

**SERMON 2025-10-19**  
**Pastor Steve Johnston**  
**Psalms 121**

[Notes to the preacher are in red in the square brackets]

Roses are red,  
violets are blue,  
Most poems rhyme  
But this one doesn't

Did that make you laugh ... or groan?

How should that wee poem have ended?  
    sugar is sweet,  
    and so are you"

There are structures in poetry that you just seem to know.  
    They give pattern for us to follow along  
        and even let us predict the words and the meaning.

Can you finish this little lament that many men ponder?

I'd rather have fingers than toes,  
I'd rather have ears than a nose.  
And as for my hair,  
I'm glad it's all there,  
I'll be awfully sad, when it ... [wait to let people call this out] .... goes.

The rhyming structure in that limerick is labeled as AABBA  
    [just read those letters – it isn't a Swedish pop group]

The 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> lines rhyme with each other  
    The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> lines also rhyme with each other .

But you didn't need to be told that  
    when you finished the balding man's limerick.  
        You just knew what to expect.

There are also other structure in how words are laid out,  
    and they use the order of the phrases to play off each other.  
        It sounds terribly academic, but when you hear it ... it is quite natural.

Try this: I am stuck on Band-Aid '

[pause for a moment to see if anybody calls out the 2<sup>nd</sup> line ]  
cause Band-Aid's stuck on me!".

The 2<sup>nd</sup> part, or phrase, is similar to the first but a little bit reversed.

They are in CONTRAST with each other.

The pattern here is called a “chiasm” [KAI-az-em,]

It doesn't have rhyme scheme  
but rather a structural scheme.

A chiasm [KAI-az-em,] is about the shape of the phrases.

It is based on the shape of an upper case X

It starts on the left, goes in a bit, the next will go in a bit more,  
then as the phrases or lines continue,  
it comes back out

like the shape of the upper case letter, X

It is from that upper case X that this literary structure

get its name, but use Greek letter that looks like our X

That X is called KAI [spelled Chi ]

and hence “chiasm” [KAI-az-em,]

Perhaps the most well-known modern “chiasm” [KAI-az-em,] is:

“Ask not what your country can do for you,  
ask what you can do for your country.”

So why should you care about this seemingly peculiar linguist structure?

It is throughout all of the bible.

So this isn't new fangled modern teaching – it's old.

Here are two “chiasms” [KAI-az-em,] that are in the New Testament that you already know

.... even if you did realise that you knew them as “chiasms” [KAI-az-em,]

**Matthew 23:12**

"Those who exalt themselves will be humbled,  
and those who humble themselves will be exalted"

**Mark 2:27**

"The Sabbath was made for man,  
not man for the Sabbath"

These examples have TWO simple but contrasting lines –one line goes IN and the other OUT.

This next example has THREE layers:

**Matthew 11:28-30**

[pause after each line to emphasize the line ending]

A: Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,  
B: and I will give you rest.  
C: Take my yoke upon you,  
C': and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart:  
B': and ye shall find rest unto your souls.  
A': For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Did you hear the first and last lines as a pair of contrasting phrases?  
They both talk about “heavy labour and burdens”

The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> lines are another contrasting pair that talk about “rest”.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> lines are pair that are in the centre of the “chiasm” [KAI-az-em,]  
and they talk about “taking and learning.”

THAT CENTRE of the “chiasm” [KAI-az-em,]  
is the **key focus** and the point of Jesus’ words here:  
“take my help and learn from me”.

There is a five layered “chiasm” [KAI-az-em,] in Genesis 6:9–9:29 about the flood.

The first and last line are a matching and contrasting pair that summarize like this:  
Violence in God’s creation,  
contrasting with,  
Covenant blessing and peace.

The key focus in the middle of this five layered “chiasm” [KAI-az-em,] is:  
**GOD’S REMEMBRANCE OF NOAH**

There is significant meaning the “chiasm” structure.

Today’s scripture is Psalm 121. Is this a favourite psalm?

In all the lists of favoured psalms:

**Psalm 23 is always first - the most favoured psalm:**

The LORD is my shepherd.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life

Some lists have **Psalm 91** as the second choice:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High  
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

Other lists place **Psalm 121** as second:

I lift up my eyes to the hills; my help comes from the LORD.

That what we are going to dig into now. Yes it's a "chiasm" structure.

I will read this but maybe you could read along as I recite it.

Your hymn book probably has the psalms  
but their wording might not match some of the words  
I am using.

For example, "watching" and "keeping"  
are different translations of the same word in Hebrew.

**Psalm 121** taken from the New Revised Standard Version - Updated Edition.

<sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come?

<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved;

A <sup>3b</sup> **he who keeps** you will not slumber.

B <sup>4</sup> **He who keeps** Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

C <sup>5</sup> **The LORD is your keeper;** the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

C <sup>7</sup> The LORD **will keep** you from all evil;

B he **will keep** your life.

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

The verb **KEEP** is used 6 times, one each in line of the chiasm.

The 3 going in “KEEP” verbs – that is - going in toward the centre of the CHIASM are participles:

- he who **keeps you** .... will not slumber.
- he who **keeps Israel** ... will neither slumber nor sleep.
- The LORD **is your keeper**;

Participles are verbs that tell you that their action is ongoing.

The action is happening now and is continuing,  
Not a thing that happened once  
Not just that happened in the past  
But is happening now and is continuing.

The three going out and contrasting “KEEP” verbs are imperfect verbs  
which gives them the meaning that their action,  
this “KEEPING” is a continuing event, is persistent  
– it will keep, keeping on.

- The LORD **will keep** you from all evil;
- he **will keep** your life.
- The LORD **will keep** your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and forevermore.

