

# Psalm 125

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[ 0 : 00 ] It's so nice to preach to real people. It's so nice not to preach to a camera. Do you know cameras don't laugh? Thank you.

So Psalm 125, you have Bibles in front of you in the seats. First time, yes, settle down. But it's also on page four of the bulletin.

We have come out of COVID feeling pretty shaky. And Psalm 125 comes to us full of confidence. It's so positive. Just look at the first verse. Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which can't be moved but abides forever.

It is a communal confession. And wonderful. And that's why we need to say it together. If you're here and you feel like a solid rock mountain, I'm very glad.

[ 1 : 05 ] But most of us probably don't feel that way. I certainly don't. This is one of the top hits on the Pilgrims playlist. Thank you, Ben, for that title last week.

As Pilgrims move toward the Holy City a couple of times a year. And for us, as we move to the heavenly city of Jerusalem. But what makes it so helpful and realistic is it tells us that on our way to the city, toward the presence of God, our life of faith takes us through dark and dangerous territories.

And it is possible for pilgrims to become completely lost, to wander off the path and never make it. That's what the Psalm says.

So I've got three things to being a pilgrim. And they all begin with P. For memory's sake. Number one, I want to talk about the pilgrim pressure.

The pressure that is on us as pilgrims. And that's in verse three, which is at the center of the poem. It is the only verse in the Psalm that doesn't mention God our Lord. And it's a completely realistic view of what the pilgrimage feels like from a human point of view.

[ 2 : 20 ] Four, verse three, The scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong.

This was not just poetry for the first readers. Israel were living in occupied territory. They had been swept into exile by a foreign power.

And though many of them returned, they were still under the tyranny of the king of Persia. Big, big kingdom stretched from North Africa up to Greece, across to India, and all the way to the Russian steppes.

So Israel were living under the laws of the Persians. It was as though they were living behind enemy lines. They were struggling to maintain their identity as belonging to God. Their existence was tenuous, insecure.

They were constantly under threat. And it felt like their lives were out of control. That's what it is to live under the scepter of wickedness. And it is exactly the situation that every believer lives throughout history.

[ 3 : 27 ] We live in what Jesus called the world, which doesn't mean the beautiful creation of sunsets and cool breezes. It's humanity arranged in opposition to God.

It's what the Apostle Paul calls the present evil age under the power of Satan. And the key to the scepter of wickedness is that it works by deception and half-truths and lies.

So behind all the messages of greed and hatred and pride and arrogance and anxiety around us is the constant pressure for every pilgrim, sometimes obvious, usually subtle, if you can't beat them.

If you can't beat them, join them. And for God's people then, it was to surrender to the Persian ways of thinking, to bow to the cultural narratives of Persia and their idols and just join them.

For us today, it's to bow to the current cultural narratives. And cultural narratives are those stories that everyone believes to be true around us, even though there's no evidence for it.

[ 4 : 35 ] And our cultural narratives are different from those. Let me give you a couple. The absolute rule of the sovereign self, individualism. Nothing and no one outside me can tell me who I am or what I should do.

I am free to do anything I can do so long as I don't harm anyone. That's a cultural narrative.

Emotions and feelings are ultimate. Emotions are ethics.

Everything new is better than the past. History is irrelevant. To be authentic, I have to express my true inner self. I don't believe these things.

I'm just saying these are the cultural narratives, okay? So if you hear it, St. John's, we don't believe these things. And religious faith is infantile. We have to get over it. You have to believe in yourself more firmly.

I have to create my own identity, free from all your religious baggage. Only then will I be truly happy. This is the way the scepter of wickedness works. It's by half-truths and lies. This is the real pressure on us as pilgrims.

[ 5 : 37 ] To believe the lies and stop trusting God. It's to trust ourselves. Or to trust what you can see more than you trust God.

And the sign that we do that in verse 3 is that the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong. In other words, the way that we show we're not trusting God is by taking things into our own hands. Because we just don't like the fact that it feels like we're out of control. This is the pressure for pilgrims. To live by what I feel, what I see, what everyone around me thinks, not by what God has revealed.

And it's so easy, isn't it, to begin to feel that the pilgrimage really doesn't matter. You know, that trusting God and doing good doesn't make any difference. I'm tired of being different.

I just want to blend in. Although being an Australian, I'm never going to blend in. The point of verse 3 is this. That the rule of wickedness, the rule of wickedness, is temporary.

[ 6 : 40 ] It's passing. It's short-lived. It shall not rest on the land. The implication is forever. It looks like the good life without God is really true.

It looks like that life really is about the abundance of possessions. It looks like it's worth it to drift away from Christian fellowship and put all your eggs in the basket of this life.

The psalm says this world is not all that there is, nor is it permanent. It's passing away. And one day, we've already said Jesus Christ is coming to judge the living and the dead. And he'll destroy the scepter of wickedness and all who belong to it.

