

Is God always awake?

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[0 : 00] So today we are focusing on Psalm 121, and I do encourage you to have your Bibles open in front of you. You can have a look at that psalm. I'm going to make a few comments as we introduce the psalm, and then we'll tuck in and have a look at some of the aspects of the text itself.

Now, most of us probably know that the psalms are poems that were written by Old Testament people of faith who reflected on their lives and the struggles they bring in the light of God's Word and the Gospel, in the Old Testament understanding, I suppose, of that term.

And often the psalms reflect on the fact that our struggles in the Christian life tend to contradict what we believe about God and what we experience.

We believe something about God because we're encouraged to do so in Scripture, in the Gospel, but there are times when our experience seems to contradict what we know about God.

Now, for example, we might know that God never sleeps, in theory. But often our experience of Him causes us to doubt whether that is indeed the case.

[1 : 15] Sometimes we feel that God is asleep when we look at what's going on out there in the world, in our town, when we look at the struggles of our fellow Christians, members of our families, when we look at our own struggles, when we look at the kind of issues that we've perhaps had to deal with in the last few months, there are indeed times, moments, where we ourselves doubt whether God is really awake.

Now, the idea of God not being asleep or being awake is at the center of our psalm today. Before we look at Psalm 121 in more detail, however, you might also be interested to know that the psalms are divided into five books.

Not all of us knew that. These five books probably model the first five books of the law or the first five books of the Old Testament. It's quite interesting.

And Psalm 121 is placed into the fifth book of the psalms. And it is one of 15 psalms that deal with Jerusalem coming up to Jerusalem for worship.

And according to the scholars, and I think that this is certainly plausible, this psalm features a pilgrim, a worshipper, an Israelite who has come from some remote part of Israel and he's come up to the temple in Jerusalem to worship.

[2 : 40] And now, as he writes the psalm, he is contemplating the long journey home. So, in other words, the focus of the psalm is not so much Sunday or our worship at church, but rather our Monday to Friday worries.

It seems that the contents of the latter part of the psalm might have come even from a prayer of thanksgiving, which would have been prayed at the temple in Jerusalem near the end of the service by those travelers and pilgrims who now have to depart from the city and go home, as many had come a long way.

So, in other words, now the service is over and the pilgrim worshipper has to return home, wherever that might be. Now, if this is true, then the setting again of the psalm is not church worship on Sunday, but rather perhaps the worries which plague all the believers down the ages from Monday to Friday as we, of course, journey through life.

What is going to happen to you this Monday? Many of us probably have the coming week on our own minds as we sit before the Word of God this morning.

What will happen to me this week? I have to deal with these projects, these clients. I have to go back and deal with the boss.

[4 : 12] What is going to happen to me this week when I hit the rat race again? Where will my help come from? Now, in Psalm 121, this Old Testament man of faith has traveled a long way, perhaps, to the temple to worship.

Now, bearing in mind the fact that in the ancient world, travel was a dangerous enterprise, fraught with dangers. You could have been attacked by robbers.

It was also quite an expensive thing to travel long distances in the ancient world. So why, as a matter of interest, does our pilgrim worshiper travel all this distance to Jerusalem?

Or, to put it in 21st century language, why go to church in the first place? Well, the scriptures tell us that it is ultimately only in the context of the place of worship, coming under the instruction of the Word of God, and within the context of Christian fellowship, that we can make sense of our busy and often complicated lives.

It is only in this context that we will be able to make sense of our existence and come to understand God's purposes for our existence and our lives, and, of course, the great answers to our anxieties and our worries.

[5 : 41] And that is why he made this journey to the temple, and I trust that's why you come to church on a Sunday. So with that in mind, let's have a look at the structure of the psalm in more detail.

It's quite interesting. If we look at how it's laid out, it's really laid out into two sections. The first section is very short. It really just comprises verse 1, where our writer lays out his concern.

Where does my help come from? The second section of the psalm comprises the rest of it all, from verse 2 to verse 8, where we have the answer. My help comes from the Lord.

So with that in mind, let's have a look at the first verse. Our writer is worried about something. Have a look at verse 1. Something is on his mind. There's something perhaps eating away at him.

Where does my help come from? He is anxious about something. Of course, after church on Sunday, again, many of us also face the first day of our working week with similar worries.

[6 : 45] But what worried our writer? It was worrying him enough for him to sit down and put it into a psalm. And here it is in our Bible.

It was something serious. And yet, fascinatingly, we don't know what it is. What was worrying our writer? What obstacles was he facing as he went home?

