

“SAFE AND SECURE”

Psalm 125 September 16, 2018

Today’s Psalm 125 is one of the psalms known as “Songs of Ascent.” Psalms 120-134 are called “Pilgrim Psalms”. They were sung by those who journeyed (and so “ascended”) to the temple for the annual feasts. Each psalm is a “step” along the journey. Psalm 120 begins the journey in a distant land in hostile surroundings; Psalm 122 pictures the pilgrims arriving in Jerusalem; and the rest of the psalms move toward the temple, mentioning various characteristics of God. The message today is the second in our sermon series titled “Season of Creation” and the focus is “Mountain Sunday: Protection and Care.”

Mountains are a key theological concept in the Bible. When you read the Bible with an eye toward mountains, you see that God likes to do business on mountains. Think about it: Mount Ararat is the mountain where Noah and the Ark landed after the flood. This is where Noah saw the rainbow of God’s promise. This is the mountain where the people came off the ark and praised God. It is the mountain where God made a covenant never to destroy the earth again. God provided Abraham a sacrifice instead of his son on a mountain (Moriah). God, as a burning bush, called Moses to free God’s people from slavery on a mountain (Horeb). God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on a mountain (Sinai). God gave Moses a glimpse of the Promised Land on a mountain (Pisgah). It was on a mountain (Carmel) that the great prophet Elijah proved to the people that his God is the one true God. Jesus was led into the wilderness to fast for forty days; then was led up to a mountain (known as the Mount of Temptation), where he demonstrated how to resist temptation. It was on a mountain (possibly Mount Hermon, the highest in the area) that Jesus was transfigured and showed the glory of God to some of his disciples. When Jesus was struggling with the task before him, he went to a mountain (Olives) to pray. “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). And in Revelation, The Lamb of God stands on a mountain (Zion) and shows us the ultimate destination for those who are faithful.

It could be said that mountains serve as a bridge or a halfway point between heaven and earth, where God meets and does business with humanity. Those who have driven, hiked, ridden a train, biked, or navigated to the top (or close to) of any mountain and looked out at the majesty of creation from that lofty perch felt like they, too, have done business with God.

George and I went for a few days last week to Estes Park to stay at the YMCA with my daughter, Margie, and our granddaughter, Heather. George has a life-time pass to Rocky Mountain National Park and we always go in to the Park several times while we are there. Last week we decided to take a “Top of the World” tour by jeep. It held 12 people and a very impressive tour guide. We went up the back way by way of Old Fall River Road which is the historic, dirt road that lets you see a more scenic, backcountry view than the Trail Ridge Road does. We were looking for the fall colors, wildlife and photo opportunities. We saw all of those as last week was the prime week in Rocky for the colors. The majesty of Creation was definitely on view as we drank in the beauty of His creation!

Rev. Dawn Chesser shares another mountain-top experience. She writes: In the spring of 1999, the youth group I directed went cross-country from east Tennessee to Pueblo Pintado, New Mexico, to work on a Navajo reservation for a week. After the week of work, we drove to the Grand Canyon. On June 1, forty-five youth and adults set out for the northern rim of the canyon at sunset. Snow was falling, and we could see mule deer climbing the ridge. There was no devotional given, and there was no Scripture read; yet people began tearing up at the majesty they were witnessing. Spontaneously, the group began singing “Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all of the earth...”

In Psalm 125 we see the ascent in the movement up the mountains in the imagery, drawing us closer to God. We reach Mount Zion, and we are in a place where we are unshakable, where we can endure forever. Parallel this to Revelation with the lamb of God standing on the same Mount Zion showing the ultimate destination for those who are faithful, a place that cannot be shaken and that endures forever. Mount Zion is a place symbolic in Scripture as a place of God’s help (see Psalm 121:1-2 and Psalm 124:8).

A little research on Mount Zion will show that it is not the highest mountain around. To its east lies the Mount of Olives; to the north is Mount Scopus; to the west and south are other hills and mountains all higher than Zion. These mountains rising above Zion in all directions serve as a fortification for Mount Zion. Thus Mount Zion became a symbol of security. These mountains surround Jerusalem and offer security, just as verse two suggests the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore.

We live in uncertain times. I guess everyone does in some ways. Do you ever worry about the future? A lot of people do. They’re afraid of what might

happen to them or to their fortunes or to their families.. They're afraid of what might happen in the world, in their country or in their community. Whenever you feel unsettled or insecure, Psalm 125 is a great place to go.

The theme of today's psalm is safety and security. These psalms of Ascent are stepping stones to God's heart. They lead us closer to God and his heart, and they also are psalms that build upon each other. That's another reason why we can call them Psalms of Ascent. Psalm 125 takes the hills of Psalm 121 and the holy city of Psalm 122 and combines them into a new image showing God's people are as safe and secure as Mount Zion surrounded by the other mountains. Psalm 122 focused on the architecture of Jerusalem to show the closeness of God's people. Psalm 125 focuses on the geography of Jerusalem to show the security of God's people.

Psalm 125 states two simple but profound truths. 1) Those who trust in the Lord are safe and secure. 2) Those who trust in the Lord have a secure future. So let's take a look at both of these truths.

Those who trust in the Lord are safe and secure (1-2) First of all those who trust in the Lord are safe and secure. Look at verses 1-2: "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore." (Psalm 123:1-2) These verses tell us two things. They tell us what you are like when you trust in the Lord. And they tell us what the Lord is like to you when you trust in him.

