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From His Strength Comes Peace

Psalm 125

Introduction

Sometimes it's good to realise that people are the same everywhere and always have been. Times have changed how we live, but not who we are.

When I go on a journey I like to have some music prepared to listen to along the way. I put together a playlist of songs that I make the family listen to if we're in the car. One of my favourite lists is useful whenever we spend a few days or a week in England. On the way back I'll always put on my Scottish singers playlist, to rouse up our pride in our nation as we head back to the land of Irn Bru and jaggy thistles.

And this is something people have always done. Before Spotify and MP3s, we would burn CDs. Before that we would make mix tapes. Before then, we just had to remember our favourite songs and sing them ourselves. That's what the Jews are doing as they make their way to Jerusalem. They've chosen their top 15 psalms, and they're singing them together as they approach Jerusalem on the way to celebrate the feasts. They cover a good range of subjects, they focus the mind on God, and they're all quite short - only one of them is longer than 10 verses - so it'll be easier to remember them.

As Peter mentioned last week, some scholars think the songs of ascent are gathered into groups of 3. In our current trio we've had waiting for God's deliverance in Psalm 123, God acting to deliver his people in Psalm 124, and now resting in his deliverance in Psalm 125.

We don't know where they would be on their journey as they sang these songs, but I like to think that this one was especially sung as they came within sight of the city. The first two verses dwell on the geography of Jerusalem.

The Fortress - 1-2

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.

[Psalm 125 v 1-2]

When Cate was 3 years old we had our first holiday abroad. Apart from the pool and the beach we also visited a town nearby. It was a lovely old town and one of the main features is a church at the top of a hill, with a set of 365 steps leading up to it, known as the Calvary steps.

We managed to climb up all those steps, and back down again, and I took a picture of Cate looking into the mouth of a cannon in the town square.

This year we went back to the same place, and we visited the little town again, on market day. We didn't climb the steps this time, but we did find the very same cannon in the same location, and tried to recreate the photo I took 15 years ago.

We like things that are long-lasting, we might even say permanent. That cannon might have moved by the time another 15 years have passed, but hills and mountains last longer. We can see the head-and-shoulders shape of Ben Lomond from our house, and that will have looked the same thousands of years ago. `If someone from 2000 years ago could visit us, everything would seem different to them. But they could look out and see Ben Lomond and say "Ah yes, I know that hill".

As the Jews climbed the trail towards Jerusalem they must have looked forward to the first sight of Mt Zion. Those who had been before would recognise its shape, like an old friend, and shout to the others - "there it is! We're nearly there". It's always the same, year after year, a sign of permanence and strength.

And so they sing about it: *Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. [Psalm 125 v 1]*. These are desirable things. We'd like to say that we cannot be moved, that we will abide forever. How do we obtain these great qualities? Well, they're for those who trust in the Lord. Those who are God's people, following God's way. It's tempting to trust in other things, perhaps more tangible things, like money, family, status, possessions. But the Bible tells us that these things are not certain. Only the Lord is certain.

Mount Zion was a sign of permanence, through time and space. The name means fortress and it was originally a fortress, built on a hill, an easily defended position. Throughout the Bible, God compares himself to a rock, a foundation, a stronghold, somewhere safe and sure. When Simon Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ he called him Peter - the Rock - and said "*on this rock I will build my church*" [Matthew 16 v 18]. Now be careful! He wasn't saying that he would build the church on Peter, but on the confession he had made: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" [Matthew 16 v 16]. Because he made that confession he was showing that he trusted in the Lord, and so he was like Mount Zion, and so are all the church, as we likewise confess Jesus as our Lord and trust in him.

We thought about the pilgrims travelling towards Jerusalem, and getting their first glimpse of Mt Zion. But it's not just a mountain they would see: it's also the city. Jerusalem is built on the flank of Mt Zion, so we're not just looking at a barren mountaintop here, it's a place full of people, of life. Jesus talked about us being light to the world, and he used the illustration of a city on a hill, which cannot be hidden (Matthew 5 v 14). It seems like a strange illustration, until we realise that that's what Jerusalem was: a city on a hill. If the pilgrims got their first view at night time they would have seen a hill crowned with light. Jerusalem wasn't just a literal city of light, it was also supposed to be a banner for the Lord, a beacon to the nations, a place that shone out to the world that here God was worshipped. And so Jesus called us to be as obvious a landmark to the world.

Now Zion isn't alone in its area. In fact it is circled by hills that are higher than it is. This is what the psalmist brings out in verse 2. Not only is Zion itself likened to a secure fortress, but the hills around are like protective walls. *As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore [Psalm 125 v 2]*. Notice here that it wasn't the walls of Jerusalem that protected them. The walls were built by man, while the hills were placed there by God. So we should look to God for protection, not our own walls that we've built.

