

PROVIDENCE

Psalm 121

May 17, 2009 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

“Providence can be defined as God’s sovereignty in action.” That is how Steve Lawson described God’s providence some years ago at one of our youth camps. In our psalm this morning we see that the psalmist certainly believed in and relied upon God’s providence as we find him praising God for His provision and protection of His people. In this Psalm he applies the truths concerning Almighty God to his present predicament and testifies that his God, who is sovereign Creator, is not some disinterested cosmic killjoy who has nothing better to do or is somehow bored out of His mind, but is personal and active in His creation.

Last week we noted that these psalms provide a snapshot of our own pilgrimage, our own journey, to the city of God. In Psalm 120, the psalmist cries out to God. He is in distress and supplicates to his God for deliverance. After reminding himself of God’s covenant promise to bless those who blessed His people and curse those who did not, he reverts back to self and his circumstances and, not surprisingly, falls again into despair as he looks at the world around him.

In this Psalm, we see movement, forward progress in the journey. As Spurgeon put it, “It is several steps in advance of its predecessor... Psalm 120 bemoans the departure of peace from the good man’s abode, and his exposure to the venomous assaults of slanderous tongues. In the first instance his eyes looked around with anguish, but here they look up with hope.”¹ That hope is found in the God who has promised to provide for His people. It is unfortunate that many today live somewhere between Psalms 120 and 121—back and forth between despair and hope. What is the solution? In this Psalm we find a marvelous testimony of reliance upon God’s strength for safety, shelter, and security every moment of the journey.

I. Who it is that provides (121:1-2)

As the pilgrim makes his way closer to Jerusalem, he takes notice of the hills surrounding him and asks, **“I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come?”** The writer on this occasion declares that he was in search of help along the way. However, the mountains along the way provided nothing but danger and deception. During the time this psalm was sung, Palestine was overrun with pagan worship and idolatry. Much of the religious worship was practiced on hilltops where shrines were set up. These hills are mentioned seventy-eight times in the Old Testament, where we are told that the Jews did not destroy them when they occupied Canaan and that they often worshiped there themselves, therefore allowing a syncretistic religion, a mingling of cultic idolatry with their calling as the people of God.

Jeremiah 3:22-23 – ²² “Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness.” “Behold, we come to You; for You are the LORD our God (Psalm of Ascents). ²³ Surely, the hills are a deception, a tumult *on* the mountains (‘commotion’; *literally* ‘orgies’ ESV). Surely in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel.” (Psalm 121)

¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/Commentaries/TreasuryofDavid/tod.cgi?book=ps&chapter=121&verse=001>, accessed 05/15/2009.

Here the psalmist rejects the help of any one, any god, any thing that the pagan deities of the hills presumably could provide. His gaze did not stop when he looked upward to those hills but he looked beyond them to the Lord who made the mountains.² How does he describe his God? Why could he depend on Him to provide rather than the idols of stone and wood in the hills?

1. God's covenant name (v. 2a)

“My help comes from the LORD,” *Yahweh*. God gave this name, His personal name, in Exodus 3. You remember the promise that God gave to Moses. God called upon Moses to bring the people out of Egypt and promised in Exodus 3:12, “Certainly I will be with you.” And in the next verse, Moses asks, “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” (3:13). Do you remember what God says by way of reply? He gives for the first time His covenant name, translated as *“I am Who I am,”* or perhaps better *“I will be what I will be.”*

“I will be” what? This was not simply a testimony of His existence, “I am,” which you have been taught is always in the present, He always exists in the now. It is that, but it is more than that. “I will be”—you remember the promise in v. 12?—“I will be *with you.*” What is implied?—“wherever you go.” And it’s as though God is giving us in theological shorthand a name that was meant to evoke in the mind of the people of God that very promise which is at the heart of the covenant: “Certainly I will be with you.” And here it’s that name that reassures the psalmist when he looks up into the hills and he asks the question, “Where is my help going to come from? My help is going to come from the One who is always with me and never forsakes me.”

It is interesting what the Lord tells Isaiah concerning His covenant and these very hills that the psalmist lifts up his eyes. **Isaiah 54:10** – “For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, but My lovingkindness will not be removed from you, and My covenant of peace will not be shaken,” says the LORD who has compassion on you.” This is in the context of judgment and affliction, and God promised His steadfast covenant love for His people. It is Yahweh, “I will be what I will be,” “Certainly I will be with you,” that the psalmist trusts.

