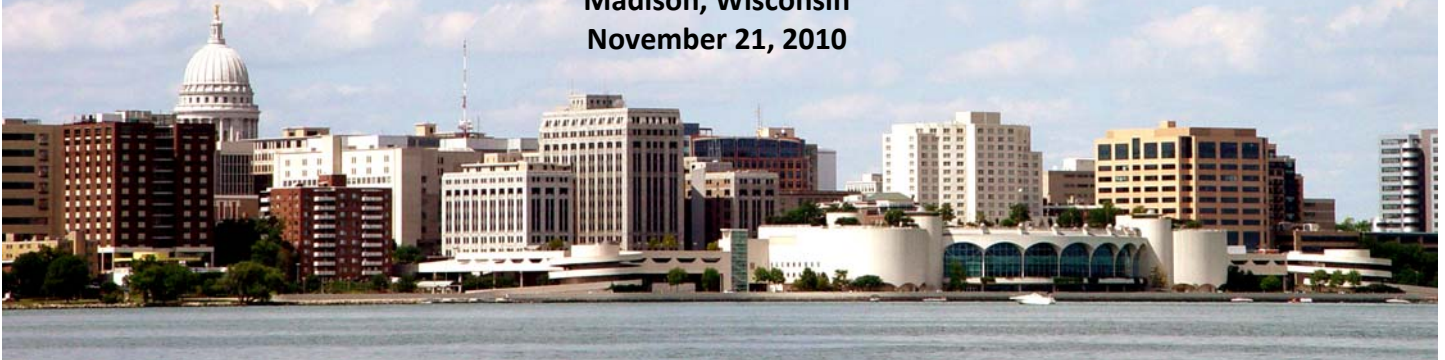


“A Song on the Way to Zion”

Psalm 125

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Introduction:

Based on what has been happening over the past week or so, it would be a serious understatement to suggest that our nation has been concerned about security. Whether we listen to the radio, watch the news, read the paper, or get our news online, it seems that security has been the lead story just about every day this week. Leading up to all of the travel that will take place over the Thanksgiving holiday, our thoughts have been focused on the new scans and the “enhanced pat-downs” that are now being done by the TSA. And yet regardless of the way we may personally feel on this issue, just the fact that it is an issue shows that people all around us are concerned about security and will go to great lengths in their attempts to feel safe.

This morning, as we think about traveling for the holidays and as we think about our longing for security, I would like for us to consider a Psalm that was sung by the ancient Israelites as they traveled to the city of Jerusalem for the various feasts that were held in ancient times. I am referring to Psalm 125, and as we study we will discover that it is a Psalm that praises God for the security and the safety that He provides.

In our pew Bibles, the Psalm is found on page 985, and when we look at the heading on this Psalm (when we look at the subtitle), we find that it is described as, “*A Song of Ascents.*” In other words, it was a Psalm that people would sing as they traveled up into the mountains on their way to Jerusalem to worship. As they traveled up (as they ascended) toward the city of David, they would praise God for His protection, they would praise God for all that He had done in the past and for all that He had promised for the future. And so maybe we can imagine thousands upon thousands of people coming in from all over the area, and as they got closer and closer they would join together and they would break out in songs of praise to God as the city of Jerusalem finally came into view and as they traveled those last few miles. With these things in mind, let us please look together at all five verses of Psalm 125...

- ¹ Those who trust in the LORD
Are as Mount Zion, which cannot be moved but abides forever.***
- ² As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
So the LORD surrounds His people
From this time forth and forever.***

- ³ ***For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest upon the land of the righteous,
So that the righteous will not put forth their hands to do wrong.***
- ⁴ ***Do good, O LORD, to those who are good
And to those who are upright in their hearts.***
- ⁵ ***But as for those who turn aside to their crooked ways,
The LORD will lead them away with the doers of iniquity.
Peace be upon Israel.***

As we keep ourselves focused on these five verses this morning, I would like for us to consider first of all the picture of security that is painted for us in the opening verses, I would like for us to consider God's promise, and then I would like for us to consider the prayer at the end of this short song.