City of the King - 3

For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest

on the land allotted to the righteous,

lest the righteous stretch out

their hands to do wrong.

[Psalm 125 v 3]

The Jews had been promised ownership of the land. In some years they would march to the holy city along roads that were indeed part of Israel. In some years, however, the country would be occupied - the sceptre of wickedness hovered over the land. Whether it was the Philistines, the Moabites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians or the Romans, we find that outside oppressors often took over the land of Israel. In fact sometimes it was internal oppressors: as we have seen in our series on the Kings, they weren't always good or godly.

And yet the Jews had the promise that the sceptre would not rest there. The wicked rule would only continue for a time. Eventually the oppressor would be driven out, utterly defeated or just die. In the darkest times, perhaps the pilgrims had to travel to Jerusalem in secret. Maybe they looked around and saw devastation of crops and villages. In those days it will have been hard to sing songs of praise to the Lord. And yet this verse would have been heartening. The sceptre of wickedness shall not **rest** on the land. One day they or their children would again be able to travel freely, to worship freely, to sing aloud. One day the land would be theirs forever.

Notice the reason the oppression of the land would be limited: lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong [Psalm 125 v 3]. There's a strand of persecution all through the history of the Jews; but also of a remnant, those who remained faithful, making it through to the end. There are many times it looks like all is lost, but God always protects the few who still trust in him.

Trials may come, in fact trials will come, and they will test us. We may be tempted to sin, to give in, but we have God's promise never to test us beyond what we are able. In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul says: *No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. [1 Corinthians 10 v 13]*.

The city may be under oppression. But one day it will belong to the righteous again, and God will be their king.

Judgement - 4-5

*Do good, O Lord, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts!
But those who turn aside to their crooked ways
the Lord will lead away with evildoers!
[Psalm 125 v 4-5]*

We don't like to talk about judgement, do we? There are two main reasons for that: fear for those we believe are not saved, and fear that we will be judged and found unworthy. The Jews loved to talk about judgement though. For most of their history they had enemies. Those enemies were generally also the enemies of God. And so they saw the issue as very much black and white: they were the good and their enemies were evildoers.

But we know that every one of us is wicked. There is nothing in us that deserves to be called good. The Israelites knew this as well, so how could they be so sure that they were going to be found on the right side when the judgement came?

In fact it was the same then as it is now, in fact it's easier to see now. We are indeed all evil and unworthy, but those who trust in the Lord are made righteous. We are made good, because of Jesus.

And so, confident that they were not relying on their own works but upon the grace of God, the writers of the Old Testament often cried out for judgement, for justice, for the evildoer to be punished.

But notice as well that it's not just the outsider who is punished. Those who turn aside to their crooked ways, the Lord will take away along with those evildoers. The writer could see those of his own people who had given up, who had sided with the enemy, and he knew they were lost.

Peace - 5

*Peace be upon Israel!
[Psalm 125 v 5]*

Finally the writer wishes for peace to be upon Israel. This isn't just a closing nicety, a signing off comment, like "Have a nice day". What we have here is the result of all that has gone before. While we started with Zion the fortress, we finish with Jerusalem, the city of peace. That's what Jerusalem means, the city of peace. And that peace flows from all that God has shown himself to be in the preceding verses.

- The protection of God - as he lifts up, sustains and surrounds his people
- The kingship of God - as he promises that evil rulers are temporary
- The judgment of God - as he assures Israel that evil will be removed

These combine to offer the believer peace and rest - as long as they trust in him.

Now these words were sung by the Israelites on their way to their holy city, but they can also be applied to God's people today. These pictures of God are pictures of Christ.

Christ the Rock

He is our protection. We might put up our own walls but they are a false promise. Unless we trust in Christ we are vulnerable, but in him we cannot be moved, now and forever. He surrounds us with his everlasting arms.

And we are the city of God, built on a hill for all to see, our lives are witnesses to the Light of the World. *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. [John 13 v 35]*

Christ the King

He is also our king, and has promised us eternity in his kingdom. We will face trials and feel the sceptre of wickedness in our lives but Jesus promises that it will not last, and our destination is sure.

Christ the Judge

We are told multiple times that judgement day will come. All who live will one day stand before the throne. If we think we might tip the balance of good deeds over evil, we only kid ourselves - we have no hope in ourselves, only in Christ. He is not only the judge but the saviour. If we are his, he wipes us clean of our sin and we are made righteous, no more under condemnation.

Christ our Peace

All these things - the assurance of protection, the assurance of possession, the assurance of judgement, are what gives the Christian peace. Peace in our hearts, peace between us and God. Peace between us and others, as we no longer strive for mastery but for their salvation and their good.

From his strength comes our peace.