

James 3:13–18

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[0:00] Please stand for the reading of God's Word. Psalm 125, a song of ascents.

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.

For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong. Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts.

For those who turn aside to their crooked ways, the Lord will lead away with evildoers. Peace be upon Israel. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Please be seated. Well, preaching through the Psalms consecutively as we are doing this summer in the Songs of Ascents, numbers 120 through 135, presents certain challenges to the listener.

[1:21] Author and pastor John Piper comments on these, quote, Because the Psalms are so personal, they often do not represent the mood or the situation we are in when we read them.

For example, he writes, a couple of mornings ago I read Psalm 142. It says, there is none who takes notice of me. No refuge remains to me.

No one cares for me. Then he says, I do not share this lament at this time. There are many who care for my soul, and I am not particularly low.

What should we do when we read Psalms that do not reflect our present experience? He writes four points, which I think in a series of 15 consecutive Psalms might be good for us now that we've come on to the fifth in a row.

First, realize that somewhere in the world there are Christians right now who are in this situation. Pray for them. Second, recognize that you will be in this situation sooner or later.

[2:38] And build this pattern of prayer into your life as preparation. Third, get to know God by watching the godly go through these situations.

And fourth, give thanks if you don't identify with Psalms that say, there's no refuge for me and none who cares for me.

I thought it would be good to open today as we look at Psalm 25 on those words. Because in one sense, it prepares all of us to hear this word productively.

Psalm 125 will have immediate experiential value for those who are in moments right now where something in life, the outcome of which is significant, still hangs in the balance.

Anybody here like that? A time when the conclusion of a matter of great importance yet remains unclear.

[3:47] Perhaps this is a season when the chance of success concerning something that's in your mind seems remote.

Perhaps you're confronting a situation where your own self-sustainability is insecure. The spiritual well-being of one you love, unsure.

Perhaps yourself or a loved one stares into a future all too uncertain. No doubt there are many here, even now, who find themselves in the throes of such a season.

And no doubt there are many here who do not readily identify with Psalm 125. So read it, hear it, store it up, that it might have life to you in due season.

Look at the opening lines of Psalm 125. They open as great optimistic sounds of comfort. Verse 1 and 2.

[5:04] Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people from this time forth and forevermore.

Now I want to mention four simple points from these verses. First is just the poetic strength that is found in the relationship between verse 1 and verse 2.

These verses, in a sense, rise like the mountains that are in them. There's a building upon the first verse in the second verse.

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which can never be moved but abides forever. And then the building of that thought as the mountains surround Jerusalem.

So the Lord surrounds His people from this time forth and forevermore. Already the reader who is in a season of perplexity, uncertainty, insecurity, is rising with an understanding that the Lord is sheltering them in such a time.

[6:33] What is this Mount Zion in verse 1? What are we to make of it? Mount Zion is another term for the city of Jerusalem.

In fact, you can see that there between the two verses. It's first mentioned as Mount Zion in verse 1. And the second one, picking up on all of that, actually mentions Jerusalem.

There's some inference in the Hebrew Scriptures that the city of Jabez, that David conquered and then named Jerusalem, also went by the name Mount Zion.

And so it actually could have been a term of fortress-like security on that mount prior to David's day, prior to Israel's coming into those gates.

Mount Zion, this great shelter of protection, renamed under David as Jerusalem. But here, what he has in mind is our understanding of the term metaphorically.

[7:39] Not historically so much. It's a metaphor. And it's a metaphor that is the Mount Zion, is a metaphor for Jerusalem. And Jerusalem itself is a metaphor in the psalm for what?

For those. Or for God's people. Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved. You then become the mount.

You become the city. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people. And so the term is meant for us to be identified with.

I think of the church. I think of Galatians chapter 6, where Paul calls the church itself the Israel of God.

Again, again, a metaphor, taking the whole Israel people as a metaphor for the church or God's children. So when you read this psalm, you are, in a sense, like the one writer in Romans, a son of Abraham, an heir of all that came to Abraham, a fullness of all that was promised to come forth from Jerusalem.

[8:59] You could read this with yourself in mind, in Christ. Those, that is, if you trust in the Lord, you will be like the certainty of His city amidst all of those promises.