2. God as Creator (v. 2b)

The psalmist moves from the name of God to God’s primary work, **“Who made heaven and earth,”** a phrase found two other times in the Ascent Psalms (124:8; 134:3). This should sound familiar to those who have been present in our study on the Apostles’ Creed, which opens with the words, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” This was originally an apologetic statement of Yahweh’s sovereignty over all realms, heavenly and earthly, and by it excluding all claims attributed to the gods of the hills. Where did Paul begin in Acts 17 before the pagan philosophers to show that Yahweh alone is the one true God? God as Creator! When Yahweh made promise of any blessing to His people, with a view of confirming their faith in His ability to perform what He had promised, He often affixed to His name Almighty, “the Lord that created the heaven and the earth,” so that all could know that there exists nothing too great or impossible for God to perform.

Psalm 115:1-7 – ¹ Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to Your name give glory because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth. ² Why should the nations say, “Where, now,

² James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms, Vol. 3: 107-150*, 1077.

is their God?”³ But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.⁴ Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man’s hands.⁵ They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see;⁶ they have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses, but they cannot smell;⁷ they have hands, but they cannot feel; they have feet, but they cannot walk; they cannot make a sound with their throat.

Jeremiah 10:10-11 – ¹⁰ The LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure His indignation.¹¹ Thus you shall say to them, “The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.”

Psalms 146:5-10 – ⁵ How blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God,⁶ *Who made heaven and earth*, the sea and all that is in them; **THEN:** Who keeps faith forever;⁷ Who executes justice for the oppressed; Who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free.⁸ The LORD opens *the eyes of* the blind; the LORD raises up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous;⁹ the LORD protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow, but He thwarts the way of the wicked.¹⁰ **The LORD will reign forever**, your God, O Zion, to all generations. Praise the LORD!

Here the psalmist moves his eyes from the hills to the universe; from beyond the universe to its Maker who is eternal and infinite; from the gods of nature, which are nothing more than idols, to nature’s God. He is the sovereign Creator of all that is. And it is He alone Who provides for His people.

II. What it is that God provides (121:3-8)

At this point in the psalm we see a shift from “**I**” and “**My**” to “**you**” and “**your**.” The psalmist wishes that all would experience the God of verses 1-2. He moves from a general testimony that the Lord alone is helper to a particular focus on Yahweh’s covenant protection of His people. The Hebrew word for “**keep**” (*shamar*) is used six times in this psalm in conjunction with God’s covenant name, indicating that God is the guardian; He is the One who watches over His people during their journey. What is it that God provides for His people along the way?

1. Safety (vv. 3-4)

The psalmist proclaims, “**He will not allow your foot to slip.**” As the pilgrim made his way to Jerusalem, the ascent was difficult. I am sure at some point in your life you have climbed a steep hill or mountain. You know how difficult it can be if the ground is wet. I am reminded of this every time I cut my grass too early in the day when the dew remains. I sometimes end up more quickly than I desire in another part of the yard because I lose my footing. Even more difficult is climbing a mountain with loose rocks lying all around. This is descriptive of what these pilgrims endured each and every time they made this ascent. Israel is noted for its slippery and rocky terrain. Further, there were often distractions in the hills. Thieves and robbers hid in the hills much like we see in Westerns, waiting for the stagecoach to pass and overtaking it. Well, the thieves in Palestine did not have stagecoaches, but you get the idea. There was danger along the way to Jerusalem.

Doesn't that describe our own lives at times? We might describe it a little differently, perhaps like a bump in the road or a valley rather than a peak. However we describe it, in our journey of faith we too face slippery slopes or rocky terrain. We have difficulties, distractions, and dangers along the way. And we have no guarantee that there will not be some pain along the way. Some of these probably sprained an ankle or bummed a knee along the way. But God promises to bring His children to safety. **“He will not allow your foot to slip”** means that He will keep you safe from harm, sometimes while keeping you *in* the harm and *in* the danger. Remember Joseph and Job and countless others who experienced loss but were better off for it. **“He will not allow your foot to slip.”** The Lord will uphold you for His glory.

This promised safety is certain because our God never slumbers. He never sleeps. His sovereign protection, His keeping providences are continual, day and night. God is ever awake, ever alert, ever watchful, always focused on the needs of His people. That is what the psalmist proclaims. His assurance is to **“you”** and **“Israel.”** As I stated last week, these psalms were written by individuals at different times for a particular application to their particular circumstance at that time. Psalm 120 was probably written by David while fleeing from King Saul to the Philistines in Gath (1 Sam. 21). Later, these psalms were packaged together for them to use in their festival journeys three times a year to Jerusalem, festivals that were required for the people of God, **“Israel,”** as part of the Old Covenant. So they had a particular application as found here for the Old Covenant people of God. But there are certainly implications for us as the New Covenant people of God.