So first of all, what are you like when you trust in the Lord? You are like Mount Zion which cannot be shaken but endures forever. The Bible uses Mount Zion symbolically for Jerusalem as the place where God dwells with his people. And the place where God dwells is clearly a place of safety and security. Psalm 16:8 says: "I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken" When the Lord is at your side, you are safe and secure, and you are like Mount Zion which cannot be shaken but endures forever.

Jesus said this about his followers: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my Hand." (John 10:28) If your faith is in Christ this morning, you are safe and secure. You are like Mount Zion which cannot be shaken but endures forever.

That's what you are like when you trust in the Lord. So what is the Lord like to you when you trust in him? Look at verse 2: "As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore." (Psalm 12:2) Mount Zion was high and immovable, but it was not as high as the surrounding mountains. And so verse 2 compares the surrounding mountains to God's protection in your life. The Lord is not simply at your side, but he surrounds you on every side. You can't get much safer than that!

There is an amazing story in the Bible about the prophet Elisha and his servant. They woke up one morning and found that an enemy king has surrounded the city and was preparing to capture them. Elisha told the servant, "Don't be afraid, those who are with us are more than those who are with them". Of course the servant was confused. He counted two on their side, him and Elisha, and there was a whole army with horses and chariots surrounding the city. But then we read this in 2 Kings 6:17. "Elisha prayed, 'O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.' Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." God's army was all around Elisha, and that phrase "all around" is the same word that we have in Psalm 125:2, where the Lord "surrounds" his people.

"As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore." In Psalm 121:9 it said "The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore." Both the now and the forevermore are equally important, and what a good thing that we don't have to choose between them. You are absolutely safe and secure, because the Lord surrounds you now, and he surrounds you forever. Notice that both verses 1 and 2 end with the word "forever."

And so not only are you strong and lasting and unshakeable as Mount Zion, but the Lord surrounds you like the mountains surround Jerusalem. John Stott writes: "God's people are like a mountain surrounded by mountains, both immovable and impregnable." John Phillips sums it up nicely when he says: "To get to Jerusalem an enemy had to get past the mountains. To get at God's people, an enemy must first get past God." So that's our first point this morning.

Those who trust in the Lord have a secure future. (4-5) These verses speak about the future of God's people, and here we learn three things about our future. God will do good to those who are good. He will banish those who do evil. He will answer his people's prayer for peace.

First of all, God will do good to those who are good. Look at verse 4: “Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart.” (Psalm 125:4) Notice this verse is phrased as a prayer or a petition. That is because none of us deserve God’s goodness or grace. We can only ask for it and receive it through Christ. God’s promises teach us how we should pray. God has promised to do good to those who are good, and so we take God’s promises and turn them to prayer.

So who are the “good” in this verse? Is it talking about perfect people who never sin? Absolutely not! If it were, none of us would be included! The good here in verse 4 are not the morally perfect but rather those who trust in the Lord. That’s what verse one says, right?” “Those who trust in the Lord...”

This verse is not about works, but about faith. Goodness is defined here not by perfection but rather by those who are “upright in heart.” The word translated “upright” in verse 4 is a word that means “straight”—to have a straight heart with God. Charles Spurgeon wrote : “Men to be good at all must be good at heart.” We need a new heart to be good, and we only get that through faith in Christ.

However, and this is very important, when we get that new heart, when we are made new in Christ, then we will naturally do good works as well. As Jesus said In Matthew 12:33: “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad for a tree is recognized by its fruit.” (Matthew 12:33) When you put your faith in Christ, God gives you a new heart. God makes the tree good, and therefore the fruit will be good also. You are not only made good in God’s eyes, you will also do good.

God will do good to those who are good, and God will punish those who do evil. “But those who turn to crooked ways the Lord will banish with the evil-doers.” (Psalm 125:5a) The word translated “crooked” here is a word that means “Crooked, winding or devious.” This is in direct contrast to the “straight” or upright heart in verse four. Those who turn to crooked ways, the Lord will banish with the evildoers.

There will be a separation of the good and the wicked at judgment day. And there will be a banishing of those who do evil. Jesus said in Matthew 7: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive

out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ (Matthew 7:21-23)

The book of Revelation tells us about the New Jerusalem, the city of God, where God will dwell with his people forever. We read in Revelation 21:27: “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” And so the Bible talks about both blessing and banishment: blessing for those who are made good and therefore do good, banishment for those who are evil and therefore do evil.

God will do good to those who are good. God will banish those who do evil. And finally, God will answer his people’s prayer for peace. At the end of verse 5: “Peace be upon Israel.” (Psalm 125:5b) This is really a prayer of peace for all God’s people. As Christians we are now part of God’s people, and so this prayer is for us, too. One day we will enter the peace and rest that Christ purchased for us at the cross. We will take part in the beautiful prophecy we find in Isaiah 2:2-3: “In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple (that’s Zion) will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.”

The prophecy in Isaiah ties together so many of the themes of Psalm 125: the prominence of Mount Zion, the preservation of God’s people, the change that God brings into our hearts, the blessing of God’s peace in the last days. Those who trust in the Lord have a secure future. God will do good to those who are good. God will banish those who do evil. God will answer his people’s prayer for peace. If your faith is in Christ, then you are safe and secure. You are like Mount Zion which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds you on every side. If your faith is in Christ, then your future is secure. You have been made good in Christ, and God will do good to those who are good. So don’t worry. Don’t be afraid. If your faith is in Christ, then you are safe. You are secure. And so you need to put your trust in Christ. When you put your faith in him, he gives you a new heart so that you can follow him and obey his commands. He pledges his full protection for you. He promises you a secure inheritance and offers you a secure future of perfect peace in his presence. Won’t you trust him today?