

Psalm 125

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[0 : 00] Again, our scripture reading this morning will be taken from Psalm 125. Please stand for the reading of God's word. Psalm 125, a song of the saints.

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, and 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 the way with evildoers. Peace be upon Israel. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. May be seated. Good morning.

It's a joy to be together. Just got to make sure I'm seen online all over the world. Father, we gather under your reign and your rule and your sky.

[1 : 30] And as we have sung, we believe that in your word you speak. And even if it be through a mere mortal. So Lord, we ask that the words that proceed to be your words, and they would land upon your people to do your work.

We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. 1978, an article titled, The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women, was published by Drs. Pauline Clance and Dr. Suzanne Emis.

Vance and Emis defined the imposter phenomenon as an individual experience of self-perceived intellectual phoniness and self-perceived intellectual phoniness.

Or fraud. The researchers investigated the prevalence of this internal experience by interviewing 150 high-achieving women in the United States.

All of the participants have been formally recognized by their peers and colleagues for their achievements. They have displayed high academic prowess through degrees earned and standardized test scores.

[2 : 53] However, despite the consistent evidence of external validation, these women lacked the internal acknowledgement of their accomplishments.

In other words, what they were experiencing or hearing from the outside did not correspond with what they believed about themselves inside.

Experience and identity were at odds. This article has led to additional studies. Many additional studies. But the article is known for being the gateway of what you and I know, or many students here in this context may know, as the present-day condition of the imposter syndrome.

The imposter syndrome.

Often may result in feeling like an imposter. Not belonging. I shouldn't be here. There is a strangeness, I'll call it, to our earthly experience.

[4 : 21] Some translations in the New Testament refer to the Christian as an alien. As an alien. And it's not too far-fetched to wonder if you've wondered if there's extraterrestrial life out there.

The Bible actually says it's you and me, the Christian. We are the aliens. Temporarily inhabiting the earth. Never quite feeling entirely at home.

Other translations call us sojourners. Or exiles. Elect exiles. Those who were somehow cast off and no longer welcome.

And this dissonance is the constant tension that leaves you and I wanting something better.

Something different. Something more fulfilling.

Satisfying. And gratifying. T.S. Lewis captured this in his infamous quote in *Mir Koshiyandi*. If I find a desire in myself which no experience in the world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is I was made for another world.

[5 : 30] We are aliens, so to say. The Christian experience in this present age is dissatisfying and disjointed. We are those, to borrow the language of another Bible writer, looking forward to a city.

Another city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. We are those who see things from afar, desiring a better country.

A heavenly one. And being aptly named the Song of Ascent, Psalm 125 is for the traveler, the pilgrim, the wanderer, the one unsatisfied with the cities of the world.

And I open up this way, kind of an extended way, because this is the underlying angst of this song being sung this morning.

The psalmist is wrestling over, and since you have your Bibles open, verse 3. The conundrum is verse 3. The scepter for the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous do something staggering, stretch out their hands, and do wrong.

[6 : 47] The psalmist is trying to describe to you and I an experience that causes the faithful to falter, the righteous to rebel, the Christian to collapse.

Wickedness is ruling the land that was set apart for God's people. As a nation, as the nation was founded and her geographic borders were established, the tribes of Israel were allotted portions of the promised land.

You could read the back half of the book of Joshua, and it's an account of who gets what. What are the boundaries? Where should we settle? There God's people would dwell secure under God's rule and God's laws.

Yet the psalmist now speaks of a time where the land was now occupied by a foreign government. We're not sure when this psalm was exactly written, whether it be Sennacherib and Assyria, whether it be Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, whether it be Cyrus and the Persians.

We don't know. The text doesn't mention it, but we do know this. The image is clear. The reign of a foreign power was over God's people and on God's property.

[8 : 08] And the effects on the righteous were grave. The righteous were beginning to do evil, to do wrong.

In other words, the people of God were now pressured and succumbing into becoming just like the people around them, indistinguishable from their neighbors. God's people practiced what the pagans practiced.

God's people worshipped what the occupiers worshipped. They were to belong to God, and now they were belonging to the world. Wickedness had worn down God's people.

Jesus likewise forecasted it today, when it would be immensely difficult to follow him. He spoke of a day when his people would be delivered up into tribulation and death.

Matthew writes, You will be hated by all nations for my name's sake, referring to Jesus, and many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And because wickedness or lawlessness increases, the love of many would grow cold.

