

Insights from Psalm 121

I have to tell you something quite exciting! While refreshing my recall of Psalm 121, one of the passages in God’s Word that Carol and I especially enjoyed reading together, and one of the many we memorized, I recently noticed a very significant wording of this Psalm in the original Hebrew.

Here is the entire Psalm 121 (NIV):

1A song of ascents [as Israelites sang on their way up Mount Zion to worship the LORD at the Temple in Jerusalem]. I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from?

2My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

3He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber;

4indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

5The LORD watches over you—the LORD is your shade at your right hand;

6the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.

7The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life;

8the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

The Hebrew word translated “watch over” and “keep you” is שָׁמַר (*shāmar*), which means to observe, to guard, to care for, to keep. In this context, I prefer the translation, to guard, which I notice is the way the NASB translates this verb. That translation fits with our contemporary terminology and concerns: It also connotes, “I have your back,” and “I’m here for you, right here,” consistent with the Bible’s teaching that the triune God is immanent as well as transcendent, Immanuel (God with us), which is unique to the Bible—no other religions teach a personal God who is both transcendent and immanent, who is involved in our lives and loves his people with a very special love, a steadfast love (חֶסֶד [*chesed*] grace, steadfast love).

The Hebrew reveals more that is not perceived in the English. Very significantly, the word *shāmar* appears three times in a row in verses three through five and three times again in verses seven and eight (though it is not always translated with the same English word, which is unnecessary and keeps people from observing this point). What makes this occurrence significant, is that the Hebrew grammar has no superlative; the way the superlative (meaning most or greatest) is expressed in Hebrew is by repeating a word three times, e.g., “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;...” (Isaiah 6:3), meaning that the LORD is not only holy, but he is holy, holy, holy, an even more powerful way of saying Most Holy; the reality keeps coming at us, penetrating our consciousness with this crucial awareness. (Furthermore, as the outstanding Reformed theologian, the late R. C. Sproul, pointed out, this is the only one of God’s attributes that is repeated three times, thereby emphasizing how very important that characteristic is to God and must be also to us.) Thus, through the Psalmist, God here in Psalm 121 is strongly emphasizing that he is guarding us. Even more: The fact that this triad is repeated in verses seven and eight highlights that fact that the superlative is doubled! He makes it doubly and crystal clear, reemphasizing that he is here with us and for us!

From what is God guarding us? In verse seven, the NIV says He is guarding us from all harm, translating the Hebrew noun רָע (*ra'*), which means bad, evil. The context indicates the translation evil clarifies the protection God is giving us, as other versions (e.g., NASB, KJV, ESV) render *ra'* . The verse immediately prior says, “the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.” Especially clear in the Hebrew culture of that time, here is a direct reference to astrology. In this verse, as well as in many other Bible passages, astrology and its evils are destroyed. The NIV is not wrong in translating *ra'* as harm, because all evil does produce harm (physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and most importantly spiritually, offending God who is holy, holy, holy as well as all love), but the word harm lacks the precision of *ra'* and the fuller meaning of God’s protection of us.

Another contribution the Hebrew makes is the clear designation that the words, “you” and “your,” are singular; this good news is for you personally. The LORD cares about each of us individually, as well as corporately, as the church. He never forgets the church, see verse four, but he’s here emphasizing the individual believer. How are the church and Israel connected? They are one; the church is the visible manifestation of God’s covenant with Abraham, all of which points to and is renewed and fulfilled in Jesus the Christ (the Messiah). (Genesis 17:7; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Matthew 5:17-19; Galatians 3:26-29; Colossians 2:9-12; and many other passages. For a fuller explanation of this Biblical teaching, see my PowerPoint presentation, [Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology](http://www.fromacorntoak12.com) on the Christian Theology page of my Website (it’s all free) at www.fromacorntoak12.com).

The term in verse five, “your right hand,” is a term throughout Scripture that is used figuratively to refer to one’s strength. Since most people are righthanded, the figure symbolizes the strength, power, and abilities that God gives a person. It all comes from Him, the giver of every good and perfect gift. (James 1:17) The shade is another figure that represents God’s protection of that power and those abilities; in this section of the Psalm, the protection is from the sun and moon, representing all else that could harm us, including Satanic and demonic astrological evil, a reference to the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged in this phase of life. (Cf., Ephesians 6:10-18, the Book of Revelation, and much other Scripture)

Much more could be said, but I wanted to mention these highlights in the text. I will add that the Hebrew in the last verse says, “the LORD will watch over your going and your coming,” which is also included in other English translations, such as the NASB, the KJV, and the ESV. The NIV’s “coming and going” reflects the current English expression, but it doesn’t contain the nuance of the Hebrew and its context. How comforting to those who originally heard this verse, who were assured that, due to the LORD’s *shāmar* (guarding), when they went out, he would guard the faithful on their way home. In those days, not everyone who went out came back, a situation that is occurring today with a tragically high occurrence as the news media report.

See how much the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, and the Greek of the New Testament, add to our understanding and application of God’s Word! The English language is just not precise enough to include all that the Biblical words mean. Nevertheless, your English translation, together with the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart and mind, is sufficient for your salvation and sanctification; but for greater enrichment, enjoyment, and encouragement, ask

your pastor to include in his or her sermons and other teaching the additional insights from the Biblical languages, if he or she is not already doing so. This is why these original languages are required for pastors to graduate from seminary, to be licensed to preach, and to be ordained in many, but not all, denominations.

God's Word is so full of exceedingly valuable, indeed vital, strength for our life, please don't let a day go by without reading some of it (I like proceeding passage by passage in order through one book at a time, rather than skipping around). When you read the Bible, consider doing so with a version that has an accurate commentary on the verses at the bottom of each page, like *The NIV Study Bible*, which typically explains the meaning of the words. Then take some time in prayer, thanking God for His Word and asking Him to help you apply it in daily life. You will be blessed beyond measure...both now and forever!

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