Immovable. So you shall be. Abiding forever. So it shall be for you. And as the mountains surrounded that great city, so the Lord will surround you from this time forth and forevermore.

Now imagine those verses in this hour falling upon the minds and hearts of your brothers and sisters and friends in Christ who are in such a season of perplexity, wherein the conclusion of matters important remain unclear, in which the chance for success in what they are accomplishing for God looks to be on unsure footing, when everything that is near and dear to them look as if they might be shaken.

Those who trust in the Lord shall be like Mount Zion. And as that mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord will surround His people.

Isn't that a comforting image? This towering strength of rising rock on either side, your right hand and your left.

- [10:19] It reminds me, you know, these psalms I've told you all the way through, that they are to me like the mountain ranges that run all the way from Arizona and up through Colorado and then even indeed into Canada, those great Rockies, whether it's the Canadian Rockies or the Colorado Rockies.

Here we've come to another great image of that very site. And I remember days as a boy camped along the streams of Silverton, Colorado.

The streams which cut their way through rocks. And on either side, ranges rising in the sense of security, of rest, of shelter, of protection.

That's what the writer is trying to convey to you. He wants you to know that God and His providence is surrounding you.

With His presence and with His protection. Ever feel as if you need the presence of the living God?

- [11:38] The protection of the one from on high? He's fixed and immovable and from evermore. This is indeed the comforting image of verses 1 and 2.

So we've seen a bit of its poetic strength. A bit of its metaphoric nature. A bit of its comforting promise to you.

I want you to see this even in regard to the visceral terms that it employs. First, a word on this word trust. Take a look. You'll see it there in verse 1.

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion. I need to say something on this word. In English, we often equate this word as synonymous with faith.

So to trust someone is to have faith in someone or something. Interestingly, this word appears 181 times in the Hebrew Scriptures.

- [12:44] And never, not once, is it translated into the Greek through the word employed for faith.

Never. Trust here is not merely the cognitive, intellectual, determinative understanding that the Lord is the one for you.

How is it translated? It's translated with two other words in the Septuagint at every point. And it's either the word hope or rely on.

In this case, to rely on. Each and every time. Now, when you begin to understand that, the reading of the text becomes viscerally clear.

That it comes in the midst of a season in which someone, the writer, is needing to hope on God. To rely on God.

- [13:53] To lean on Him amidst circumstances that are nearly overwhelming. To hope on.

To rely on. We'll get to a great picture in Israel's history of this very thing. But I want to see or show you another one of the visceral terms.

And it's the last term in Psalm 125 where the Lord will lead away the evil doers. It opens with a call. A statement that those who hope and rely upon the Lord will be immovable.

But it ends with a statement that those who do not. Those who turn aside. Those who are crooked in their ways. Those who do not hope in the Lord. They will be led away. These two terms find their way in the Hebrew scriptures.

In one experience of Israel's life. More clearly than any other. And indeed the word trust or hope is at its outset. And this word of the enemy being led away is at its conclusion.

[15:05] And indeed all of the content surrounding that experience that I'm going to show you. Deals with the city of Jerusalem. Or Mount Zion. Or the enemy whose scepter wanted to come in and reign.

I'm speaking of the day when Hezekiah was on the throne. And the army of Assyria was on the march. I'm speaking of the day when the young king Hezekiah taking over at age 25.

Was now at the ripe age of 39. I'm speaking of a season when all things important to him and his people. Were uncertain and unclear.

Take a look back with me at 2 Kings chapter 18 and 19. This is the moment in Israel's history that I think fully embodies Psalm 125.

And therefore I am bringing you from 2 Kings 18 and 19. This story so that it might illustrate for you the force of our psalm.

[16:21] Page 324 if you're using the blue Bible we've set on a chair beside you. It begins in chapter 18. Hezekiah reigning in Judah. You see there that he began his reign, verse 2, when he was 25 years old.

But by verse 13 we've picked him up in his 14th year. And by that time the king of Assyria had already begun demanding tribute from him.

Silver, in verse 14. And gold. And Hezekiah was releasing from the house of the Lord and the treasuries of the king's house.