What issues was he having to deal with? Well, fascinatingly, as readers of the Bible and the psalm, we don't know. And it's not important that we do.

The problem's not the focus here. It's the solution that we need to concentrate on. So in the sovereignty of God, as the Spirit of God inspires this man to write the psalm, the focus is not so much on the problem but the solution.

Observe also, as I say, that you've got one verse devoted to the problem, the rest devoted to the solution.

[7 : 51] Look at verse 2. My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. It's quite interesting that immediately he answers his own question.

Immediately he places his own worry, his own anxiety, whatever it was that was confronting him at that point in his life. He immediately, as a man of faith, puts it into the context of God's revelation to the Church, the Bible.

He puts the problem into the context of God's Word, what he knows about his God. My help, he immediately answers, comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

I think we too need to learn to tackle our own anxieties from our knowledge of God's Word, of course, before they get out of hand. If we are true believers, if we know the Bible, we often know the answers to our own anxieties more than we realize.

And here, this man, as he contemplates going home, the long journey home, he places the significance of his particular life and problems into the overall context of God's sovereign power as the Creator.

[9 : 13] He realizes that if he worships a God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who watches over the mountains, well, such a God is quite capable of watching over him.

What a wonderful reminder. Now, the main idea of the psalm, of course, is this idea that God neither slumbers nor sleeps. But, of course, in saying to us that God does not sleep or slumber, our writer is not simply suggesting that God's eyelids are always open.

It's not simply a biological or a physiological reference, if you were. It's something far more profound than that.

It's something much deeper than that. When he points out to us as his church and as individual believers that God neither slumbers nor sleeps, our writer is saying to us that there never comes a

time when God's focus on the church or his focus on the individual believer somehow slackens off. That somehow God, at times, can lose his focus on my life because he's too busy worrying about what's going on in the United States or in Europe.

[10:27] Our writer points out that God, as the sovereign creator who knows all things, is constantly and at all times focused on fulfilling his purpose and his will for the local church, for the worldwide church, and indeed the purposes of all mankind, as difficult as that is for us to believe.

In the ancient world, if you believed in a particular God, such as Baal, Israel's neighbors believed in Baal. They were called Canaanites.

And when they had a bad harvest or when they didn't get any rain, they would argue that their God was too busy focusing on other things.

So they worshipped Baal and Baal's job as their God was to ensure that they had a good harvest every year. But when they didn't get a good harvest and when there was a famine, that's how they would explain it away.

They would say, no, Baal's big enemy is another God called Mot, the God of death. And they believed that Baal and Mot were always arguing with each other.

[11:42] And so that when Baal wasn't doing his job and focusing on the needs of his people, that was because Baal was busy in an argument with Mot and was probably losing.

And this went on year after year in the Canaanite mind. Now you see, our writer of the psalm is fully aware of this nonsense. So he writes and he says, As the true creator of heaven and earth, the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, never loses focus on his people.

He's never slack. He never allows his attention to wander. I see that sometimes in class as I lecture my students. If it's a particularly complex lecture, I can see having been a preacher for many years when my students' attention is wondering.

And you know that as a teacher, that happens. It's part of being human. Well, our writer points out that's not the case with God. God neither slumbers nor sleeps.

Now, why does he write this? Why is it necessary for our psalmist to remind us that God neither slumbers nor sleeps? Well, the answer, of course, is obvious.

[12:52] And I alluded to it a bit earlier that much of the time as his people, as believers, whether we are Israelites or whether we are Christians, we doubt that that's the case.

We don't really believe that God is able to watch over us and our families and our children, ensuring that his will comes to pass in our lives all the time.

In fact, for most of us, God often appears to be asleep rather than awake. And yet in the NIV translation of the Bible, five times the word watches or watch appears.

In the old days, they never had highlight pens. They never underlined things to catch our attention, what they used to do in the days of the Bible. If you wanted to catch somebody's attention, you repeated yourself over and over and over and over and over and over again.

And that's what he does. Five times. God is awake. God is watching. God's sovereign power is working itself out in the world, irrespective of what we think, irrespective of how we feel.

[14:02] I don't know about you, but my emotions from Monday to Friday never stay constant. They are up and down. Once again, it's part of being a human being. But we're reminded here in the psalm, and of course in the gospel, that you must never run your Christian life and your dependence on God on the basis of how you feel.

You might not feel that God is awake, that God's purposes are fulfilling themselves in the lives of your kids and in your own life, whatever your circumstances.

