's dark. And as they get closer and closer, they get closer to God himself. So the Psalms of Ascension were sung three times a year with the people.

All right, let's do it. Psalm 121. "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?" So as the people are in their caravans traveling from all over Israel to celebrate who God is and what he's done, they say, I lift my eyes to the hills. The idea is that, as we said a moment ago, Jerusalem is set up on hill, 2,700 feet up. And as they look up, they see surrounding hills where people who did not follow the God of Israel, rather the Canaanites and all the other ites, the Jebusites and the Hittites and the, you know, the Amalekites and all the ites, they participated in what's called pagan Babylonian religion. Child sacrifice, temple prostitution, on and on. It was anything but holy and the people of God would be ascending up. And as they get closer and begin to look around up on the hills, there are pagan shrines all around and they begin to sing and say, I lift my eyes to the hills. And in so doing, they begin to ask questions like, well, where does my help come from?

It wasn't hard to like drive out of Seattle this morning and drive across the water and like, think about what it feels like to be surrounded in a culture that doesn't follow God, and to lift your eyes. The word lift your eyes here, by the way, it doesn't mean glance. It means to gaze longingly and to gaze in such a way that it creates something inside you. Have you done that lately? Gaze longingly. Maybe it was on Instagram this morning. Longing for someone else's life. Oh, they're in this place, in that part of the world and this is the food they eat and this is the places they hang out and these are the people they're with in this curated life. And we can gaze longingly. I wish I had that. I wish I was there. I wish, I wish, I wish. That's that gazing longingly did. You know there's somewhere else you can look. There's somebody else to look at. Somebody else is looking at you. So I lift my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

So before you jump on into like the obvious Bible answers, be honest, where does your help come from? The obvious ones could be alcohol, overeating, spending recklessly, work, never disconnecting from our phones and devices. Where's my help come from? A relationship that I don't belong in? Where's my help come from? What am I looking to? Those are some of the more obvious ones. My work, whatever. But maybe one of the more or less obvious ones, especially if you've been a Christian for more than like, you know, 5, 10, 20 years, they can become religious in nature, but equally just as absent from the presence of God. Here's what I mean. If you're a Christian, did you know theology and sound doctrine and Bible reading and serving and giving and doing all the Christian things can actually serve as a fig leaf to cover you up too. It's true. That's how you get the Pharisees in the Bible. What do you think they were doing? "You search the scriptures", Jesus says "for in them you think you have eternal life, but they testify of me and you don't come to me". So where does your help come from? It's easy to get busy with religion or rebellion. The flesh will ride any horse <laugh>. So those who are sober minded and present to God are present to both of those ideas. Where does my help come from?

The word help here by the way, isn't assistance. It's not like your gym coach or a financial planner, or somebody like that. That's not what they're singing about. Somebody to assist you, assistance is, can you help me change my alternator, or check this email before I hit send, or whatever. That's assistance. What they're talking about here, help, azar, means literally salvation. Where's my salvation coming from? What's gonna quench what's deep down in here and give me purpose and meaning and direction and vision for the totality of my life? Where's my salvation coming from? I lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from? They say my help comes from the Lord.

That's what Jonah said when he was in the belly of the fish, you remember that? Salvation is of the Lord. My salvation. And I know if you've been in church for any amount of time, you've heard it before, but please hear it for the millionth time. Your salvation does not come from your works or your white knuckled obedience or trying harder or doing good or getting the thees and thou arts and minding your P's and Q's just right. Your salvation does not come through religious tithing and rigid obedience and all those things are wonderful to be self-denying, sacrificing Christians that go for it and work out our salvation. But we are not called to work out something first. We first have something worked in and then we work out our salvation.

My help comes from the Lord, Jehovah Tsidkenu. That's a fun name in the Old Testament. The Lord is my righteousness. Gosh, for somebody that was steeped in self-righteousness for so long, I cannot tell you how good that feels to take a drink of cold water. God is my righteousness. I don't add anything to my salvation except just the very fact that I need it.

That's wonderful news. The Lord is your salvation. Where does my help come from? Where's my salvation coming from? It's not coming from anything in creation, it's not coming from you. It comes from him. The maker of your soul is the savior of your soul. Thank you Jesus. So the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, it says. What do you make, by the way? I like to cook. What do you make? We're in a city filled with people that make things for the whole world. <laugh>. God made the world <laugh>. I make apps--appetizers, I make appetizers. Some of you make apps on the Eastside here. God made the world just the whole thing. All of creation. One sentence, let's, I'm just gonna make everything.