[9 : 22] Jesus foretold a day that his people, situated in this world, would fade. Perhaps you walked into this gravel lot this morning, and you're worn down by the world.

Sure, there are not national enemies like the psalm, such as those who held the scepter. But the complaint being raised, or the problem that's arisen in Psalm 125 is this.

The faith of the righteous is at risk. The faith of the Christian is jeopardized. It's gotten too hard. It's too troubling.

It comes at too great a cost to follow Jesus. My love has diminished and chilled, just like Jesus said. And my faith is fading fast. And Lord, if you don't show yourself, then I may just fold and do what everyone else is doing around me.

[10 : 29] If the wicked prevail, Lord, then why should I be righteous? If you don't demonstrate justice, Lord, then is there a reward to being even upright?

Many have walked away, you may be saying, and turned away, and I fear this is the route I'm headed. And so the question I want to answer this morning is this.

What are we to do when our faith is failing? What are we to do when our faith is failing? This is real. This summer, I received a 12-page paper from an individual communicating to me why it's no longer viable to be a Christian.

12 pages. You know it's from a Ushkaga student. 12 pages. Single space. What do you do when your faith is failing?

This is the angst of the psalm. This is the problem. What do we cling to when faith is fragile? Well, I've already laid out the problem of verse 3, but it's sandwiched by two helpful thoughts the psalmist gives us.

[11:51] It's bracketed in verses 1 and 2 by a promise. You'll see a promise. You'll see the problem in verse 3, and it ends with a prayer.

Promise, problem, prayer. I guess I should have wrote that down. Promise, problem, prayer. You'll see in verses 1 and 2, there's a promise for protection. A promise for protection. And you'll see in verses 4 and 5, a prayer for peace.

A prayer for peace. And we will find this morning that the Lord protects His people, and He will secure their peace. The Lord protects His people, and will secure their peace.

A promise of protection, verses 1 and 2. When faith is fragile, there is a promise of protection. The psalm opens up with two similes that apply to those who trust in the Lord.

[12:54] Those who rely and put their confidence in God are compared to Mount Zion, the mountain where historically the temple in Jerusalem stood. These people, those who trust, are equated with its immovability.

The image is one of stalwart strength. In the same way a mountain stands and endures and lays fixed are those that trust in the Lord.

Those that trust in the Lord would remain fixtures, immovable, unconquerable. If you've ever gazed up on a mountain, it rises and stands in the sky with great grandeur and glory.

As the wind blows, trees sway, rain falls, fire rages, a mountain will stand unmoved and undeterred. It is, arguably, amongst all nature, emblematic of permanence.

It's absurd to think of moving a mountain. I don't think many people consider it. How would you move a mountain? Would you approach a mountain and threaten to move it?

[14:03] With modern technology, we make tunnels because we can't move mountains. We build around them because we can't scale them. We sing love songs about them because they represent power and the strength of our love.

I climb every mountain and swim every ocean just to be with you, one songwriter writes. Why? Because among all of creation, nothing is a symbol of strength like that of a mountain.

Unless the geological foundations of the earth move, the mountain stands fixed and abiding. Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

And you see, the believer is not only an immovable object, according to this psalm, but we soon find that the believer is like the city of Jerusalem, a city set upon a hill.

So in the Bible, well, if you ever have the joy of going to Jerusalem, you'll know a little bit about its topography, how it's situated.

[15:19] It's a city upon the hill. You read about, remember when Jesus goes out to pray at the Mount of Olives. He's actually leaving Jerusalem, heading down the Kidron Valley, up the East Bridge to the Mount of Olives.

Why? Because Jerusalem is a city set amongst mountains. Now, not 8,000, 12,000, 17,000 peaks, but a few thousand. And it makes sense because it provides natural security.

And it is this image that the psalmist draws upon. Those who trust in the Lord are surrounded, as Jerusalem is surrounded, by the Lord himself. And the psalmist is presenting this staggering picture.

So you have Mount Zion fastened to the earth, to the foundations of the earth, and all around her, the Lord provides protection and safety.

The idea we're supposed to get, to quote John Stott, is God's people are like a mountain, surrounded by mountains, both immovable and impregnable.

[16:25] Impregnable. The psalmist wants the people of God to be clear that they will be secure to the end. This is an enduring and permanent security.

We see it doubly reiterated. At the end of verse 1, forever, and again at the end of verse 2, from this time forth, and forever more.