You might not necessarily feel that way, but nevertheless, that is the factual nature of reality, writes our psalmist.

How is God able to watch over Israel, over his people all the time? Well, because he neither slumbers nor sleeps. Now, I find that very difficult, of course, to accept as a human being.

And as I get older, I find it difficult for me to focus on anything for too long. I find I need a break. I find I need to go and look at other things. The idea that my heavenly father doesn't sleep, doesn't need a holiday, doesn't need a break, but is constantly focused, as focused on my life as he is on everything else, well, that is something that I just cannot accept.

[15:20] How can God be as concerned about my existence as he is about the United States or Europe? It's impossible. God is busy looking at the more important things, and when he has a little bit of time on his hands, he might focus on little old me.

Well, that's not what our writer is saying. God is equally capable of focusing just as intensely on his purposes for my life as he is, as he focuses on everything else.

That is just truly remarkable, isn't it? It's unbelievable. It's wonderful beyond description and enormously comforting. He watches over his children all the time.

His providential watching is never interrupted, irrespective of what you experience and how you feel. Now, we know, of course, that our earthly fathers have let us down in the past, and earthly parents know that it isn't always possible for us to watch over our children as much as we try.

We worry about them. Remember when I had to write an exam, I must have been about 12 years old, and I had to get to school early that morning and write an exam because we were writing, I think it was English, at about half past eight that morning, and we all relied on my dad to wake us up at six in the morning.

[16:40] In fact, I didn't even bother with an alarm clock because every morning during the week, I'd be very angry if he did it on Saturday, every morning during the week at six o'clock sharp, the light would go on and he'd wake me up and I'd get dressed and he'd take us to school.

I remember waking up that morning with a sense of panic. It was eight o'clock, I was writing in half an hour's time, and my dad hadn't woken me up because my dad had slept in. My dad was asleep. I ran into my folks' room and my dad was snoring fast asleep, and I was so shocked that my dad had let me down. And I remember after writing the exam, it was a total disaster, rushed off to school, didn't have any breakfast, and I remember feeling so disappointed in my dad.

You know, as we grow up, we discover that our earthly fathers, who we once saw as being invincible and perfect, are far from actually being so. In different ways, as much as we love them, they do go to sleep when we need them.

Of course, the danger is we then start to ponder whether or not God would also let us down, whether our Heavenly Father might also be caught napping when we need him the most. And of course, our psalm writer says that's never going to be the case.

[17:52] Now let's take up our Bible, and I want you to turn to Mark chapter 4, because I want us to have a look that even for the disciples, even for Jesus' disciples, there were moments when they believed that Jesus was asleep.

Even Christians have the same problem. Turn to Mark chapter 4, and I'm just going to quickly read to you from verse 35 to verse 41. It's the famous story, we all know, it's about Jesus sleeping in the back of the boat.

And the disciples, they're busy going across the Sea of Galilee, and one of these terrible storms came out of nowhere, and they're in the middle of the storm. That day, it says in verse 35, Mark chapter 4, when evening came, he said to his disciples, let us go over to the other side.

And leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was in the boat. And there were also other boats with him. And a furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.

Jesus was in the stern, sleeping. Sleeping on a cushion. And the disciples woke him up and said to him, Teacher, don't you care if we drown? And he got up, rebuked the wind, and said to the waves, Quiet, be still.

[19:05] And then the wind died down, and was completely calm. And he said to his disciples, Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith? They were terrified and asked each other, Who is this?

Even the wind and the waves obey him. Now, I know that you know the story, so I'm not going to comment on it in any length today. But let me just make a few remarks about that story. First of all, you'll observe that although Jesus was undoubtedly genuinely asleep at the time, it's quite clear that he's testing the disciples' faith during a time of great need.

Secondly, observe in the story how extreme their need was. When a professional fisherman gives up on life, then you know you're dealing with a mother of all storms.

Probably demonically inspired would be my guess. In fact, they're so despairing of getting out of the situation, they don't wake up Jesus to say, Please help us.

They wake him up to get one last little jibe in before they drown. We're not going to drown until we've told you what we think of you, that you've let us down. They just want to get one last criticism in before they get swamped by the waves.

[20:13] And then you'll observe, of course, when Jesus awakes, in a terrifying display of power, he calms the storm.

You will appreciate the fact that they were terrified of the storm, but then they were even more terrified of Jesus, when just for a moment, this happens with Jesus every now and again in the Gospels, where just for a moment, just a tiny little bit of his sovereign power shows itself, and the disciples are absolutely terrified and blown away.

