

Psalm 125 (PM)

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening all. It's wonderful to see you in the flesh. And to those of you in video streaming land, beholding my simulacrum, I hope we can see each other soon, when the time is appropriate.

So our sermon text for tonight is Psalm 125. It's a short little psalm, just five verses, and it's the sixth step in the Songs of the Ascents.

Now the songs of the Ascents, if you're just joining us, these are pilgrim psalms. They might have even been sung when the Israelites traveled to the temple three times a year. And as we read through all 15 of these psalms, we start Psalm 120 with exile, and we move slowly upward, Psalm 133, 134, with worship in the temple.

And we're taking some time to listen and reflect on these psalms, because they're focused on the temple and on the gathering of God's people to that temple.

I think after a year, more than a year, of being physically apart, as a congregation it's a significant and timely thing to be praying and thinking about these things.

[1 : 10] Now the big theme of the Psalms of Ascent is Zion, the place where God's presence dwells. It's the place where, in the words of Zephaniah 3, all the peoples of the earth gather to draw near and worship the Lord of the universe.

Here in Psalm 125, we get a very interesting and important connection. 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 forevermore. Now at first glance, this seems like an impossible promise.

We all know life is full of flux and uncertainty. Shortly after World War I, the Irish poet, William Yeats, wrote his famous poem, The Second Coming.

There he proclaimed, Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

[2 : 44] But as the poem continues, Christ does not return, and there is instead a dreadful foreboding that something even worse than World War I is on the horizon. And 100 years later, these words continue to ring true for many of us.

The days we are living in are an age of loss and confusion, an age of deep anxiety and deep suspicion. Depending which side you fall on, you're either distrustful of mainstream media or alternative media, organized religion or emotive spirituality, free market, socialism, police, anarchism, or maybe you're suspicious about all of it, and you've just retreated into a little circle of your friends to pat yourself on the back.

Studies have shown, in the last few generations in North America, we have experienced a rapid and growing suspicion, not just in the efficacy of our social institutions, but about their very trustworthiness.

As our culture loses any sense of coherent worldview, or of common purpose, Yeats seems right. Things fall apart, the center cannot hold.

Our culture is not like Mount Zion. So where does that leave us? And what exactly are these two verses in Psalm 125 promising then?

[4 : 09] What Psalm 125 is telling us is not that life will be comfortable and straightforward, but rather that God's presence in the world, Mount Zion, is the firm foundation.

We cannot stake our lives on external circumstances, it is God in which we place our trust, it is his presence in our midst, which we build our lives on, and it is God's dwelling place which cannot be moved.

But there's more. Seen through the lens of the New Testament, because of Christ, through his ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, the church becomes the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, and those who trust in God begin to participate in that eternal and heavenly dwelling place, they are like Mount Zion, and they become more and more like Mount Zion.

Paul puts it like this in Ephesians 2. Jesus Christ himself is the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, that's the church, being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him you are also being built together into a dwelling place for God. Those who trust in God aren't just like Mount Zion, but filled with the Holy Spirit, those who trust in God are becoming Mount Zion.

[5 : 34] It cannot be moved, it abides forever. And in Jesus' own words in Matthew 16, Out of God's faithfulness and trustworthiness, we learn to trust, and to build trust, and to be trustworthy, and to live lives which invite people into that trustworthy presence of God.

The people of God, the body of Christ, is a community of trust that abides forever, even in the midst of confusion, doubt, and social turmoil.

So that's the first point I want to glean from Psalm 125 today. God's presence by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the work of Christ, in the goodwill of the Father, is the firm foundation we need for our lives.

There is nothing you can reliably place your confidence other than Him, nothing that will help you weather the storms of life. Those who trust in God and have Him as their center are like a mountain surrounded by mountains.

And that brings us to the second theme of our punchy little psalm, which we get in verse 3. Indeed, the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong.

[7 : 01] This verse is about God's kingship, and more specifically, about His kingly deliverance. The scepter of wickedness is an image of evil oppression.

What the psalm promises here is that the rule of evil can and will be broken. Now, what's going on with that land allotted to the righteous bit?

Another way to translate that would be the inheritance of the righteous. And the language of inheritance is family language that the Bible uses to speak about the blessings of being in relationship with the God of the universe.

In Colossians, we learn that God has qualified us to share in the inheritance of His holy people in the kingdom of light, in Christ.

It's like being adopted into a rich family, except instead of getting a nice car and an apartment and kits or whatever rich people do, you get heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven.

[8 : 0 4] Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven.
Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. Heaven.
You get the joy of being in the presence of God Himself.