Stripping the gold indeed from the doors of the temple. So that the enemy would not come into the city and overtake and overrun them. And you might remember this if you've had Sunday school classes under your belt.

Where the great enemy comes up to the city wall. All of the Israelite soldiers on top. And they begin to mock them derisively from below.

[17:26] Verse 19. And the Rabshakah said to them, Hey, say to Hezekiah, thus says the great king, the king of Assyria. On what do you rest this trust of yours?

There's our word. Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust? That you have rebelled against me.

Behold, you're trusting now in Egypt. That broken reed of a staff which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it. Such is the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, to all who trust in him.

But if you say to me, we trust in the Lord our God. Is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem.

Come now. Make a wager with my master, the king of Assyria. And I will give you 2,000 horses if you're able on your part to set riders on them. What derisive mocking is this?

[18:29] I'd give you horses if you stay under our control, but I doubt you've got anyone who can ride. Now when that threat came against the city of Jerusalem, those who were there, verses 26 and following, went out and began to whisper to the enemy, Hey, please, speak to your servants in Aramaic.

We understand that. Don't speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who were on the wall. You're going to frighten my people to death. Which was their very point.

And so Hezekiah sits at that very moment under the attack of Sennacherib from Assyria. He is now at the city's gate.

The great Zion's fall is probable, not merely possible. The idea of removing a people to a foreign land had already been put forward by the enemy.

And what does Hezekiah do in such an hour? Chapter 19, verse 1. As soon as King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went in to the house of the Lord.

[19 : 48] He began to pray. The second thing he did was he asked for a preacher. He prayed and he asked for a preacher. Not many of you in the great seasons of life where all things are in turmoil immediately begin to think, you know, first of all, I need to pray.

Second of all, I need a word from God. I better go to church today. Now our minds, preachers included, begin to leverage our ability to see our way clear from a season of extremity.

But what Hezekiah does after he hears of continued attacks in verse 14, when he received a letter from the hand of messengers, indeed, by that time they were going to return.

They had already returned and come back again. And he lays out this letter before the Lord. He spreads it before the Lord. And he prays, O Lord, the God of Israel, who's enthroned above the chair of him, you are God, you alone.

Come, incline your ear, O Lord, hear, open up your eyes, O Lord, see, hear the words, truly, O Lord, truly, he is here now, seeking deliverance from the hand of God.

[21 : 06] That's what I would encourage you to do, to stretch yourself out before God in an uncertain season, to make no alliance, to depend without any significant weight at all, on your own ability to think your way clear, to put the perplexing situation of your life, like that letter, before the Lord, and read it to him in his presence.

O Lord, this is my life on this day. You alone are, Lord, my God, in whom I trust.

What happened in that situation of old can be relayed. You might want to go back and read that story later this evening.

But to cut it short, verse 35 in chapter 19, On that night the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians.

And when the people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. And Sennacherib, king of Assyria, departed. And guess what? He went home. Just as in our own text, Psalm 125, the evildoer is led away.

[22 : 29] Well, I show you that illustration in Israel's history to help you understand the gravity behind Psalm 125, verses 1 and 2.

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people from this time forth and forever.

And you and I need to learn how to hope in the Lord. How to trust in His name. How to claim His glory in your life.

How to stretch yourself out. Rather than all the anxieties of life rolling with you, to read them before the Lord and put your reliance and complete dependence on Him.

I don't care if it's your job, your health, the spiritual wandering nature of your own soul, or your son, or your daughter.

[23 : 40] I don't care what threats would derail you from continuing to trust in the Lord. The options in the psalm are clear. Those who trust in the Lord, who hope in the Lord, who rely upon the Lord, who lay down before His name, shall rise in the morning, knowing the deliverance of His hand.

Those who are not upright, that is, they are not stretched out, but they are rather crooked in their ways, they will be led away. And in verse 5, the word led away is always by force.

The form in which we have it is always by force. The Lord Himself will forcibly remove of His own doing the enemy at the gate of your home.

My grandma, I'm going to mention this illustration just because my dad's here. Well, no, not just because you're here, Dad. Because it works, right?

Don't use an illustration unless it works. My grandma Helm, Central Illinois, Tuscola, Illinois, used to tell me that she had learned in life how to lean heavy on Jesus.