And the decisive moment in that victory has already passed when Jesus died on the cross to defeat the powers and was raised and crowned with glory and honor.

And when he comes, he will be glorified in his people, in his pilgrim people when he returns. And until then, you and I live under the pressure. And we have to live by faith, not by sight.

[ 7 : 42 ] We have to trust God and not ourselves. We have to be different, not just blend in. And that is why we need his protection. So here is the second P, if you're a note taker. Not the pressure on pilgrims, but here is the protection, verses 1 and 2, the pilgrim's protection.

What is it that holds us till we get to the heavenly Jerusalem? I mean, is this Christian pilgrimage thing just for the tough, resilient?

What enables us to live faithfully, even joyfully, under the scepter of wickedness? What prevents us from moving off the path and keeping us to the end? And there are two answers, verse 1 and verse 2.

Verse 1 about us as pilgrims, verse 2 about God. Let me deal with them in order. Verse 1, those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

We live in a world where everything is changing, where everything shakes and moves and falls apart. And verse 1 says that God offers his unshakeability to all who trust in him.

[ 8 : 56 ] He is eternal. He is unmovable. He reigns in sovereign power over all things. And he offers his own personal strength and security to us in the midst of our pressures.

That is why we cannot be moved. This is a favorite word in the Psalms. It means shaken. Because the world we live in, it's its nature to shake. Our health, our wealth, every person we know are all profoundly fragile.

And if we ground ourselves in any of these things that are shakeable, we will be swept away with them. Every civilization, every corporation, every institution, every person shakes and falls apart.

There is one thing that's unshakable. It's God himself. He does not disintegrate. He does not decay. And verse 1 tells us that he gives his unshakeability to those who trust in him so that we will abide forever because we abide in him.

And the brilliant picture here is that we are like Mount Zion. Mount Zion is the mountain on which Jerusalem sat. Well, Israel had been shaken badly years before, probably 100 years before.

[10:11] They had been taken into Babylon. And when the Babylonians came through, they razed the city to the ground, Jerusalem. They burnt everything. They destroyed it. Did it affect the mountain?

Not an iota. Mount Zion stayed still because buildings come and go, but the mountain remains completely unshaken. Great picture, isn't it?

So cultures and cultural narratives come and go. But everyone who trusts in Mount Zion, so everyone who trusts in the Lord is like Mount Zion, cannot be shaken, cannot be moved, but abides forever.

So the stress and the pressure of this life, underneath it, there is a firmness and an unshakableness to the pilgrim. It's Christ, our rock, of course, but he shares that firmness with us.

We are like milk bottles in that carnival game. I don't know if you've ever seen these. They're metal bottles. And you pay and you get a number of balls. You have a couple of throws to see if you can knock them over.

[11:14] But I tell you, it's rigged. Because the bottles often have lead in the bottom. And you hit them, but they don't fall over. Well, just imagine instead of lead at the bottom, it's connected to a mountain.

And it doesn't matter how many balls you throw at it, it's not going to be knocked over. And I know it feels like it's not nice getting balls thrown at you.

But you and I, we don't stand because of our own native strength, but because of the strength of God in you. So whatever lies and half-truths we're facing, whatever difficulty, whatever suffering, God is making a mountain out of you by sharing his steadfastness and faithfulness.

I was going to call this sermon, God makes mountains out of molehills. But I thought you'd all be very insulted. If you trust in God, this psalmist saying, you are like a mountain, you abide forever. It's a good word for us post-COVID, isn't it? You know, the psalmist realizes we need more than verse 1. And so there's a second thing he gives us about this protection.

[12:26] Verse 2, this is about God. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people from this time forth forevermore.

This too is a great picture because if you've been there, the mountains around Jerusalem are higher than Mount Zion. And they're close together so the enemy can't get through. And here is the picture.

God surrounds us. He has us in his hands in such a way that we are at the center. He circles us on every side to protect us. There are no weak points in God's protection and defense of us because God is infinitely higher than these mountains.

And I know you might know this again and again in the Bible. God loves to explain his care for us and his protection. Do you know in the book of Zechariah, he promises to surround us with a wall of fire.

And if he surrounds us, it means that we look out on life through him and his guarding. We put on the glasses of his protection to see ourselves and our lives and our identity through God, our defender.

[13:41] It's brilliant, isn't it? So here is a double protection for us as pilgrims. Verse 1, God establishes us in ourselves by sharing his strength with us and makes us like mountains.

Verse 2, God humbles himself and comes down and doesn't surround us with great bodyguards and wire fences and electric surveillance, but with himself, personal protection.

And just in case we missed it, it starts now and it goes on and on and on. It abides forever, both now, this time forth forevermore. And I don't think it's always easy to see this when you're in difficult circumstances.

But it's exactly what the Apostle Paul says. It's like we have the treasure of God's firmness in this earthen vessel. And his power is made perfect in our weakness.