The forevermore at the end just reinforces that persistence.

So what about the middle – the centre of this literary device.

Verse 6 ... The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

It means you will continue to be protected.  
The LORD is your shade at your right hand.

Do you remember Jonah? God’s messenger to Nineveh.

God had sent Jonah to proclaim a message

- it was shortest, most powerful and effective sermon ever delivered:  
Jonah cried out saying:  
“Another forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown!”

Effective? Most certainly.

The people of Nineveh believed God and called for a fast and wore sackcloth—  
from the greatest of them to the least of them.

God relented from the calamity that He said He would do to them, and did not do it.

Jonah spoke to God,

“was **not** this what I said when I was still in my own country?  
That’s what I anticipated,  
for I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God,  
slow to anger and full of kindness, and relenting over calamity.

So please, Adonai, take my soul from me  
—because better is my death than my life.”

Jonah didn’t like that God had been merciful to the people of Nineveh.  
He went off in major huff.

GOD arranged for a broad-leafed tree to spring up.  
It grew over Jonah to cool him off and get him out of his angry sulk.

Shade is a good thing – God protected sulky Jonah.  
The shade God provides is given to protect against all forms of threat,  
even if you don’t recognise it in that moment.

God is keeping watch.  
It is a promise that God is aware of you  
and your situation.  
even if you don’t recognise it in that moment.

There is the story of the person trapped on the roof of their home.  
The river has flooded and the man climbs to the roof.  
He was praying to God for help.  
Soon a man in a rowboat came by and shouted to the man on the roof,  
“Jump in, I can save you.”  
The man shouted back,  
“No, it’s OK, I’m praying to God and he is going to save me.”  
The rowboat went on.

Then a motorboat came by, “Jump in, I can save you” the captain said.  
The stranded man said,  
“No thanks, I’m praying to God and he is going to save me. I have faith.”  
So the motorboat went on.

Then a helicopter came by and the pilot shouted down,  
“Grab this rope and I will lift you to safety.”  
“No thanks, I’m praying to God and he is going to save me. I have faith.”  
The helicopter pilot reluctantly flew away.

The water rose above the rooftop and the man drowned.  
Up in Heaven and the man finally got his chance to discuss this whole situation with God,  
at which point he exclaimed,  
“I had faith in you but you didn’t save me,  
you let me drown. I don’t understand why!”

God replied, “I sent you a rowboat and a motorboat and a helicopter,  
what more did you expect?”

Then there is the TRUE story of **74-year-old Roland Borg**.

In the narrow cobblestone streets of Ystad, (EE-stad)  
a remote village in southern Sweden,  
there is a watch tower.

It is not a purpose built modern tower that you might see in a forested area.  
This is atop the spire of a 13th-century church with a great view  
over the timber-built homes of the town.

And at the very top of that church tower 14 stories up,  
and up a rickety spiral staircase,  
sits is Roland Borg, one of the world’s last night watchmen.  
He climbs the staircase EVERY night and watches from 9 pm until 1 am.

Every 15 minutes he blows a “haunting, bellowed cry” with a four-foot-long copper horn,  
reassuring the town’s 29,000 residents that “all is well.”

Many of people of Ystad, (EE-stad) sleep with their windows open  
so that they can hear the horn blow. It helps them sleep better.

Roland Bord is probably the last of his lineage to hold this job.  
He, and all the fathers before him,  
have been keeping safe the people of Ystad, (EE-stad).

That is what God is promising in Psalm 121.  
We cry out, “from where will my help come?”

Then we get this beautiful poem with its Chiasm structure  
Here it comes  
God is watching  
You will not be forgotten or harmed  
God will always be watching  
and will continue to watch forevermore.

Just like the man on the roof  
whose heart was set on a receiving a miraculous and divine rescue ...  
our help will also come through ordinary people and regular events  
and we might not recognise those as help  
in our greatest moment of need.

You might only see that help as “God’s help” when you look backwards.  
The LORD keeps watch over you.  
The LORD will continue to keep watch over you.  
The LORD gives you the shade you need,  
even when you don’t recognise it.

It is the reminder that God’s knows when you are in danger, or anxious,  
or need of shade from some situation.

That is God’s loving, unwavering promise for you and for me.

That is God’s unending blessing.

May the Lord bless you and keep you

May the intensity of pain or struggles never strike you  
by day nor by night.

May the Lord send you helps  
that you don’t even recognize as God’s divine action.

And may you feel the love of God each and every day.

Amen.

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| FOR YOUR BULLETINS |
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If you want to use the same version of Ps 121 as the sermon with suitable indents, here it is:

**Psalm 121**

**New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition**

**A Song of Ascents.**

<sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come?

<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved;

he who keeps you will not slumber.

<sup>4</sup> He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

<sup>5</sup> The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night.

<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.

If you want to use the same version of Ps 121 as the sermon with suitable indents and notes, here it is: the X Chiasm section is an image.

### Psalm 121

#### New Revised Standard Version - Updated Edition

#### A Song of Ascents

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come?

2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

3 He will not let your foot be moved;

A <sup>3b</sup> **he who keeps** you will not slumber.

B <sup>4</sup> **He who keeps** Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

C <sup>5</sup> **The LORD is your keeper;** the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

C <sup>7</sup> The LORD **will keep** you from all evil;

B he **will keep** your life.

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

If you want to use the same version of Ps 121 as the sermon without any indents here it is:

**Psalm 121**

**New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition**

**A Song of Ascents.**

<sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?

<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

<sup>4</sup> He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

<sup>5</sup> The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night.

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

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