In theology, you learn this Latin, ex nihilo, meaning out of nothing, God just reaches into nothing. Anthropomorphically speaking, he doesn't have a hand, but say God had a hand, he does in Christ. Anyway. He reaches into nothing and makes everything maker of heaven and earth. That's who your salvation comes from, the maker of heaven and earth. He's not lacking for power or strength or creativity. He is the one who's chosen to get involved in your life through the person and the work of Jesus. Wow. That's where your salvation comes from. That's it. The maker of heaven and earth.

"He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber or sleep." That's kind of redundant to say that, isn't it slumber or sleep? If they mean the same thing, then yeah, that would be redundant. But it's not. Those are two different words, both in English and in Hebrew. Slumber means just literally in Hebrew, it means to start dozing off. Sleep means rem cycle, you're out.

And I love that the singers here teach us who God is and how God is. He doesn't slumber or sleep, that is, God's not dozing off at the wheel of your life, even if you do. Have you fallen asleep at the wheel of your own life? God's not falling asleep on you. I love that. I get bored with people all the time and you do too. But God does not slumber. He's not bored with you or frustrated, going, "I wish they'd try a little harder and then I'll give them attention. Oh, here's my favorite. Billy Graham just walked in now boy, I was falling asleep on the rest of everybody out there." No, no, no, no. God does not slumber or sleep. He's not weak. He doesn't grow tired of keeping up with keeping you. Oh thank you God, for not falling asleep at the wheel of my life.

God does not slumber asleep. And by the way, this was also kind of a snarky dig at all the Canaanite gods as well, on the hills. In the ancient near East, there's these old texts called the Enuma Elish and the Atrahasis. And they're these Babylonian epics that tell about the stories of their gods and so on. And there's two stories in particular that talk about their gods falling asleep and they fall asleep all the time. They were like humans in many ways. And when they get awakened, they are actually awakened by noisy humans and they get very grumpy and start punishing people. And the people of Israel are just going up the hill into Jerusalem going, our God doesn't even, he doesn't fall asleep. He doesn't grow tired. Like, you and I won't make it 15 hours before we're about to just drop dead. Not God. Since before time

began he doesn't slumber or sleep. Wow. He's not falling asleep on you. He's not falling asleep on his church. He's not falling asleep on this world. Thank you God. When everyone gets tired, our spouses or our friends or our employees or employers, our neighbors, everyone needs to go to sleep except for God.

And he'll keep you. It says this word keep shows up six times. And it doesn't mean like keep like you keep your keys in your pocket or something, it means quite literally to guard or protect. That God is a jealous--even is how the Old Testament describes God--is a jealous defender and protector of his people. I love this. In a world that feels so hot and hard, hostile to God and to his will, God is protecting us. He is keeping us. He is defending us. God is our defender, that we don't put our hope in other things. We put our hope in the maker of heaven and earth. He is keeping me. He's defending me. I have a protector from sin and Satan and the lies of people in my own flesh. I have somebody defending me, even from my own self. Thank you God. God keeps his people. And while we believe absolutely in the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Absolutely. Yes. Okay.

There's a twin doctrine known as the preservation of the saints. God's preserving you. You might find yourself in church this morning going, I don't know how I'm here or why I'm here. In fact, I'm going through something awful right now and I don't have, I don't really know why I'm in church today. Quite honestly. I know. God's keeping you. And in a day and age of deconversion and deconstruction where everybody's moving out of the Holy of Holies and back to Kedar and Meshek and all this, why are you in church, why are you here right now? Because God's keeping you. Because God hasn't given up on you. Because God's not fallen asleep and he begins a good work in you will finish it. He absolutely will. He's keeping you. He's defending you. He's going to see you all the way through.

"The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand." This was one that drove me to my knees this week. The Lord's your shade on your right hand. In Galilee, the region where Jesus was from, to descend down to the city of Jerusalem is roughly a three day journey. Three days of walking. It's about 90 miles. If you don't find shade in that heat quick, you might not make it. And I love that the singers teach us this when the world is hot, and it is so hard, and the relief that your soul needs, God says, I'll be your shade. Just step up into the shade. How comforting. How long has it been since you just stood in the shade? Did you know you're still welcome in the shade?

He'll be your shade at your right hand. This is also beautiful. When soldiers would march into battle, they march in with their shield in the left hand, sword in the right hand, which means one side of them is protected and the other side is exposed and vulnerable and God--and this is why you would find your best friend to march beside you into battle at your right hand. And the psalmists teach us God is your shade at your right hand, saying, I don't just see the parts of you that are doing well and protected and prospering and all that. I see the broken part, the vulnerable part, the exposed part that if it's not protected, there could be a death blow, could come this way. I got you. I got your right side.

This is why we worship our king. Like who does this for people like us? Come on. Who does this? Only God could be this good. The rest of us wouldn't do this for almost anybody, but God, God will be your shade at your right hand, the vulnerable exposed part of you. God will cover, God will cover. Gosh, I wish we could find good news in this book. This is just amazing. Woo. Alright.