- I. **But first of all, let us please look together at the PICTURE OF SECURITY that is painted for us in the first two verses as the author illustrates God's power by describing the strength of Jerusalem.**

We know from the Scriptures that God's people put a lot of trust in the strength of Jerusalem, the ability of the city of Jerusalem to withstand an enemy attack. We know that the city was in the hills. We know that it was surrounded by more hills. And so to attack the city of Jerusalem, the enemy would literally be fighting up hill. We know that it was rather difficult even for King David to capture the city of Jerusalem for the very first time. Let's just say: There is a reason why we refer to Jerusalem as the "City of David." We have the story in 2 Samuel 5. King David was a warrior, and so he needed a fortress, a stronghold, he needed a city that could be defended. By the way, David ruled somewhere around 1000 BC, which means that the Israelites had been living in the land of Canaan for more than 400 years before they ever managed to capture Jerusalem. Even in David's time, the city of Jerusalem belonged to the Jebusites. They were holed-up there and refused to come out. In 2 Samuel 5:6, in fact, King David went there himself, ***"Now the king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, and they said to David, 'You shall not come in here, but the blind and lame will turn you away'; thinking, 'David cannot enter here.'"*** And so the Jebusites were so confident of their position in Jerusalem, they challenged King David, "Go ahead and try to take this city: Even our blind and our lame soldiers will turn you away." Nevertheless, the Bible tells us in the very next verse that, ***"David captured the stronghold of Zion, that is the city of David."*** David's soldiers took the city only by going up from underneath it through a water tunnel. But the point is: Jerusalem was a strong city in a strategic position. And so when these pilgrims would come in from all over Israel for the yearly celebrations, no matter how bad their year had been, they could always count on Jerusalem being there. Jerusalem was always a place of safety.

But as we look back at Psalm 125, we discover that the picture of God's security is not given to just anyone who lives in the city of Jerusalem, but in the opening words, we find that the whole Psalm is written about, ***"Those who trust in the Lord."*** A lot of times, the Jewish people thought they were good-to-go just because of their family heritage, or just because of where they lived. But we have the reminder here at the beginning that the Psalm applies specifically to, ***"Those who trust in the Lord."*** And so for those who trust in the Lord, the writer of the Psalm says that they can be compared to Mount Zion and to the mountains that surround Jerusalem. In other words, the author is painting a picture of strength and security. In the Lord, we are safer than the Israelites were in Jerusalem, and so the lesson is: God can be trusted!

II. As we look back at the Psalm itself, we find (in verse 3) that the author continues with a PROMISE.

“For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest upon the land of the righteous, so that the righteous will not put forth their hands to do wrong.” We know that a ***“scepter”*** is the symbol of a king’s rule; it is basically the king’s staff, his symbol of authority. And so the ***“scepter of wickedness”*** refers to the rule of a wicked king. We do not know exactly when this Psalm was written, so we don’t know exactly who the author is referring to, but when we look back over the kings of Israel, we know that we have many choices! I mean, even the best kings were far from perfect—Saul, and David, and Solomon all had some serious problems. But the author says that the rule of wickedness will not last forever, and that is important, because if an evil ruler rules long enough, even the righteous tend to be affected. With enough time and pressure, even the righteous can give in, and so the Psalmist makes a promise that the ***“scepter of wickedness shall not rest upon the land of the righteous.”*** It will not be there forever. But the good news is that God is a King whose kingdom will endure. The Lord is a good King whose scepter is righteous, whose kingdom is pure, and right, and just.

Of course, in the New Testament, we have a similar promise in 1 Corinthians 10:13, where Paul said, ***“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.”*** And so the Psalm does not say that there will not be a wicked scepter. The Psalm does not say that the wicked scepter will never affect God’s people. But the Psalm promises that the wicked scepter will be temporary, that it will not last forever. And, as Paul said, that it can be endured by those who are faithful and by those who are willing to take the way of escape. And so we learn that the Lord is strong and that He will not allow wickedness to rule forever, but He will keep us through it.