[25 : 04] She was crippled from an accident in 1962 until her death in the late 1990s. So for a generation, knew the nature of leaning on something for support in order to be ambulatory.

But what she said and instilled in her children and her grandchildren in all of life was what it meant and what it was to lean heavy on Jesus.

That's what Psalm 125 is proclaiming. That those who lean on Him shall know His presence and His protection.

This is something that we all need to learn to do. There's ample opportunity in our own congregation right now for you to be leaning in this way or for you to be learning to lean in this way as you watch the godly around you do so in the most perplexing and difficult seasons of their life.

So I would say to you, let your weaknesses be those things which you boast in. For there are many here who are learning and needing and needing to learn what it is to watch real men and women on the south side of Chicago hope in the Lord and call upon His name.

[26 : 38] Well, I think we should get out of the first two verses although I don't really want to leave them. Verse 3, we see an indication of God's care for His own.

This ought to be an encouragement to you. He says, for the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous. In other words, God is saying, I'm not going to let another ruler run my people.

Only His Son. And then, not only do we see His care for us in order to build our confidence that we can learn to rely on Him, but look at the second half of verse 3.

lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong. This is an interesting verse to me. What I think it teaches is that if you and I are under such stress and strain, spiritually speaking, to acquiesce to the ways of the world and to forget our hope and trust and dependence on God, we can, under a long period of strain, I don't care how righteous you are, you can begin to break down.

Just like athletes break down. Your body can begin to break down. Your spiritual maturation can tumble. You can fall. The righteous themselves can stretch out their hands and do wrong.

[28 : 09] Think their own way clear. It's a great word of caution for all of us. Most of us still have a lot of years to live.

And this is a word that ought to land on everyone regardless of the situation you're in. Have you been leaning? Have you been trusting? Have you been hoping? Have you been relying upon God?

Guess what? When Sennacherib keeps coming back and he keeps coming back and he keeps coming back and the situations of your life begin to be overwhelming and just when you begin to get up and suck air, you're down again, you can lose your way.

But know this, the Lord will not allow the scepter of the ungodly to rest upon the hand of his own people. He will not allow you even if you stumble and fall.

I mean, the righteous gets up seven times after falling. Great care of God for his own. Great cautions for us to persevere.

[29 : 22] And then look at this great calling out to God in verse 4. This is just exactly where you want to be if you realize that you might have been doing well but you've got to continue to do well.

He says, Do good, O Lord, to those who are good and to those who are upright in their hearts. There's this great call upon God.

O God, my life is now on the brink. Things important are uncertain, unknown, and perplexing.

And yet, I am relying on you, leaning on you, and aware that I can yet go away from you. God, do good to those who are good.

To those who are upright in their heart, the word there, upright, is straight. Keep me straight. Keep me straight.

[30 : 19] In contrast with Hebrew poetry, verse 5, to those who are crooked. The final phrase, I'm not yet convinced whether it's a word of praise or a prayer given.

Peace be upon Israel. If it's a prayer, it's a concluding line of supplication. O Lord, grant us peace.

It could very likely be one of praise. For by this time in the psalm, the writer has almost written his way clear.

And he knows that for all of God's people, men and women and children alike, those who are hoping in the Lord will be immovable and you shall abide forever.

He knows that those who are relying upon the Lord shall be like a city or a meadow from which rock rises around them.

[31 : 32] The great presence and protection of God. They know in their hearts and in their minds that God will not allow the evil one to overrun your life.

that although you are susceptible to failure and to failings and to falling along the way, He will not allow that rule to continue.

He will raise you up that you would not do wrong. And this one knows then that they are calling upon God even in the midst of the writing that the Lord would do good to those who are good and that He would watch out for those who are living their life straight, straight under the hand of Jesus.

But those who turn aside the Lord will forcibly remove as evildoers.

Peace shall reign upon God's people. Let me pray. Our Heavenly Father, as we make our way through these songs of ascents, I know that in this part of the city and in this part of your family, many look before them and see a steep incline.

[33 : 03] we ask, O Lord, that you would teach us collectively to praise your name as we continue to put our hope in you.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen. Amen.