I think it is important for us, upon this first mention of **“Israel”** in these Psalms, to be clear in our thought as to how this **“Israel,”** the people of God, progresses from the Old to the New. The importance of this will be clearer next week as we encounter “Jerusalem” for the first time and later on “Zion.” Let us briefly consider Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 6:16, “Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, ‘I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.’” What did Paul say? In the context of idols and the temple of God, He said that those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, those who are part of the New Covenant people of God, a New Covenant described by the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, “we,” Paul said, “are the temple of the living God.” What is this a reference to? It is a reference to the Church. And what did Paul give as the support for the Church? Note the covenantal language, “I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.” When did God originally broadcast this? In the Old Testament, but as part of the New Covenant made with the house of Israel and the House of Judah (Jer. 31:33). We will expand on this a bit as we go, but for our purposes this morning I want to point out that covenant Israel always refers to the people of God, which have always been one people of God in God’s economy, a people “saved by grace through faith” (Eph. 2:8). Thus Calvin commented on Psalm 121:4:

To recall each individual to the consideration of the common covenant, he represents the Divine providence as extending to *the whole body of the Church*. In order that each of us for himself may be assured that God will be gracious to him, it behoves us always to begin with the general promise made to all God’s people.³

So what is the psalmist promising to all who are the people of God? We can sleep because He never sleeps! Contrast this with Baal and Elijah’s mocking in 1 Kings 18:27, “Call out with a

³ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Vol. VI: Psalms 93-150*, 66, emphasis mine.

loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened.” Unlike Baal, God never slumbers. So the believer and the people of God can rest knowing that he is safe, that nothing can befall him while he sleeps, because God “**will neither slumber nor sleep.**” “Certainly I will be with you.”

2. Shelter (vv. 5-6)

As these pilgrims made their way, there was a genuine danger of sunstroke or heat exhaustion. There was also the threat of extreme temperature changes at night that could affect those who slept out in the open. So the sun and the moon were potential troubles. Some believe that the moon was a threat, drawn from the Latin word *luna*, from which we derive the English *lunatic*. There was an ancient belief that extended exposure to the moon’s rays could disorder the mind, make one crazy. What the psalmist means, however, is that there is nothing by day or by night that can harm the people of God over which He keeps. He is our shelter, the “**shade on your right hand.**” It is a picture of God’s covering against every danger. His protection is continuous and constant. “Certainly I will be with you.”

3. Security (vv. 7-8)

As we noted earlier, travelers on their journey to Jerusalem faced many evils. Thieves and robbers would hide along the way and wait to pounce, providing a real physical threat. But there were also the spiritual dangers of doubt, discouragement, and despair. As we have seen in our movement from Psalm 120-121, it is a fine line between focusing on the fallen world and all its distractions and faith in the God alone Who can deliver us. The Lord promises to intervene in our lives and protect us physically and spiritually.

And there is the added security in v. 8 that the Lord will “**keep you going out and your coming in.**” The Lord would watch over His people both going to Jerusalem as well as their return home. Do you remember in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* where Bunyan very graphically describes a road to hell that goes even from the gates of the Eternal City? The psalmist is saying that the true child of God will make it through those gates, and will make it into that Eternal City. Through every necessity of life, through every imaginable difficulty, through every strife, through every turmoil, through every heartache, through every pain, He will keep you. And the promise is for all eternity. “Certainly I will be with you.”

Conclusion

1. How has God shown His providential protection in our lives?

(1) Christ

Safety – **Jude 1:24-25** – ²⁴ Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, ²⁵ to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, *be* glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

Shelter – Christ is the ark! Our union with Christ, our being in Him, provides us shelter in the ever changing social environment of a fallen world. He is our shelter, who protects us from

the onslaught of the world but also from the righteous wrath of God's waters of judgment. He is our Deliverer.

Security – John 10:27-30 – ²⁷ “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; ²⁸ and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one.” **Romans 8:35** – Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? **Romans 8:38-39** – ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, *which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

(2) Holy Spirit

Ephesians 1:13-14 – ¹³ In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴ who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God's own* possession, to the praise of His glory.

“Sealed” means “that the Holy Spirit protects and preserves Christians until they reach their inheritance.”⁴

1 Peter 1:3-5 – ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, ⁵ who are protected (kept) by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

2. In whom or in what do you really trust? In whom or in what are you secure? Nothing compares to the protection and security we have in Christ Jesus! Can you sing, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness”?

⁴ *ESV Study Bible*, note on Eph. 1:13, 2263.