

Psalm 125 (1984 NIV)

Security: God Surrounds His People

1 Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever.

2 As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.

3 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.

4 Do good, O LORD, to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart.

5. But those who turn to crooked ways the LORD will banish with the evildoers. Peace be upon Israel.

Introduction

One Christian said to another: “I prayed to get that promotion, but someone spoke ill behind my back and I missed it. I prayed for my beloved mum to get well, but she died last week after battling with cancer for a year. I prayed for commitment to serve God well in church, but I was criticized by a brother for not controlling the kids during Sunday School. I am feeling defeated as a Christian. There must be something wrong with my faith—it can’t move any mountain.”

The other Christian replied: “My boss blamed me for something I did not do. My wife misunderstood me for something I did not mean. My pastor tasked me to do something I did not like. The going is tough, but I am not shaken. My faith in God has helped me to become like an immovable mountain.”

Psalm 125 belongs to a group of Psalms called the Songs of Ascent. The pilgrims who made their journeys up the temple in Jerusalem to observe the various Jewish festivals were believed to sing these Psalms along the way.

Psalm 125 is about our security in God and how it should be expressed in our faith life. Often times, God does not intend for us to move any mountain, but to become like an immovable mountain in the face of many frustrations and temptations.

When I call you a “mountain tortoise” it is very much a derogatory term. You are to me someone who is backward and not well exposed to many things in life.

But when I call you a “mountain-like Christian” it is very much a complimentary term. You are to me someone who is strong and stable in faith, and thus, stand like an immovable mountain in the face of many frustrations and temptations.

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And God desires that we be a “mountain-like Christian”. The faith of such a Christian indicates that one has truly experienced the security of God.

What is one response to this security of God over us?

I. We respond with trust (v. 1).

The psalmist says that “those who trust in the Lord” are like a mountain—like Mount Zion (v. 1).

King David captured the fortress city of the Jebusites. He then renamed it Jerusalem. It was also known as the “city of David”. And this city stood on the imposing ridge of Mount Zion. When the temple was later built in Jerusalem, Mount Zion was also known as the temple mount of God’s presence.

The psalmist pictures those who trust in God like Mount Zion as those who “cannot be shaken but endures forever”. They are solid and stable; always standing come what may, be it earthquake, storm, whirlwind, or tsunami.

This psalm might have been written at a time when the people of God were under the dominion of some wicked rulers. Wickedness was promoted and righteousness was frowned upon. It was a difficult time to live for God and do any good. The big question was: “Is it any good for anyone to trust in God in such trying times?”

And the psalmist answers, “Yes! As unshakable and as long-standing as Mount Zion, those who keep up with righteousness and turn away from wickedness will indeed experience their security in God.”

“Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever.”

To trust in the Lord is to lean onto the Lord. Security in the Lord is experienced when we lean onto Him, and not on anything or anyone else. Some may profess to trust in the Lord, but at the same time, they lean onto something else for their sense of security—like position, possessions, or power. This is not what it means to trust in the Lord.

Another common misunderstanding of trusting in the Lord has a rather mushy meaning—resting in the loving arms of the Lord, and enjoying the security of His comfort and certainty.

I call this a misunderstanding because, often times, in our journey of faith, God calls us to trust in Him not by resting in His loving arms to enjoy His comfort and certainty for us, but striding forward as His guiding hand leads us out of our comfort zone to face some uncertainty.

In the Old Testament, men of faith like Abraham and Moses had experienced how God moved them out of their comfort zone to face some uncertainty when they were called to trust in the Lord.

It is the same in the New Testament, men of faith like Peter and Paul had experienced moving out of their comfort zone to face some uncertainty at points in their lives when they were called to trust in the Lord.

It is still the same today with us. When we really mean we trust in the Lord, then expect not to rest passively in His arms to enjoy comfort and certainty. But expect to stride passionately forward as His hand leads us out of our comfort zone and uncertainty to a new challenge in our faith journey.

Thus, to trust in the Lord—to stride forward as God leads us out of our comfort zone and face some uncertainty—is all about obedience. To trust in the Lord is to obey what He has already made known to us. It is about moving forward by doing what best represents His purpose and intention with confidence deepened in Him. To trust in the Lord is to ask Him to give us the courage to do that we already know.

Often times, the line between fear of leaving our comfort zone and faithfulness in remaining where we are is very thin. And we use various terms to spiritualize our staying put in our comfort zone, refusing to take a journey of faith with the Lord. We use terms like “persevering in where God has put me”, or “waiting upon the Lord’s timing”.

A bright, young man is sensing God’s call upon his life to full-time ministry. But he has a struggle. His organization has nominated his name for a scholarship to do a master’s degree at a very prestigious university in the US.

When sharing with his church leaders about his calling and struggle, he told them, “I want to look at it this way. If God wants me to go full-time now, I will not get the scholarship. But if I get the scholarship, I take it that God wants me to go full-time at a later phase in my life.”

Trusting in the Lord, even in His call upon our lives, is all about obedience. Could this young man be mistaken? Perhaps, it is when the scholarship comes that God is saying to him, “Now, I want you to forego what is good in human eyes and obey my call upon your life now.”

A later time may not necessarily be a better time because each later phase will not loosen us more from the demands of life, but suck us deeper into them ... UNLESS we intentionally work at freeing ourselves from their grip on us.

There is another young man. He too has sensed the call of God upon His life to full-time ministry. He too struggles in view of the level of comfort and certainty he has been enjoying and used to. But the Lord dealt with him. He knew he had to trust. And if he had to trust, he needed to obey.

He talked to his superior at work and expressed his desire to resign to obey the Lord's call to be trained for full-time ministry. His boss tried to dissuade him and offered him many options—he could do it on a part-time basis without resigning, or he could take some official leave for study and resume his duties after that. He was also told that the organization had bigger things for him—he had been earmarked for promotion and that's why he would need to stay and help execute future plans.

When he heard that, he knew that it was THE time to obey God. In a written testimony, he said that he left his superior's office after that meeting with tears in his eyes. These were tears of relief because he had understood what trusting in the Lord meant—it is to stride forward and move as God's hand guides him, even out of the comfort and certainty he is enjoying now. Today, his wife and church are standing with him in his decision.

Does this church want to trust in the Lord? Do you as a Christian want to trust in the Lord? Maybe I am asking redundant questions. Of course, you do!

Good for you. But remember this—trusting in the Lord is not so much resting in the Lord's arm and enjoying the security of our comfort and certainty. Rather, it is often a call to move as the Lord leads and rest in His security, even when our comfort and certainty levels are diminished.

When God called Gideon to fight the Midianites, he first wanted to bring with him 32,000 men. But what did God do? He downsized it to 300! He greatly reduced the comfort and certainty levels of Gideon. That's what it means to trust in the Lord, and not in men. It is to believe that when God downsizes our comfort and certainty levels, we can still experience that He is still true to us, and what He can do in and through us.

Is God challenging you to get out of your comfort zone and face even some uncertainty?

- You say, "We will not try because our church has never done it this way before." When you say this, you may not be trusting God enough to get out of your comfort zone, face some uncertainty, and make a difference in your church life.
- You say, "I will not change because I am not the one at fault." When you say this, you may not be trusting God enough to get out of your

comfort zone, face some uncertainty, and make a difference in a relationship.

- You say, “We cannot give to this need because we need the money.” When you say this, you may not be trusting God enough to get out of your comfort zone, face some uncertainty, and make a difference in your financial stewardship.
- You say, “I cannot be too Christian in my workplace because people will not respect me too much.” When you say this, you may not be trusting God enough to get out of your comfort zone, face some uncertainty, and make a difference as a witness in your working life.

To experience God's security as a mountain-like Christian—i.e. solid and stable even in the face of adversities—we are to trust in the Lord. And this trust may even lead us out of our comfort zone to face some uncertainty. It is a trust in God's character that will work towards transforming our own character.

And character is often not transformed by guaranteed comfort and certainty. It is often in the crucible of diminished comfort and certainty that character becomes moulded and refined; that character is built up and transformed.

The psalmist goes on to encourage us that as we respond to God with trust, He Himself will do something.

II. God Himself will surround us with His presence (vv. 2-5).

The psalmist speaks of the Lord surrounding His people like the mountains surrounding Jerusalem—“As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore” (v. 2).

The mountains surrounding Jerusalem were there in the past. They are still standing today. And they will still be standing in the years to come. Thus, to say that God surrounds His people as the mountains surround Jerusalem is to declare that God is always faithful to His people—He was with them yesterday, He is with them today, and He will still be with them tomorrow.

Jerusalem itself is on a high mount. But the surrounding mountains are even higher, giving the semblance of a city protected by a ring of high protective walls. The psalmist compares this ring of mountains that surround Jerusalem to the way the Lord protects His people—i.e. like a natural defence on every side.

To be surrounded on every side is not necessarily a good situation. It depends on who is surrounding you. If you are surrounded on all sides by enemies, it means you are a dead duck; absolutely no way out!

But to be surrounded by God is a great comfort. Why? Because He is always true to His promises to His people. When God surrounds you on all sides like

a ring of high walls, it does not mean no way out for you. Rather, it speaks of His complete and continuing commitment to protect His people. And because of this commitment, it is not no way out, but there is always a way out in Him no matter how difficult the situation may be.

The psalmist might be writing at a time when evil powers were making life very difficult for God's people. The temptation to bow to the powers of evil was so strong. And so the psalmist wrote of how God's surrounding presence could act as protection to His people.

God's surrounding presence has three implications:

- One, God's surrounding presence implies He has set boundaries to the extent evil can attack us (v. 3). The psalmist wrote to comfort and reassure that things would not be so severe that God's people had to bow down to the evil powers; that they had to compromise their integrity as God's people and turn away from righteousness.

He told them, "The scepter of the wicked will not remain over the land allotted to the righteous." The sceptre is a rod that signifies power and authority. It represents the rule and domination of a king or government. God will not allow wickedness to rule and dominate over His people to the point that they "might use their hands to do evil"—i.e. to the point that they had to turn away from righteousness and partake in wickedness. God will limit and break that sceptre of wickedness so that His people can live freely for Him.

But this does not mean we leave all to God, and assume no personal and mutual responsibilities.

A landmark case in the US has to do with the execution of pornography addict and serial killer, Ted Bundy. Dr. James Dobson, founder of "Focus on the Family" ministry, met and interviewed him a day before his execution.

During the interview, Ted spoke about his addiction to pornography: "I would keep looking for more potent, more graphic kinds of materials ... until I'd reach the point where pornography only goes so far ... You begin to wonder if maybe actually doing it will give you that which is beyond just reading about it or looking at it. Basically, I was a normal person. I wasn't some guy hanging out in bars or a bum ... I lived a normal life, except for this one small, but very potent, very destructive segment that I kept very secret."

And it was this secret, signature sin of his that led him to his destructive behaviour—a private sin of the mind that began to own him and define him.

So, beware of that look of lust, or that flash of anger, or that streak of greed. Don't let it be so full of life that it begins to define and destroy you.

Unless we develop a relationship of mutual accountability, a sin in us can begin to grow, get out of control, and define us and become our signature sin. Thoughts can become actions, and these form character that affects one's destiny.

(<https://www.dobsonlibrary.com/resource/article/cfeb58f0-967e-4bd5-afbe-7e12206d5ffb>)

God sets boundaries to limit how much evil can attack us. Our response to this is to remain secure in His surrounding presence by preoccupying ourselves with things that keep us close to Him. We help one another to do that by being accountable to one another.

- Two, God's surrounding presence implies He too has set boundaries for us. We are not to overstep these boundaries so that we will not endanger ourselves to the temptations of wickedness. The psalmist said in v. 4, "Do good, O LORD, to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart."

Those who are "upright" are those who "travel in a straight path" as opposed to those who "turn to crooked ways" (v. 5). To travel is an active, not passive word. Hence, to be upright is something active, not passive.

We often think of not overstepping God's boundaries for us in terms of not doing wrong—that's passive thinking, not active. Not overstepping God's boundaries for us must also be in terms of doing right—i.e. active thinking with the intent of taking the initiative towards doing good.

We often emphasize avoiding evil to the point of being blind to the many opportunities for doing good. We define holiness so much in terms of separating ourselves from, but so little in terms of giving ourselves to. And we can end up not upright before God not because of the sins we commit, but the life we fail to live for Him. We keep stopping the wrong, but become paralyzed when doing the right. In soccer, when you keep stopping your opponent's attacks but never take the initiative to attack, you never win no matter how well you have been defending.

When we avoid doing evil, we do not overstep God's boundaries for us. Yes, we call it piety. But no, God may call it apathy because we have not taken the initiative to do right.

When God has spoken, the right thing is to take the initiative to obey. But very often we stay put because we are afraid of doing wrong. We then remain in our status quo; stuck in the rut.

Yes, God has boundaries for us. But within these boundaries, there is freedom. When there is freedom, God wants us to initiate and move with the resources He has already blessed us. If we do not, we are in reality, dishonouring those resources that God has blessed us with. We may not have done evil with the resources He has given us, but we have also not done any good with them.