I'll wrap up. Verses 6 to 8 say this: "The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore." They begin to say, nothing in the night or the day are gonna harm me. God's gonna keep me from evil. God's gonna protect me as I travel.

But we all know, like this is beautiful. Yes and amen. And moments of life do feel like that. But we know that not all of the faith feels that way. We know that Jesus didn't promise us a bed of roses at all. Look what happened to him. So, and then he says, follow me. Oh gosh. So what do we do? What do we do?

Because we do go to funerals and bury people we love. We do have people break our heart. We do have things happen in this. So how do we reconcile, how do we Christians reconcile a psalm like this in a world like this?

Here's how. It's that word we just used to describe ourselves. Christian. How long has it been since you marveled at the fact that you get to call yourself Christian? It's a beautiful name to be called. A lot of people in Seattle don't think that, but those that behold the king do. How do you reconcile these two things? Here's how. As Christians, we say, I lift my eyes to Calvary's Hill from where my help comes from, where my savior reigns. Do you know in the first three centuries, Christians actually talked when they would talk about Jesus on his crucifix, they would say things like, look the king's reigning. Behold him on his throne.

I look to Calvary, that's where my help comes from. That's where my salvation comes from. The maker of heaven and earth has made peace with me through the blood of his cross. My foot will not ultimately be moved because his feet were pierced to the wood of his cross. The sun and the moon will not strike you by day or night, but they struck Jesus. They scourged him in the sun and he died in the dark. They buried him in a grave and he resurrected. And where is he seated? At the right hand of God. He has triumphed over all evil. He is keeping you. He is preserving you. And one day he will glorify you alongside all the saints belonging to his church. So have a biblical vision for your life.

Pastor Eugene Peterson, who is now with the Lord says it this way: "The Christian life is not a quiet escape to a garden where we can walk and talk uninterruptedly with our Lord; nor a fantasy trip to a heavenly city where we can compare blue ribbons and gold medals with others who have made it to the winners' circle... The Christian life is going to God. In going to God Christians travel the same ground that everyone else walks on, breathe the same air, drink the same water, shop in the same stores, read the same newspapers, are citizens under the same governments, pay the same prices for groceries and gasoline,"--some of us have not converted to an EV yet--"fear the same dangers, are subject to the same pressures, get the same distresses, are buried in the same ground. The difference is that with each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God, we know we're accompanied by God, we know ruled by God; and therefore no matter what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will preserve us from evil, he will keep our life."

That is good news. I, on the nose, but I feel impressed to do this, to actually tell you the gospel today, we got kind of into it a bit. But I feel like we should just be explicitly clear every week, yeah, on who Jesus is in the gospel. So here you go. You remember the first feast that they were hiking to, Passover, in April. What were they doing? They were remembering when they lived under and slavery. And God in his grace and mercy looked down on his people and reached into that dark place. And through the blood sacrifice of an unblemished lamb, the wrath of God was averted as he passed over the people, sparing them judgment and delivering them through the blood of the lamb. In 1 Corinthians 5 verse 7, St. Paul writes, Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. The good news of the gospel is that you don't have to pay for your sins and no other lambs will be sacrificed. Do you know the year that Jesus died, one early historian reports that over 1 million lambs were being sacrificed in Jerusalem in the first century. And then on came the one, the great one, the one John the Baptizer says, behold what? Who is he? What's he say first or John chapter one, behold the, the Lamb of God. There you go, Christians. Who does what? Takes away the sins of the world that includes yours. All your sins are separated from you as far as the east is from the west.

Isaiah 45 is still true about you today. Behold, on my hands I have engraved your name. Jeremiah Chapter 30 is true, is Ephraim not my darling child. You belong in the presence of God because of who Jesus is and all that Jesus has done in dying, in being buried and being raised to the right hand. And the

Spirit of God testifies to your spirit today. You belong in the family of God and you're not getting kicked out. Okay, that's all I got. Let's pray and then we'll continue in worship.

Thank you for listening. Lord Jesus, we love you and we thank you for the good news of the gospel. Thank you that it is still true for us this morning. Thank you for the work that you have done in our lives as individuals and corporately here in this church. Thank you for Doxa. Thank you for the 109 backpacks that came in this week. Thank you for the mercy ministry that's flowing into and out of this church. We pray for the pastors and the staff and those who serve week by week. Give them strength. I pray for the elders as they go on their retreat this week that you'd speak to them and give them fresh vision. God, I thank you for the children that make up this church, work in the kids' ministry here. Thank you for hearing our prayers. Thank you that we know you. Help us to be good stewards of all that you've entrusted us with. And God, this week we ask that you would help us to keep looking to you, our guard and our keeper. We love you Jesus, and we pray these things in your name. Amen.