

Memory Aids

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Psalm 121

If you've ever been on a long trip with children in the car, or if you know people who have, you realize that it can be challenging to keep them content (and to keep them from fighting with each other). Some people use naming activities such as the alphabet game or the license plate game to keep them occupied. Today technology often comes into play with a video, possibly playing in the van or perhaps the kids using some type of personal device. Another way to keep them happy, however, is to sing.

During my teaching days, there were many field trips where we journeyed by school bus across the state in order to take in the incredible beauty of the State Capitol building in Lansing or to head back in time as we explored historic Greenfield Village in Dearborn.

And often during those trips, someone would start to sing and then others would start to join in the song: B-I-N-G-O, B-I-N-G-O, B-I-N-G-O, and Bingo was his name O. If you know that song, you know that you eliminate a letter on each subsequent verse and replace it with a clap. Other times the bus would be filled with the words about Old MacDonald and his farm, which included naming the many animals he had and the sounds they would make. And rarely did a bus trip go by without the lyrics of "Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall", a song that was usually interrupted by a teacher telling the kids to change their choice of beverage from beer to pop. As we journeyed across the state, the kids would sing to keep themselves occupied and to keep themselves content (even if they didn't realize this was a benefit of their singing).

As the children of God head up through the hills of Judea on their way to Jerusalem for the great feast days, they also sing. But they don't sing little ditties like what was heard in the school bus; they sing deep spiritual songs, songs like Psalm 121, for although they are traveling physically from their homes all over the Promised Land to God's home in the temple in Jerusalem, their journey is really a spiritual one. They are on a journey into the very presence of God, so they need songs to help them remember what's really important.

Staying focused on these journeys is not easy, for the trip can be hard. These pilgrims are not on a pleasure trip in an air-conditioned car nor on a weekend get-away on a chartered motor coach. These people are riding on donkeys or walking on their own two feet along steep paths that are narrow and treacherous, and the dangers before them could include things like wild animals, bandits, falls, injuries, and even possible heat stroke. They have likely either experienced these perils before, seen them experienced by others, or heard the rumors that are circulating about them.

Some of you may have also experienced the challenges of mountain climbing or hill climbing, perhaps you even did it in the Holy Land itself, so you know the difficulties involved with it. But all of us, whether we have been mountain climbing or not, have experienced times when we feel like life is an uphill climb, times when cancer or stroke, depression or anxiety, financial strife or family instability make the journey of life more difficult. We also see this in the lives of others: our friends, our family members, our fellow church members. We think of all of the challenges that are before them and us, and it can seem overwhelming and downright discouraging, especially when our faith may be a bit weak.

But we can take a lesson from the pilgrims who sing this song. As darkness falls about them or as the blazing sun beats down upon their backs, they find comfort in the Lord their God. Their singing of this Psalm becomes an emotionally uplifting chant, raising their spirits as the path rises ever upward toward the city of God. The singing of this Psalm is like a memory aid that helps them to remember.

And what do they remember as they sing? Many things. Many things are packed in these eight verses. First of all, they remember that God never slumbers nor sleeps. While Baal worshipers, like we find in the story with Elijah in 1 Kings 18, believed it was necessary to wake up their gods, our God, the all-seeing

Yahweh, is always awake and alert. He doesn't take breaks for lunch and dinner, he doesn't slow down or stop, and he doesn't ever get distracted. There are no vacations or holidays for him; he is always on the job.

Verses 3-4, where we read about his ever-present activity, is also where we read that he keeps our feet from slipping. The Psalmist here is not referring to physical slipping or injury, something most of us have experienced at times, nor is he talking about stumbling morally. We've all done that as well. Rather, he is talking about spiritual slipping. This passage includes the promise that no matter what happens to us, the Lord will not let our foot slip off the path that leads to him.

The Psalmist continues to sing of God's goodness in verses 5-6, where he speaks of the Lord being our shade so that the sun will not harm us by day nor the moon by night; phrases that refer to the challenges we face in life. Yes, trials, such as ones we mentioned previously, may come your way, but the Lord will care for you so that the dangers of this world will not keep you from your destination. And he will also provide the "shade" we need, the spiritual refreshment along life's journey.

