



VIRTUES FOR DISCIPLES

TRUST

Confidence in the God of Salvation

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Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited for you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each chapter.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the day for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume is one of several volumes that explore the theme **Virtues for Disciples**. Each of us is called to be a disciple, a follower of Christ. The life of a disciple is challenging but it is the most fulfilling way to live. Called by name by the God who created us, we are shaped by the teachings of Christ and continually guided by the Holy Spirit. As we grow more deeply into this identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, we discover the valuable virtues that mark God's people.

The Pilgrim's Song of Trust



Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read through Psalm 121, one of the psalms that pilgrims prayed as they approached Jerusalem.

Psalm 121

¹A song of ascents.

**I raise my eyes toward the
mountains.**

**From whence shall come my
help?**

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

**³He will not allow your foot to slip;
or your guardian to sleep.**

**⁴Behold, the guardian of Israel
never slumbers nor sleeps.**

**⁵The LORD is your guardian;
the LORD is your shade
at your right hand.**

**⁶By day the sun will not strike you,
nor the moon by night.**

**⁷The LORD will guard you from all evil;
he will guard your soul.**

**⁸The LORD will guard your coming and going
both now and forever.**

After a few moments of quiet reflection on Psalm 121, consider some background information offered in “Setting the Scene.”

Setting the Scene

The book of Psalms is a collection of collections of prayers. Psalm 121 belongs to one such collection (120–134) known as the “songs of ascents.” These prayers were probably used by pilgrims as they went up or “ascended to” Jerusalem or as they took part in some celebration of a Jewish feast. Although this collection contains different types or genres of psalms, it does possess some common characteristics. Overwhelming trust in God, hopeful requests for forgiveness, and gratitude for the Lord’s bounty toward his people typify this collection. Here the psalmist selects a simple notion or image and proceeds to develop it with an economy of words. These psalms are not cerebral.

On the contrary, they are lyrical, attempting to capture a significant image that compels one to follow attentively and prayerfully. These images often touch upon ordinary, routine matters of daily life, such as the significance of spouse and family and the centrality of the home.

The psalms are forms of Hebrew poetry in which symbolism plays a vital role. Their imagery appeals to the imagination and leads one to see God, oneself, and reality from a variety of vantage points. As poetry, they tease the reader

How does the use of symbolism and imagery help you to speak to God in prayer?

to set aside objective canons of prose and indulge oneself in the provocative and many-sided glimpses of the symbolic world. Such a world provides not only tempting delights but also stringent demands.

Understanding the Scene Itself

The entire psalm will be considered a few verses at a time. The occasional questions in the margin (as above) are for discussion with others. If you are using these materials on your own, use the questions for personal reflection or as a guide to journaling.

**¹I raise my eyes toward the mountains.
From whence shall come my help?
²My help comes from the LORD,
the maker of heaven and earth.**



The pilgrim begins by catching a glimpse of the mountains in the distance. At this juncture the pilgrim raises questions about his or her own personal safety as the journey is beset with perils. For example, he or she is preoccupied with the danger of stumbling on the rocky terrain. This naturally prompts the pilgrim to seek help. The security provided by the hill country on the way to the Jerusalem temple (see 1 Kgs 20:23) piques the pilgrim's interest. The moun-

tains, therefore, offer a military and strategic sense of relief. However, the pilgrim moves from this objective sense of defense to a personal issue. His help will come from the Lord himself who resides in the temple within the holy city of Jerusalem. With the Lord there is always an abundance of help. (“Help” often has a military connotation as in “help and shield” [see Deut 33:29; Pss 33:20; 115:9-11].)

“The maker of heaven and earth” functions as more than a passing nod to God’s work “in the beginning” as in Genesis 1. “Heaven and earth” is a merism, that is, an expression that combines different elements to represent a whole series. “Heaven and earth,” therefore, stands for the universe. As the prophet Isaiah has particularly elaborated, creation is not a divine enterprise consigned only to the beginning. Rather, creation is an ongoing reality—God continues to create and resolve the crises of both Israel and the individual believer.

The pilgrim, therefore, in Psalm 121, does not employ an aimless epithet in addressing the Lord as “the maker of heaven and earth.” The pilgrim’s God is one with credentials who has intervened creatively in the past and can do so again.

When has an appreciation for creation led you to a deeper sense that God is worthy of your trust?

³He will not allow your foot to slip;
or your guardian to sleep.

⁴Behold, the guardian of Israel
never slumbers nor sleeps.