And that's what the Bible means by inheritance. So to go back to verse 3, Satan, the scepter of wickedness, wants to deprive God's people of their inheritance.

Wants to prevent people from receiving the blessings Now, I had a friend once back in Calgary.

He came from a broken family, lots of kids, lots of substance abuse. And he slowly found his way, as he got older, out to the downtown east side because he wanted to party and get high and all the usual things that get people out there.

And in a rather bizarre trip on a Greyhound bus that he was convinced was going to hell, he came to Christ. And he got sober.

[9 : 40] And he found a woman. And he became a trustworthy man. And there was a moment after his conversion where he had a dream.

And in that dream, the man whom he'd met on the Greyhound bus that was going to hell told him, God doesn't love you.

How could he love someone like you? And he knew it was the same man because the same smell was in the room as he dreamt.

And in desperation, he cried out to the Lord and prayed the Lord's Prayer. And when he told this to me, he said, I'll never forget it.

It was like a fresh wind blew in through the room. And I knew I was free. This is what it looks like for the scepter of wickedness to be broken.

[10 : 56] And I don't tell this story to say, you must have an experience like that to be saved. That's not the point. The point is that the same power of Christ and the Holy Spirit at work in my friend's life is at work in your life.

Delivering you from your sins. Breaking the power of oppression in your life. Now there's a couple of important things going on here, I think, in this verse that we should also make mention of.

The first is that word righteous. It needs to be said the righteous are not the people who never sin or make mistakes. The verse itself tells us that.

Later on, lest the righteous stretch out their hand to do wrong. Being considered righteous by God means having right standing before God.

It means belonging to the people of God, walking in his ways. Being righteous is about putting our faith in Christ. The one in whom we become righteous.

[11 : 59] And then follow him. It's not moral perfection. And that brings us to one other thing in this verse worth mentioning for just a moment.

Being righteous doesn't mean having your life together. And it also means that being righteous requires continual dependence upon God to deliver you as you wrestle with your sin.

We cannot do it on our own. This is precisely why Jesus sent the Holy Spirit. So that his body, the church, might be convicted of its sins and delivered from them.

Because of Christ, the true king, the scepter of wickedness is broken and we are free. We place our trust in God and we are delivered.

And that deliverance is a lifelong process as we live into our inheritance as a people of God, Mount Zion.

[13 : 02] And that brings us to our last point. First, we saw God's presence is the firm foundation. Second, that God's kingship delivers us from the power of sin.

Third, verses 4 and 5. God's justice and provision lead to human flourishing. Not only is God trustworthy, not only does he deliver us from sin, he does it so that we can become what we were created to be.

We are delivered for a purpose. To be blameless and upright sons and daughters whose lives are characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And so a life of faith means taking the goodness and the holiness of God seriously, yearning for it to be established in our lives. In the same way that the righteous of verse 3 are not righteous under their own merit, neither are the good and upright of verse 4 good and upright under their own strength.

The prayer of verse 4 is not about earning God's approval, about measuring up so we can receive his blessing. It's about petitioning the Lord that the good work which he began in us would be completed, that the good work which he began in you would blossom, that you would flourish, whatever your circumstances.

[14 : 30] And at the same time to pray for blessing, is also to acknowledge and pray for those who have committed themselves to rebellion against God, to pray for justice.

That the torturous paths we take, where we deceive ourselves and rebel against God, will lead a way to final judgment. Now here down on the ground, this is a messy and complicated thing.

We see in part, and we know in part, even as we are fully known as Paul says, there are those who look righteous, whose hearts are far from God, and need to throw themselves upon his mercy and grace.

And there are those who look like they belong to the wicked, but are brothers and sisters undiscovered. Speaking as one delivered from his own crooked ways, all I can say is thanks be to God.

And having been delivered from our wickedness, and adopted into the family of God, isn't it a remarkable privilege to pray for the peace of Israel?

[15 : 53] Not the state of Israel, the people of God, though you certainly should pray for that country too. Read a certain way, these closing verses might strike us as very exclusive, right?

If you're good, you get good. If you're bad, you get bad. But then what would be the point of evangelism? Now the good in this psalm, are those whom God is drawing to himself.

So to pray for the peace of Israel, is to pray that the family of God, would be a blessing for all nations. It's to pray like Jesus taught, thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

Now we are living in unsettled times. But our trustworthy king and judge is the firm foundation.

He rescues, he protects, he invites us. And he helps us avoid the cynicism of a poet like Yeats. In Christ, we have a firm foundation.

[17 : 00] In Christ, we have deliverance from sin. In Christ, we have justice. So may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

To God be the glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.