It's his power in our weakness. And I think we do feel exposed and very shaky. But when we look back, we can trace his hand and we can see the pinnacles of his protection.

[14:51] We can here at St. John's. And how he has held us in places that were way beyond our own strength. Because without God making us mountains and without God surrounding us, we're easy pickings for the scepter of wickedness.

And what is the only qualification the pilgrim needs in verses 1 and 2? Just one thing. To know the strength of God and his surrounding power is faith.

Those who trust in the Lord. What a relief. This is not advice for being strong. It says open your heart to God and his promises.

It's not working up your strength as you believe so that you'll be equal to the difficulty. No, no, no. In the difficulty, we receive these promises with open hands.

And we commit to take the risk of living on them. It's not psychology. It comes from the living God who is with us now.

[15:51] And it's a matter of the heart. And you know, it's by faith God begins to make us something that we're not. Surrounding us with his protection.

Our hearts go out to him as we personally rely on him to do what he promises. So this is from old Bishop J.C. Ryle. So faith is like the hands of the soul grasping onto God's protection and his promise.

Faith is like the eye of the soul seeing through the circumstances to who God is. Faith is like the mouth of the soul taking in these words and feeding on them and living by them.

Faith is like the foot of the soul so that in the dark ravines and under the pressure, where everybody seems to be happy under the scepter of wickedness, we keep pressing on toward our heavenly home. And the way our faith grows is not by looking in ourselves to see how much we believe, but looking to him, looking outside ourselves to him and to his promises.

That's why the psalm finishes with verses 5 and 6, which is a prayer. Because faith always flowers into prayer. So we've moved from the pilgrim's pressure to the pilgrim's protection, and now to the pilgrim's prayer, verses 4 and 5.

[17:06] This is a beautiful finish to the psalm. And it's quite stern as well. As the maker of heaven and earth bows down and opens his ears and his hands to our prayers, because he knows that he is making mountains out of hesitant, wobbly, and fearful pilgrims, like you and me.

And he doesn't answer our prayers because we're good or our prayers are good, but out of his sheer goodness. He answers our prayers out of his goodness, and he makes us good.

Verse 4. Do good, O Lord, to those who are good and to those who are upright in their hearts. There's something very lovely, I think, about this prayer.

It's a four-word prayer. Do good, O Lord. I often find it hard to know how to pray exactly. And there are some situations, and some of you here are in these situations, that are so complicated, and they seem so intractable and fixed.

And I can't see a way through, and I'm not sure exactly how to ask God. How do I pray for those who've got family, who've wandered off the path? But this I can always pray.

[18:27] Do good, O Lord, to you and to you and to you. Do good, O Lord. And the greatest good, of course, is that we can pray that that person's feet will find the path of peace.

And sometimes doing good is praying for a way that our fellow pilgrims will just make just the next step toward Jerusalem. And then the last verse brings us back to earth with a warning.

Verse 5. Those who turn aside to their crooked ways, the Lord will lead away with the evildoers. Peace, shalom beyond Israel. The same God who seeks and saves the lost will bring an end to all evil.

He will establish justice and equity. And when those who finally trust in him and enter his presence, they will see him face to face. But here, in the context here, this is a warning to pilgrims who are on the journey, verse 3, who've started to stretch out their hand to do wrong and have begun to turn aside and wandered away.

Under the pressure of lies, they've moved into a spiritual fog and lost their way. They've grown passive and apathetic toward God. And rather than returning to God and the straight path, they've turned aside to their wicked ways.

[19:52] And it's just, I think, another reason why our face-to-face fellowship is so important. You know, when you take the computer away between you, you have time to be able to go below the surface with each other.

That's why this is a corporate confession, because we draw strength from each other. Our faith increases as we declare and hear God's truth together.

We have to help each other. We have to assume that we're all under pressure to doubt the promises of God, to doubt the goodness of God. But the pressure of the half-truths that we marinate in become more believable to us each day.

And every day of every week, we are being tempted to see something. Anything is more important than God and his kingdom. Do you know, when I was made a minister, under the old prayer book, this is what the bishop said I should do.

I quote, That's Christ's priority for his church, not just for ministers, but for all of us who are pilgrims. [ 21 : 14 ] And God has been very kind to us during COVID. And what a joy it is to meet together again, to worship God, to listen to each other as we sing in faith, pray and grow to be more like him.

But over the next months, and it will take months, all of us need to seek for Christ's sheep, dispersed abroad, some who have wandered, some who might have fallen down and, you know, caught in some bush, and draw them back.

Because this is the work of God the Father and the work of Jesus Christ, his Son. And to those of you who feel like you've wandered, Christ has got you.

Listen to these words from Jesus, from John chapter 10. He says, My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life.

They will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all.

[ 22 : 21 ] And no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.

Amen. Amen. Amen.