Given the terrain, the pilgrim can easily experience the danger of slipping. Ever alert, however, the Lord offsets this danger by assuring the traveler of constant protection. As Psalm 66:8-9 notes, the psalmist calls upon his audience to break out in praise of his God “[w]ho has kept us alive / and not allowed our feet to slip.” The Lord’s persistent care, therefore, more than meets the challenges of the rocky terrain.

Verse 4 introduces the overriding motif in this psalm, namely, guarding. The noun “guardian” and the verb “guard” occur a total of six times. This reassuring image recalls God’s protection of the people of Israel on their perilous journey in the exodus, that is, from the land of bondage to the relative security of the Promised Land. In the covenant renewal ceremony at the close of the book of Joshua the people acknowledge, “He performed those great signs before our very eyes and protected us along our entire journey and among all the peoples through whom we passed” (Josh 24:17).

What life events have made you aware of God as your guardian?

In blessing the Israelites, the priests begin their prayer with, “The LORD bless you and *keep* you!” (Num 6:24). While the ordinary setting for this blessing is the sanctuary where the Israelites are to present themselves three times a year (Exod 23:14-17; 34:22-23), the prayer requests God’s guardianship in the midst of all life’s concrete problems—a request that fittingly includes the pilgrim’s trek to the temple to fulfill the requirement mentioned above. Such divine protection amply demonstrates the second petition of

the Aaronic or priestly blessing, namely, God's shining face and accompanying graciousness.

To reassure the pilgrim of God's ongoing oversight and alertness, the psalmist asserts in verse 4 that Israel's guardian "never slumbers nor sleeps." Being awake symbolizes alertness and readiness to take action. Although certain psalms (Pss 7:7; 44:24; 59:6) beseech God to awake and intervene on behalf of the people, in this psalm there is no need. The Lord is ever vigilant, constantly ready to enter the fray and protect his people. The Lord, therefore, is unlike Jesus' disciples who fail their Master by falling asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:40; Mark 14:37; Luke 22:45).

**⁵The LORD is your guardian;
the LORD is your shade
at your right hand.
⁶By day the sun will not strike you,
nor the moon by night.**

*The Lord is ever
vigilant,
constantly ready
to enter the fray
and protect his
people.*

Verse 5 serves as the center of the entire psalm by reinforcing the predominant image of "guard/guardian." The psalmist adds to this central metaphor by developing the image of shade. In this regard Psalm 121 shares much in common with Psalm 91, another psalm of trust or confidence. In that psalm the psalmist depicts his audience as those "who abide in the shade of the Almighty" (Ps 91:1) with the assurance that the Lord dispatches his angels "to *guard* you wherever you go" (Ps 91:11).

How has God provided shade for you in recent years? What does that mean to you?

God as shade or shadow often occurs in the formulation “in the shade/shadow of your wings” (Pss 57:2; 63:8). There are at least two explanations for such usage in Psalm 121. In the first view the wings refer to the winged creatures (the cherubim) who guard the ark of the covenant (God’s throne) in the temple (Exod 25:18-22; 1 Kgs 6:23-28). Since the object of the pilgrim’s journey is the temple, such an interpretation suits the context of the psalm.

In the second view the wings depict God as a mighty bird, for example, an eagle that keeps constant watch over the needs of its brood, namely, the Israelites. The book of Exodus exemplifies this imagery when the Lord describes his protection of the newly arrived former slaves at Mount Sinai: “You have seen . . . how I bore you up on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exod 19:4; see also Deut 32:11-12). What commends the second view is the image of personal protection that is so central to Psalm 121.

Verse 6 with its reference to day and night underlines the constancy of the Lord’s ongoing solicitude. Exposure to the Palestinian sun can pose considerable danger to the traveler (see Isa 49:10). However, the psalmist rules out this danger since the Lord will prevent the sun from striking the pilgrim. In the ancient Near East the moon was often thought to cause serious problems. (See Matthew 4:24 where lunatics [from the Latin “luna” = “moon”] figure among those cured by Jesus.) Closely allied once again with Psalm 121, Psalm 91:5 also includes the dangers of the day and night.

⁷The LORD will guard you from all evil;
he will guard your soul.

⁸The LORD will guard your coming and going
both now and forever.

Here the psalmist reintroduces the central metaphor of “guard” no less than three times. In the first instance it is the guarding from all evil. “Evil” refers the reader back to all the dangers mentioned in the preceding verses. The God of this psalm continues to show a vested interest in all the difficulties and problems faced by the pilgrim. In the second instance the psalmist reassures the pilgrim that God will guard his or her soul. The Hebrew word translated “soul” derives from a root meaning throat. Throat is linked to breathing and the fundamental life force comes from breathing. Hence “soul” stands for life itself. Here the psalmist assures the pilgrim that God will guard his or her life or person.

In the third instance the author employs another merism, namely, coming and going (see Deut 28:6). Every departure, therefore, and every arrival come under God’s close scrutiny and care. Absolutely nothing escapes his attention. As a result, the pilgrim has every reason to indulge in divine trust and confidence. “Now and forever” heightens this sense of trust and confidence by emphasizing the aspect of perpetuity.

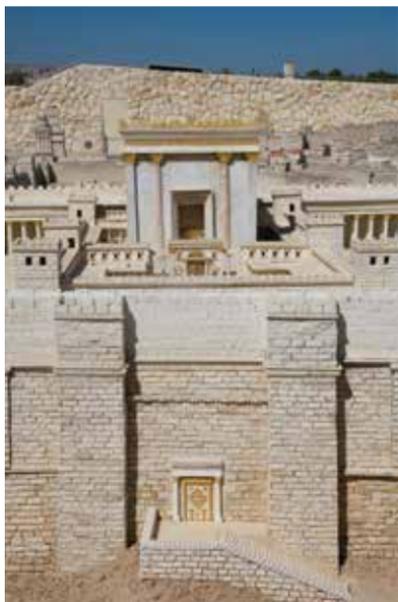
The psalmist employs the device of inclusion to round off his composition. Inclusion is the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning and at the end. In verse 1 the pilgrim inquires where his help will *come* from. In verse

Consider these connections between soul and breathing. Consider too that Genesis speaks of the Creator breathing the “breath of life” into the dust of the ground to create humans (Gen 2:7). How do these images speak to you?

8 the pilgrim hears the reassuring message that God will guard both his *coming* and his going. Besides defining the limits of the poem, the inclusion unifies the whole composition.

To sum up, the pilgrim has raised his eyes to take in the view of the city walls and the natural defense of the surrounding mountains. His glance catches sight of the heavens and the pilgrim instantly recalls the role of the Lord as the maker of heaven and earth. The glance has functioned as the interrogator and, having reflected on the heavens, receives a totally satisfying response that the Lord will answer his or her prayer by the message of universal concern developed in the psalm as a whole. This God is indeed an involved deity who projects an image of relentless concern.

Perhaps another scenario revealing the impact of the mountains on the pilgrim is the experience of countless waves of immigrants in the past as they sailed for the first time into New York harbor and experienced the Statue of Liberty. After a long and often arduous voyage, these immigrants sense the thrill of having made it to a new homeland with the prospect of safety and ultimate success. The sight of Miss Liberty with her welcoming torch may capture the intense feelings of the pilgrim as he or she views the sur-



rounding mountains, the defense walls of the city, and ultimately the splendor of the Jerusalem temple where the God of Israel resides. The haunting final verse of this psalm must impact and heighten one's emotions: "The LORD will guard your coming and going / both now and forever."

Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

Spend a few moments imagining what it would have been like to journey through the barrenness of the desert toward the bustling sacred city of Jerusalem. Place yourself in the scene.

- *Perhaps you are among those making the pilgrimage on foot to celebrate a religious feast. Are you young or are you one of the older members of the group? Is this your first pilgrimage or have you traveled this route before?*
- *Maybe you are a member of the military guard assigned to watch from the ancient walls as you see a band of pilgrims approach. What might capture your attention from the vantage point you choose?*

Allow those images and thoughts to emerge. What would be the value of making an ancient prayer your own prayer as you approach the city? Does it connect you with previous generations who have traveled that route?

In your own life, what previous works of God have helped you to trust in God more deeply as

you make this pilgrimage we call life? Take the time to compose even a brief prayer to the God who has provided protection for you, who has led you safely through the dangers you have encountered along the way so far.

Help me, Lord, to desire your presence, and to make my way toward you among the people whom you call your own. Stir in me the memories of your guiding presence in my life and in those who have gone before me. Renew in me the ability to see your protection and, in seeing, to walk with greater confidence in your goodness and mercy.

Living the Word

Commit yourself, as the psalmist did, to acknowledging that your help comes from the Lord. Ask for an opportunity to be an instrument of God's help and protection to someone else who is doing his or her best to succeed in this world. Perhaps this person is your neighbor who has lost his or her way, a young friend who is struggling, a coworker who is weary, a parishioner who is blinded by defeat. What might you do or say to bear witness to God's help in your own life?