

## Enduring the Long, Uphill Road

Psalm 125

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The 125<sup>th</sup> Psalm falls in what is one of my favorite groupings of psalms -- the songs of ascents. The songs of ascents are comprised of psalms 120 - 134. This is the group of psalms that would have been sung by Jews travelling to Jerusalem to observe the three annual religious feasts: the feast of unleavened bread and the Passover, the feast of weeks, and the feast of the tabernacles. These were pilgrimage festivals, which required the participation of Jewish males at the sanctuary of the Temple. And so, as devout Jews would make the journey to Jerusalem, the psalms of ascents would have been the psalms that they sang along the way. The psalms are called songs of ascents because the journey of the faithful took them upward, always upward, toward Jerusalem, and to the Temple atop Mt. Zion.

It was a long, uphill road to Jerusalem. The pilgrimage was not an easy one, for the travel was hard. Yet somehow the pilgrims making the journey found a way to endure the long uphill road. Even more, they were able to find ways to travel the long uphill road with joy and anticipation, for they were going to meet and worship God.

The Psalms of ascent are filled with faith and laden with hope, as the faithful made their journey to Jerusalem. And Psalm 125 is no exception, for it is a psalm which tells us something about God's faithful people; it is a psalm which tells us something about the God of the faithful; and it is a psalm which provides hope in the knowledge that the evil that seems so prevalent in this world will not have the last word against God, but that God is triumphant over evil for the sake of his people.

The psalm describes the strength of the faith of God's people. "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mt. Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever."<sup>1</sup> I have a picture in my office of Jerusalem in the days of Jesus. It's a medieval depiction of what Jerusalem would have looked like back then. There Jerusalem stands, surrounded by mountains on three sides, and the city itself sits atop a mountain, fortified by a large wall around it. It is a formidable sight, a picture of immovability and strength and security. As the pilgrims drew near to Jerusalem, they would have seen Jerusalem and its temple sitting on Mt. Zion. It would have been for them a sight to behold, a vision of strength and security, a vision of steadfastness. Mt. Zion became, for those who made their pilgrimages there, an image that described the faithful people of God. The people of God, in their expression of trust, are like Mt. Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever.

What does this say to us, about our faith? Does this mean that our faith in God makes us impenetrable? Hardly. Even the pilgrims to Jerusalem knew that Jerusalem was vulnerable to attack. It's not a promise that troubles won't come against God's people. It doesn't take but a moment for us to be reminded each day that, even for the Christian, troubles come our way. That's the way of the world, isn't it? Tragedies abound. Disasters strike even innocent people. The rains fall on the just and the unjust alike. To

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 125:1

both saints and sinners, the realities of life can be uncomfortable and painful. But for those whose trust is in the Lord, even the painful realities are clothed in a faith that enables them to endure, and sometimes even transform, the pain and sorrows of life.

I'm reminded of one of the parables Jesus told. As he closed his sermon on the mount, he likened the faithful person who put his teaching into practice to the house that was built upon the rock. When the wind and the rain and the floods came, the house was able to endure, because it was built upon an immovable foundation. That parable does not teach that life will be easy; in fact, it affirms that we will face adversity in our lives. And it teaches that a life built upon a right relationship with God will be able to endure the trials.

That's the same affirmation of the psalm: That those who trust in the Lord will be like Mt. Zion, which cannot be moved. Those whose trust is in the Lord live a life that is built on a rock-solid foundation. It's not a promise of immunity from danger or difficulties, but it is a promise of strength and security against tribulation.

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved but endures forever. Is that an affirmation that can be made about the church in America today? Where is our trust? It's a question which we really need to ask of ourselves, because in an affluent society it is easy to be lulled into a false sense of security.

Who is it that is holding your world up? Where is your trust? When you wake up in the morning, where do you turn to seek what you need to make it through the day? "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever."

The psalm continues: "As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore."<sup>2</sup> To be sure, there is a description of faithful people who depend upon the Lord for life and strength. But the psalm also describes the God in whom we place our trust. The *people* are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever; but we're like that *because* of the God in whom we place our trust. I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases the second verse: "Mountains encircle Jerusalem, and God encircles his people -- always has and always will."<sup>3</sup> Mountains surround Jerusalem on three sides. No wonder Jerusalem was seen as such a safe refuge. And that's the way that God protects his people -- we're safe, unshakable, enduring, only because God is our refuge. I think Luther was right -- a mighty fortress is our God.

And because he's that kind of God, then we have hope. We have hope that God will prevail. We have hope that God will be victorious over evil. The psalmist declares, "The scepter of the wicked will not remain over the land allotted to the righteous, for then the righteous might use their hands to do evil."<sup>4</sup> It is believed that Jerusalem was under some sort of foreign occupation at the time that this psalm was written. Maybe it was the Persians. Maybe the Greeks. Maybe someone else. Whoever it was, one thing was certain: any foreign power exercising authority over Jerusalem would be seen as an evil thing. And the assurance of the psalm is that God will expel evil from his kingdom. Knowing the God in whom we place our trust gives us strength and confidence to face the world.

That's something that the Israelites understood extremely well. Time and again throughout the Old

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 125:2

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 125:2, *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 125:3

Testament, in their times of trouble the people of Israel would remember God's mighty acts of the past: Remember when God brought us out of Egypt? Remember when God split the sea and let us pass? Remember when God held back the waters of the river Jordan and let us cross over into the promised land? Remember when...? This wasn't just an attempt to relive the glory days. Their remembering had a purpose. You see, they would remember God's mighty acts of the past, and through their remembering they would be filled with hope that God would again act on their behalf. They remember, and then they are filled with hope.

So much of faith involves the act of remembering. Remember that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever would believe in him should not perish but have eternal life. Remember that it was our sin God was judging when Jesus was nailed to the cross. Remember that on the other side of the cross is the empty tomb. It is in remembering that we find renewed hope and strength to face whatever it is that lies ahead.

And we need that, don't we? We need a fresh dose of hope and strength for the long uphill journey of life, for sometimes the scepter of the wicked seems heavy in our world. Sometimes we look at the world around us and we're tempted to believe that evil will forever have the upper hand: Investors being bilked out of billions of dollars by a fraudulent, greedy man; a young girl kidnapped and held captive by her abductor for 18 years; just the other day a promising young woman was killed as she was walking past a college dormitory in Atlanta, the victim of a stray bullet from a nearby gunfight; around the world people live in terror of suicide bombers and gunmen. Sometimes the scepter of the wicked seems so very heavy. Where's the hope in all this?

But there is hope, because the answer to the evil in our world is not up to us. The gospel of Jesus Christ is God's promise to us that death, pain, suffering and evil do not have the last word. Because our trust is in the Lord, we can already celebrate victory over these things. The resurrection tells us in no uncertain terms that God is greater than even the most awful of things that can overtake us. The risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is proof positive that death -- and sin and suffering -- are swallowed up in victory.

The scepter of the wicked will not remain, for the Lord will banish the evildoers from his kingdom. Evil will not have the last word, for the last word has been spoken decisively in Jesus Christ.

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mt. Zion, which cannot be shaken.

The Lord surrounds us--a mighty fortress is our God.

The scepter of the wicked will not long rest in the land of the righteous.

Words of faith, of assurance, of hope. And we need such faith, and assurance, and hope, because the journey of life is a long, uphill road.

Amen.