This, regardless of what unfolds, the psalmist wants us to know that those who trust in the Lord will be there when it's all said and done.

Despite hardship, the psalmist continues to commend a life of trust in the Lord. For those who trust receive a promise of protection. This is how one endures and lives in the midst of foreign rule.

When things are not yet the way they ought to be, we are commended to trust. When the scepter of wickedness rests in the land of the righteous, trust in the Lord.

[17 : 25] When life is unfolding, unraveling, we are to rely upon the Lord. As the visible world unwinds, as the pandemic perpetuates and seems to continue forever, forever more, lean upon the Lord.

Those who trust in him will find themselves immovable, unconquerable, and secure. In the Lord, there is permanent protection.

Those who trust in him will find themselves secure. You see, what this tells us about God is the Lord is committed to your preservation, probably even more than you are in persisting.

He is committed to my preservation. He is committed to our preservation. This doesn't mean the Christian would not face an onslaught of attacks, or certainly we do.

Our predecessors certainly have. Many of our contemporaries around the world are, and we will, yet in the last day, the faithful will be stalwart and standing. An illustration of this is the Apostle Peter.

[18 : 41] Peter, you might recall, gung-ho, enthusiastic, ready to die for Jesus, ready to fight for Jesus, ready to stand with Jesus.

And he was a feeble disciple. In all his weakness, pressured by the accusation of a servant girl, he was shaken. And from all outside appearances, what it seemed like was there was a breach in the sentinel that was surrounding Peter.

Yet we don't see the full picture until Jesus' words. Peter, Peter, Satan has desired to sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.

And that is the promise of protection. That even in our feeblest, and even at our feeblest, and even in our failures, and our frailty, the Lord secures his people.

Well, we've seen this in this 15-track album. The Lord would be the keeper, would he not? The Lord would be the help, would he not?

[19 : 55] The Lord here would hold his people. A promise of protection. Secondly, a prayer for peace. Verses four to five.

Though the psalmist professes his confidence in the Lord for his protection. It doesn't relegate him to silence. The psalmist raises his prayer and his voice and petition in verses three to four.

God, I know you can hold me, and I know you can protect me, and I know I ultimately can't be shaken, but you better do something right now.

You have to do something right now. Do good, O Lord, to those who do good, and those who are upright in their hearts, but to those who turn aside the wicked, turn aside to their crooked ways, Lord, would you lead them away with all the evildoers?

Peace upon Israel, the people of God. the petition is for God to maintain the moral order of the world.

[21 : 05] Let me say that again. The petition, the request. God, you must maintain the moral order of the world. That is who you are.

Do good to those who are good and cast away the evil. And at first, you might think, hey, that sounds a lot like karma. Is it? Right?

Like, if I do good things, then I might get good out of this. Or if I do evil, then I might get evil out of this. And I'll return to that thought, but you have to get to the heart of the complaint.

The truth of the matter is this. God, you are, this is not right. The good are not receiving the good. The evildoers are not receiving evil. Instead, the good are receiving evil, and the evil are receiving good.

The objection to God is, God, the moral order of the universe, has broken down, and you have to fix it. You have to fix it. This is the moral conundrum repeated in the Psalms.

[22 : 13] One psalmist writes in Psalm 73, but as for me, my feet had almost slipped or stumbled. My steps had nearly slipped. Why? Because I was envious of the arrogance when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

See, that's the moral conundrum. I don't get it, Lord. If I live well before you, should I not receive good and blessing and favor from you?

Instead, the wicked and the unrighteous are prospering, while the faithful are floundering. Culturally, it's expressed by this question.

Why do bad things happen to good people? The presumption is that bad things happen to bad people and good things ought to happen to the good.

But you only have to live a little while to recognize that's not how the world unfolds. It's not really the case. We expect the good to be rewarded by good and expect the crooked to be cast away.

[23 : 21] Yet the moral world doesn't work as it ought. And here, the psalmist's petition is for God to be just and fair in his dealings. Bless the good, strike the evil, and in so doing, Lord, you will restore peace, wholeness, and stability among your people.

Reward the righteous and punish the wicked is the prayer. The petition is filled with this longing and this lament, brokenness over the current situation, and desperation for God to do something about it.

The cry is an acknowledgement that only God can resolve their circumstances. It is only if God acts that peace can be restored to his people.