III. And with that, we come to verses 4-5 as we find that the Psalmist closes this song with a PRAYER.

He moves from speaking about God to speaking to God. This is something we need to do. We need to do it often. When we think about God, when we are reading the Scriptures, we can end our reading with a prayer, a prayer praising God for what we have learned, and a prayer where we ask God to be with us as we put what we have learned into practice.

As we look at the author’s prayer in verses 4-5, we find that he takes these two basic ways of living and he places them side by side. And in the first place, he says, ***“Do good, O LORD, to those who are good and to those who are upright in their hearts.”*** The word ***“upright”*** comes from a Hebrew word meaning ***“to be smooth, straight, or right.”*** In the ancient world, the word was used in road-building as engineers would design a road to be straight. They would remove obstacles, they would raise up those low places, they would build bridges, they would lower the high spots, and they would make those roads just as smooth and as level as possible. That is what the Psalmist is talking about here. God’s people are to be ***“upright in their hearts.”***

But then on the other side there are those who ***“...turn aside to their crooked ways,”*** and the author says that, ***“...the LORD will lead them away with the doers of iniquity.”*** Let’s think back again to why this song was written. The song was originally used as God’s people made those trips back to Jerusalem, and as they struggled on those narrow mountain trails, verse 5 would have had a solid application. They were on the path to Jerusalem, and to turn aside on a wrong path would have caused them not to make it. And so the author is saying: If people make the decision to turn off of the path, then God will let them go. In fact, God will even lead them away in that direction. Not that God wants them to leave, but if they choose to go off and do their own thing, God will not stand in their way. One author described this, in fact, as an act of God’s divine

kindness to His church. In other words, if someone is determined to leave, if they refuse to repent, if they refuse to turn back, then, like God, we are to let them go.

At the end of the Psalm, therefore, we have this prayer: A prayer that God will bless those who do good and that God will allow those who insist on turning aside to turn aside. And with that, we are presented with a choice between doing good and turning aside. Those whose trust is in the Lord will keep on keeping on. As the Psalmist says, our trust is in the Lord, and God has promised to be with us through the struggle.

Conclusion:

Hopefully most of us have been able to relate to this song that God's people sang together on their way to Jerusalem. And as we bring our thoughts on this song to an end, hopefully we can see some parallels between what they were doing and what we are doing close to 3,000 years later. They did not live in the city, but they traveled to it. They lived outside the city and they were vulnerable, they were not comfortable until they got there. And yet they loved singing together about the great city. They loved singing together about their trust in God. As they sang, they were on their way to a great celebration. The way was dark, and narrow and dangerous, but they were heading in the right direction, they were heading home. In a similar way, we have been singing this morning about heaven. The way is not easy, but we are making progress.

One thing we have not discussed yet this morning is how the Psalm ends (in verse 5), ***"Peace be upon Israel."*** Peace is a concept that continues over from the Old Testament into the New. For example, we have Paul's statement in Philippians 4:7 that, ***"...the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*** This morning, then, as we think about peace and security, we think about body scans and pat-downs, we think about our jobs, we think about our families, we think about our bank accounts, we think about that car with the 25 air-bags, and we realize that our only real security and peace comes from God. This is a peace that all people can have, but it is a peace that is based on our trust in God. And this is the song we sing on the way to heaven.

We turn to God by turning away from our sins and by putting our trust in Him. God offered His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins, and we respond that offer with faithful, humble obedience, doing whatever it takes to put God first in our lives. We make an appeal to God for a good conscience by putting our faith in God's power as we allow ourselves to be briefly buried in water and then raised up to live the Christian life. If you are struggling along the path to heaven and would like for us to pray about it as a congregation, you can let us know, and we would be glad to pray about it. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org