So Jesus doesn't show his power here, really. All he does is he wakes up, and he just gives him a little inkling of his power, and of course now they're more terrified of him than they are of the storm. And of course Jesus is showing the disciples that God is never asleep at all.

And this passage wasn't written for them, of course. This passage, this story in Mark's Gospel, was written for us, for the Church. But now we come to the interesting part of the story, and that is Jesus' challenge to the Church, Jesus' challenge to us to have faith.

I've always struggled with that. That doesn't make sense to me. Where is your faith? For years I struggled with that part of the story. I said to myself, you know, if I was one of the disciples, and I'm in this boat, and there's this terrible storm, the mother of all storms, it comes out of nowhere, and I'm going to drown.

[21 : 35] And the Lord Jesus stands up, and he calms the storm, and then he says to me, we're going to just test your faith now. I'd get 10 out of 10. I'm sure I would pass with flying colors.

How would your faith be if the Lord Jesus just stood up and calmed all of the storms in your life? How would you score 1 to 10 in your faith? Well, I'd get 10 out of 10. Their faith must have been pretty much 10 out of 10 at that time.

So why does Jesus ask them, where is your faith? Well, of course, the real issue is that our faith is not tested while God is clearly awake, calming our storms.

It's their faith, while he was apparently asleep, that is being tested. You see, our faith is tested when God is seemingly not interested in the world.

God is, it would appear, not interested in our lives and our problems. It is then that we need to have faith. You see, that's the point of the story. Dawned on me some years ago.

[22 : 39] Blew my mind when I really understood what the Lord Jesus was challenging the disciples about. So finally and fifthly, in this little story in the New Testament, what is Jesus saying? He's saying that God is never asleep when it comes to the needs of his people.

So as we come towards a conclusion, we need to talk a little bit, I want to talk a little bit about signs, because it's nice and controversial.

How's that? You know, so many people have come to me over the years and have said to me, you know, Mark, you're our pastor. We just want you to know that if God gave us a sign, an overwhelming sign that he cares and that he's awake, that he cares for our lives, he cares for the world, it would be so much easier to preach the gospel.

If we could just get a sign from God that he cares, it would make such a big difference in my life and my faith. And I have to confess, over the years, I have secretly also longed for some kind of sign from God that he neither slumbers nor sleeps.

Now, perhaps we need to stop the sermon and perhaps I need to pray for such a sign. How's that? You can see Nick's starting to get worried.

[24 : 03] Rightly so. But perhaps we need to do that. Why don't we stop the sermon and we can all break into groups and pray for a sign. How's that? Well, before I do that, let's think about this a little bit further.

Let me ask you a couple of questions. Let's say God is willing to give us this miraculous sign that we all want. Proof that he's awake.

And let's say the Lord is willing to give us the sign, not today, but how about yesterday? How would you feel?

Well, I'm sure you'd feel the same way. I would feel. I would say, that's fine. He can give it to me today. He can give it to me tomorrow. He can give it to me yesterday. I don't care.

But I just would love a sign. Okay, fair enough. Let me ask you another question. Let's say God is willing to give us the sign. A sign so powerful that he cares for the church, that he is on his throne, that he cares for the human race.

[25 : 11] A sign that is so powerful that it would span all the ages. How would you feel if God said to us today, I'm going to give you the sign, you'll get the sign, but I'm going to give it to you a year ago.

I won't give it to you today. I won't give it to you tomorrow, but I've given it to you a year ago. Well, I suppose you would probably answer in lines similar to my answer.

I would say, Lord, I don't care. As long as you can show me the sign. I don't care if I get it tomorrow or the next day or today or yesterday. Even a year ago, if only I could just have a sign.

Churches are so concerned about getting this kind of sign. There are churches out there that are built on the basis of trying to ask God for signs all the time.

Now, I'm in a position to tell you this morning that we don't have to actually ask God for a sign. We don't have to stop the sermon and break into groups for those of you who are worried. God has given us the sign.

[26 : 14] And he didn't give us, he's not going to give it to us today and he's not going to have to give it to us tomorrow because it won't be necessary. And he hasn't given it to us a year ago. He's given it to us 2,000 years ago.

A sign that spans the ages. A sign so profound and so powerful. It's a sign that says, I really care. I am awake.

And that, of course, is the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross of Jesus Christ fulfills the psalm by reminding us that God does indeed care.

the cross and the resurrection of Jesus confirms once and for all, whatever you're going through this morning, that our creator never slumbers nor sleeps.