You see, isn't this the angst that you and I feel when we read the news? Marches are organized to demonstrate against some form of injustice. Legislation is enacted when a particular group of people are treated unfairly.

Political parties align to policies to restore moral order. And what occurs in society happens at a family level, too. If you grew up with multiple siblings, you know this.

[24 : 39] child runs up and shares about the injustice that has fallen upon them.

Any parent of multiple children knows that when bickering occurs amongst children, it is inevitable that one child runs up to mom or dad and files a complaint. Why?

Why? The moral order of this home is off. That's not fair. This isn't right. The scepter over this home is unjust, unrighteous.

Do something about it. Restore the peace by implementing what is fair. It's true. At a familial level, at a societal level, at a national level, at a global level.

You see, when our faith is fragile, what the psalmist is inviting us to do is pray to God who is concerned about the moral order of the world he created.

[25 : 52] He's not apathetic. He's not unaware. His ear is actually open to crisis. The cries of his children who are telling him all that is wrong in the world.

It's okay in your prayers to say to God, I know you're sovereign, but this ain't right. I know you're good, but this isn't good.

I know you're just, but this is unjust. Prayer is an outcry to God calling for his intercession. Things are not right.

restore order, preserve justice, defend the innocent. The longing that the psalmist expresses is really this longing that you and I have, that our nation and our world needs.

We need the scepter of wickedness to be passed, the one who would rule in righteousness.

[26 : 55] righteousness. The psalmist understands that the scepter of wickedness is only temporary. God, we know there will come a day when things get so bad that you have to spare us and save us.

The psalmist is yearning for a change in power where the scepter would be exchanged, wicked rule for righteous rule. wicked rule for righteous rule.

See, the Bible tells us of a story of how a scepter of wickedness tried an innocent man and found him guilty.

The Bible recounts a story that the scepter of wickedness sentenced this man to the brutal death on a cross. it was the scepter of wickedness that crushed him, buried him, and sealed him.

And unbeknownst to Satan, unbeknownst to Pilate, unbeknownst to Hitler, while Jesus rested for a few days, a new administration was being installed.

[28 : 14] For on the third day arose another scepter, not one of wickedness, but one of righteousness at the hands of a new king and a new empire. The writer of the letter of Hebrews puts it this way about Jesus.

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.

Therefore, God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions. And what the Bible asserts is that as the world is looking for a scepter, God, according to Psalm 2, has installed his king on his holy hill, holding a righteous scepter.

It is this scepter which will accomplish peace for the kingdom. It is this scepter which proclaims peace to those who are far and peace to those who are near.

It is this scepter that Paul would take later in Galatians that proclaims peace to the Israel of God, the people of God. It is this scepter that assures us that the crooked and the evil doers will be carried away, securing peace in all the land.

[29 : 37] It is this scepter that rules over the righteous and will continue world without end. And the staggering thing about this scepter, this rule and this reign, is it doesn't follow the world's moral order.

Because what you and I want, good for the good, bad for the bad. But when this king comes on the scene, he announces good for all the bad.

Good for all the bad. Good for all the bad. And so when you ascend the steps to this king and you want permission to enter his kingdom, you do not pull out good for good.

You do not pull out merit for good. You don't pull out resume for acceptance or hiring. You pull out my bad.

My bad. God. My frailties, my failures, my sin, my idolatries, my brokenness, my evil, my wickedness.

[31 : 12] And in the cosmic things of the kingdom of Christ, he takes all that currency, all of it. He says, I'll take all that.

And I will exchange it for goodness. Welcome to my kingdom.

As Christians, we are certainly strangers and aliens in the world. We are those who will be unsatisfied and ungratified by earthbound experiences. We are out of place and don't belong.

But we are not to lose heart. We are not to grow faint. Rather, in our struggle to live faithfully, we are those who cling to this promise that the Lord protects his very own people.

And while he protects us, we are praying and petitioning for his help and his peace to reign in our lives over his world.

[32 : 24] Well, those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved but abides forever. As mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people from this time forth and forever.

Father, we come to you as a people who are so shaken by the world, so disturbed by it, so undone by it, and faith is fragile.

And yet here are two promises that remind us that the Lord secures his people, and the Lord will secure our peace. And while we're waiting for that day, we raise our voice and know that we're heard, for you are a God who hears the cries of your people and intercedes on our behalf.

And so continue to do so as you've done in the Lord Jesus. And may we be those who are strengthened, strengthened by your spirit.

We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen.