

## “The LORD is Your Keeper”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden  
for 1<sup>st</sup> UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, October 13, 2024

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*Scripture Text: Psalm 121 [NRSV]*

### OPENING

The theme for today was driven by Jim’s (Werner) choice of the anthem you just heard – which he gave to us to start working on in the summer, given its musical complexity! It picks up on the fact that Friday evening into last evening was one of the most sacred days of worship for our Jewish brothers and sisters: *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. If you break it apart: at-one-ment.

*Yom Kippur* and *Rosh Hashanah*, form bookends for a ten-day period of repentance called the “Days of Awe”. Jewish teaching holds that during this ten-day period, “The gates of repentance remain open until [on] *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement...” God’s judgement of the heart of every human being and their behavior for the prior year is written into “The Book of Life” [Kolatch, *The Jewish Book of Why*, p. 222 and my sermon of 2016-10-02]. And a new faith year begins with the opportunity for the observant Jew to start again, committing him- or

herself to a life of greater faithfulness to God than might have been the case in the prior year.

And the connection between *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, and the central tenet of the anthem that comes right from Psalm 121 is this: The God of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps but is intimately and unceasingly observant of and concerned with the quality of life for those who follow Him in faith (\*Repeat this\*). And even if we stumble – the lyrics in the anthem were “if walking in grief, we languish” – God is there to restore us. The words in the Psalm are  
*The Lord will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.*

In other words, atonement between us and God is a top priority for God!

### TO THE SCRIPTURES

- I want to explore a thought with you that I’ll put it in the form of a question: What is meant by the word “Israel” in the psalm? (Or “Israelite”?) We often think reflexively of the modern nation state of Israel, but if faithfulness to the Scriptures is important to us, a political entity is not what is in view here.  
→ If we read the Scriptures faithfully and attentively, we’ll see that “Israel” carries with it an understanding not of a nation state but of a people, a people faithful to Yahweh, especially as understood and extolled by the prophets: *A people of justice, who love mercy, and who walk humbly with God* (e.g., Micah 6:8 but also throughout the prophets).

→ And note that none of the LORD's actions in Psalm 121 have to do with granting any forms of prosperity to a nation state. By contrast, the LORD's actions in the psalm have to do with protection, protection of the individual Israelite, especially and specifically from evil. Worldly, temporal privilege is not in view here.

- And so, in the spirit of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, Psalm 121 encourages us to seek the blessings of a relationship of faithfulness and repentance with God, who can be trusted to never be "asleep on the job" of protecting His faithful followers from evil and from harm.

### SERMON THOUGHTS

- I would caution us about something: The words "I", "my", "you", or "your" in connection with God's blessings show up in nearly every verse of the psalm. And this can lead us to misread this Psalm as some sort of special endorsement of God irrespective of our attitudes, actions, and behaviors.

→ In other words, we have to be careful not to assume *a priori* that our attitudes, behaviors, and actions are endorsed by God simply because of the language of the psalm.

Because like "I", "my", "you", or "your" that occur in nearly every verse of the Psalm, so "the one watching over Israel", "the LORD," also occurs in nearly every verse!

→ So, as I see it at least, the psalm calls us to implore God through the power of His Spirit to align our attitudes, behaviors, and actions with His, so that our lives might be evidence of God's gracious providence as celebrated in the Psalm.

### CONCLUSION

This is subtle, but if we shift our focus from Israel – or us – to God, we get a fresh perspective on the psalm. And the natural response is PRAISE for God's providential care for us as taught in the psalm. This is very different from having the focus on us and God's apparent endorsement of our "righteousness", a focus which leads to pride and arrogance – the opposites of the purposes of the "Days of Awe" and Yom Kippur.

My point is that Psalm 121 is about highlighting the nature of God and God's goodness and providential care for those He loves and who love Him. And that redirects my attention from an unhealthy focus on me to a healthy focus on God. And with the right focus, atonement – at-one-ment with God – comes clearly into view.

<sup>7</sup> *The Lord will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.*

<sup>8</sup> *The Lord will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and forevermore.*

Thanks be to God!