And then in verse 7, we read something that sounds a bit startling: "The Lord will keep you from all harm." These words, as one author noted, tend to stick in our throat a bit, because we have all experienced some type of "harm" in our life. But the word harm in this text doesn't mean hurtful things; it means evil. And the word life means soul.

In other words, as we journey with God, we can sing and remember that he will not let evil harm our soul. Even in the midst of a journey that can be hard and painful, God will keep evil from destroying our soul. In fact, even in the valley of the shadow of death, as we read in Psalm 23, we will not have to fear any evil, for he will take care of us so that we can eventually meet him face to face.

All of these traits of God are things to sing about, things that lift our spirits, things that are worth remembering. However, probably the main thing to remember in this Psalm, and what we might call the thesis of the passage, is the refrain that runs throughout it, a refrain that is included five different times in this passage: the Lord (Yahweh), the Maker of heaven and earth, watches over us. In fact, it is, in essence, the overarching theme of all that we've already mentioned so far.

As we travel through this world on the way to meet our Maker face to face, we can count on that, and remember, that Yahweh is watching over us. That word watches is the Hebrew word *shamar*, a verb that means to protect, to preserve, and to guard. But what exactly does that look like?

Sometimes when the Lord watches over us, he gets directly involved and actually fights our battles for us. We often think of these times as miracles. Sometimes when he watches over us, he partners with us, so that while we're working with him, we can feel a sense of cooperation as we're being led by the Holy Spirit. Still other times when he watches us, as one author noted, he overwatches us, a term that may be new to many of us (it was to me).

Back in 2007, an article was featured in the New York Times Magazine by William Safire entitled "Overwatch." Safire had heard President George W. Bush use the term in a speech about the war going on in Iraq at the time. "Our troops," the President said, "will shift from leading operations to partnering with Iraqi forces and eventually overwatching those forces."

Never having heard that word before, Safire, a wordsmith, assumed that it was some sort of political jargon. But what he discovered, upon further investigation, is that the word is actually military language with a long history. Here's the technical definition: *overwatch* is "a tactical movement technique in which one element is positioned to support the movement of another element with immediate fire." Perhaps an example can help explain this better.

Let's say a group of tanks is engaged in direct battle with an enemy. There are, however, several more groups of tanks up in the hills surrounding the battlefield, who can at a moment's notice pour down fire on the enemy if needed. Those tanks on the hills are overwatching the situation, not leading, nor partnering, but overwatching.

And it's not just in the military where we see this. Think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when Judas leads that crew of soldiers to arrest him. As they surround Jesus, Peter whips out his sword and hacks

off the ear of the high priest's servant (although he was likely aiming for the man's neck). Jesus puts the ear back on, tells Peter to put his sword away, and says, "Don't you know that I could have called on my Father, and he would have sent 12 legions of angels to help?" Twelve legions is 72,000 angels! Although invisible to the disciples, those angels were overwatching them, with enough power to easily handle the enemy. When the disciples felt overwhelmed and alone, God was watching over them.

At times like this in our own lives, times when we may feel overwhelmed and alone, we may think that he isn't watching, but he is surveying the whole terrain of our lives, ready to provide help when and how it is most needed.

Psalm 121, this treasured song in the Psalter, assures us that Yahweh, the Creator of the heavens and earth watches over us. He is the one the pilgrims remember and about whom they sing as they lift their eyes up to the hills. But today we can sing not just about Yahweh but about "Yahweh Saves," which, as many of you probably know, is the meaning of the name, Jesus. We sing of him because he is watching over us today at the Father's right hand, while also interceding for us. And we sing of him because he is the one who knew we needed a helper here on earth, so he sent his Holy Spirit to be among us.

Tonight, we remember Jesus in a powerful way...at the table, a place that also serves as a spiritual memory aide, for Jesus said whenever you do this, eating the bread and drinking the cup, you remember me. It is a place where we remember and proclaim Christ's tremendous sacrifice, a place where we are united as brothers and sisters in Christ, a place where we are fed not only physically but also spiritually, and a place where we receive his grace and are drawn closer to him.

This evening, and always, may God enable us, by his Holy Spirit, to be people who do not forget but who remember through his Word that we read and hear, through the songs that we sing on our journey of life, and through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, that God loves us and is watching over us at all times. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. ©Chad Boorsma