It's a wonderful thing, the cross of Jesus Christ, which is why we preach about it all the time. It offers us so much, doesn't it? It offers us forgiveness of sins, new life, new hope, but it also, in the light of the psalm and its message, tells us something else.

[27 : 15] In the cross of Jesus Christ, God can never again be accused of being asleep. And we will never, ever, ever again have to ask God for some kind of miraculous sign to prove or to show that he cares or that he's awake.

It is God's megaphone crying down the ages. God is there. God is real and God cares for the world and for his church.

Nobody will ever, if they understand the significance of the cross, nobody will ever again be able to say of God, you are asleep, you are slumbering and you don't care.

You are not interested in my life, you don't care about my problems, my sins, my issues. Because in the cross, God crossed into this suffering world.

In the cross, the God of heaven and earth broke into the suffering world for you and I. in a way that our psalmist, although being a man of faith, didn't even begin to appreciate and contemplate.

[28 : 22] The cross of Jesus Christ proclaims to mankind that God is not a disinterested bystander to the hurts and tragedies of the world. The challenge to you, of course, is do you really believe and understand that?

The cross is God's decisive answer to atheism. The cross is God's answer to all those who say God doesn't care and God doesn't exist.

And so, as we wrap up, the question then is, in the light of this psalm and its fulfillment in the gospel, what does it really mean to say I am a Christian?

Now, we know that when we talk about becoming a Christian, we talk about repentance, we talk about trusting in Jesus, we talk about having faith in Jesus and rightly so.

But when we do talk about faith and trust in Jesus, according to this psalm, a Christian is defined as a person who, in the ultimate sense of that word, has decided to stop playing their own God.

[29 : 31] According to this psalm, a Christian, a person of faith, is a person who has decided to stop caring in the ultimate sense for themselves. You might say, what do I mean by that?

Well, of course, we're all control freaks. We all, by nature, wake up in the morning, whether we go to church or not, believing that we must control our own destinies because we're going to do a much, much better job of that than God.

We need to watch over ourselves. We're very, very good, or at least so we think, at watching over our own destinies and laying out our own futures, but we're not very good at handing the job over to God.

You see, the sinful heart by nature will not give God true ownership of our souls. It's just too hard. What if God makes a mistake?

Does God really understand my problem? Can I really entrust all of my heart and my life to Jesus Christ? Is God really awake? What if he makes a mistake?

[30 : 30] God's grace? I'm not saying the Christian no longer cares for himself at all, but the psalm suggests that the ultimate role of watching over myself and laying out my future destiny is no longer mine when I become a Christian.

It is God's. Becoming a Christian is to say I will no longer place watching over myself as my own God as my life's most important task. I'll now get on serving my neighbor and I'll leave the ultimate task of laying out my future destiny to the Lord Jesus Christ. The challenge of the gospel and the psalm, of course, is whether or not you've really done that. It's one thing to proclaim some kind of theoretical faith in the gospel. It's one thing to proclaim that I have some kind of basic trust allegedly in Jesus Christ, but it is very, very different to actually leave the ultimate task truly of watching over myself to Jesus Christ. Because if I've really done that, well then I do indeed believe in the gospel and the cross of Jesus Christ that God neither slumbers nor sleeps.

But do you believe it? That's the rub, isn't it? Do you really believe that God neither slumbers nor sleeps?

If you maintain that you do, well then let me ask you this, who truly watches over your life? who truly watches over your destiny? Is it you? Or is it Christ? Amen.

[32 : 26] Let's bow as we pray for a few moments. Let's take a minute or two as we reflect on the word of God and the gospel. Perhaps you've been struggling in your own faith lately.

Perhaps your heart is riddled with doubt. Perhaps you've come to doubt whether or not God is truly able to watch over your soul. Perhaps you doubt that the cross is indeed God's megaphone down the ages, proclaiming to the world, I am here, I am not silent, and I care.

If you do not come to the Lord this morning quietly in prayer in your own heart, reconsider your doubt before him. Perhaps you need to repent of your doubt, commit the control of your life and your destiny once again to Jesus Christ.

Will you not do that now? Our Father, we thank you that your word proclaims the truth. It tells us that you are a great God who is equally focused on each and every one of his children as he is, on all the great things of the universe.

Thank you, Lord, for sending Jesus Christ, who above all, in his love for us and in his death, his resurrection, has given us that wonderful, priceless sign that spans all the ages, that God neither slumbers nor sleeps.

[34 : 01] Amen.