When we enjoy the blessings of God but neglect His purpose at the same time, we rest not in the security of the Giver, but in the security of His gifts. And that's not the will of God for us.

It is indeed sad if we live our Christian life on neutral—i.e. no great evil to speak about, yet no great good to be proud of. And our Lord Jesus did not call wickedness as just doing evil. He also called wickedness as choosing to do nothing with the measure of talent that had been given—i.e. the wicked one merely watches life go by rather than living life for the Lord.

We often want to tarry till we feel God's strength before we do any good in His name, and that sounds spiritual. We don't want to do God-size work with our man-size capacity. But often God is calling us to go in our limited strength trusting in Him, and in our obedience, receive His strength to accomplish what's way beyond our human capacity. That's how God glorifies Himself in human weakness, and how we can demonstrate that God is truly with us and in us. So, don't worry too much about running ahead of God because if He is truly God, you will have a hard time catching up with Him, much less to overtake Him. Remember, when you say you are waiting on God, He may be waiting on you instead.

To be surrounded by God's presence is not to justify a passive lifestyle of merely enjoying our God-given safety, comfort and boundaries. It is also a challenge to a passionate lifestyle of employing our God-given resources to do any good and be upright in heart.

- Three, God's surrounding presence implies experiencing the covering of His peace (v. 5). The psalmist warns, "But those who turn to crooked ways the LORD will banish with the evildoers. Peace be upon Israel."

Indeed, to be under the security of God's surrounding presence is not a license to sin. It is not thinking that since we are now safe in the arms of God (with a sure ticket to heaven), we can now live as we like.

The psalmist calls for a concern for righteousness. Those who have turned to crooked ways are those who have persistently chosen to compromise their integrity as God's people. They have lost irreplaceable time and opportunities for serving and doing any good in God's name. They face the disapproval of God as disobedient children would face the disapproval of their father.

But in spite of some of these disobedient ones among God's people, God's sovereignty prevails. The covering of His peace would be with those who continue to trust in Him.

My mother suffered two minor strokes in late 2004. She lost much of her mobility. The strokes also brought on a condition called vascular dementia. She would gradually lose her memory.

I brought her home when she was discharged from the hospital. She was still very much confused and disoriented, unaware of her own loss of mobility.

She would get up middle of the night and begin to walk around, losing her balance and falling. For two weeks, I could hardly sleep in peace—getting up almost every hour to make sure she was not endangering and hurting herself.

But she was so unmanageable that one night, I had to strap her down onto the bed. The act of tying down my own mother was emotionally traumatizing. But middle of that night, I caught her trying to walk around again. Somehow, she managed to ease herself out of the bed strap.

My wife and I decided that it would be best to put her under the care of a nursing home until her condition was more stable. She stayed in a nursing home for slightly more than a year. The people there confined her to the wheel chair most of the time.

In January 2006, we brought her home. Her mobility had improved and she had better safety awareness.

I remember the first day of her returning home. She could hardly sit still. She was all eager to walk around the house with her walking frame.

But while she was enjoying her freedom of movement at home, the rest of us were all anxious for her.

Then in the midst of that anxiety, I sensed the Lord reassuring me: "John, do your best to take care of her. Leave the rest to

me. Sleep in peace tonight for I am watching over her and all of you.”

A beautiful peace in the Lord began to come upon me. Even though I was not sure if my mother would repeat her night-walking act, I did not strap her down in bed. I also told the maid who's sleeping with my mother to relax and rest well. I myself slept like a baby that night. I experienced the calm of God's Shalom peace.

Next day, our maid told us that my mother did sit up in bed middle of the night, but thankfully, she did not try to walk.

God does not always choose to calm the storm. Often times, He allows the storm to rage, but He chooses to calm us instead.

This aptly describes the Shalom peace that the psalmist pronounces upon Israel in Psalm 125 (v. 5). This peace is not an absence of anxiety, uncertainty, and difficulty. Rather, it is the serene trust in the Lord in spite of circumstances.

To pronounce peace to God's people is to say, “People of God, relax. Times may not always be easy. But be solid and stable; be a mountain-like Christian. And you will in turn experience that God's presence is like a ring of mountains surrounding you on all sides. God is still running the show and He has not abandoned you no matter what the external circumstances may seem to indicate.”

Conclusion

May the Lord help us to build up our trust in Him—trust that is concrete and constant like a mountain.

And we shall experience His surrounding presence of Shalom peace so that no matter what our circumstances may be, we know He is with us and we are secure in Him.

Amen!