

Surrounded
Psalm 125
June 25, 2023

To say, “I love the mountains,” is a bit like saying, “I love steak,” or “I love Yo-Yo Ma on the cello.” To say you love those things is not exactly a narrow viewpoint, or a minority position. Nevertheless, the mountains, I love them. And as I thought about the imagery in Psalm 125 last week as well as our mission focus this month—NETS—I thought of the Green Mountains in Vermont.¹

If the weather cooperates, I prefer to write and think outside. And a couple summers back, when we were in New England, I found a spot in the middle of the NETS campus looking directly at the tallest peak in Vermont: Mount Mansfield. If the clouds weren’t too low that day, it was a sight to behold. Most days I spent writing I would peek at my notepad and books for a bit, scratch out a sentence or two, look up at that peak, and repeat the process.

Then, a few days in—with Von Trapp’s “Climb Every Mountain,” in mind—I asked Julie if Owen and I could do it. Seeing a mountain from a distance is one thing. But nothing acquaints you with one quite like climbing it.

Year after year, Israelites would’ve ascended Mount Zion together. Once in Jerusalem, they would’ve been surrounded by mountains. And in *that* spot, Israelites would’ve often sung *those* words we just read: **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.** Note first,

1. God Surrounds His People (vv. 1–2)

I recently heard a guy joking about imagery, quoting the metaphor we often use, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.” This guy—tongue firmly in cheek—asked, “What does that even mean?” “Well,” the other person responded, “It means you can give someone all the information they need, but that person still has to absorb it themselves and act on the information you’ve given them.” The first guy responded, incredulously, “Well, why didn’t you just say *that*? Why bring a horse into it?”

It’s a decent question. Verse 1 says that **those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion.** The imagery describes someone as like Mount Zion. It does so among those well-acquainted with Jerusalem. Who is it describing as like that well-known mount? Those **who trust in the Lord.**

This is the first time “trust” has been used in the Psalms of Ascent. We know what it means, to “rely on,” or “to feel secure in” something else.² It’s *more* than mere intellectual assent. It’s to believe something, yes, but also to *demonstrate* that belief by corresponding affections within—inward *trust*—and actions without—visible demonstrations of that trust. I don’t think you need six illustrations to explain it. I’m not going to pull up a chair and declare, “*Saying* out loud that this chair won’t collapse is one thing. *Sitting* in it is another, a visible demonstration that you believe it won’t collapse.” You know what trust is. And you know it’s a characteristic of God’s people, from Abraham to Joseph in Genesis, to Lydia in Acts and Mary in Luke, to your grandmother 25 years ago and your Sunday School teacher last month. Time and again we’re given opportunities to trust. This last week was no exception.

¹ By the way, Vermont is from *vert*, the French word for green, and *mont*, the French word for mountain.

² Walford, Jacobson, Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT, 911.

And what does the Psalmist say about those who trust in the Lord? **Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion.** Now, if you isolate the phrase like *that*, it's not immediately apparent how that simile intends to encourage. So, *in what way* are those who trust in the Lord like Mount Zion? Verse 1, again: **Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.** So, *why* do we need imagery? Because it's one thing to say, "Those who trust in the Lord are immovable." That's an encouraging truth. It's certainly one we believe. But if someone were to long that God's people believe this, not merely on the surface, but deeply, it's significantly more persuasive to tell pilgrims in the midst of Jerusalem, "Those who trust in the Lord are immovable. In fact, they're as immovable as the mountain you're currently standing on."

Have we considered lately how committed God is to us believing? It's not *only* that He graciously preserved His word, as we've been considering on Wednesday nights. Those words He preserved are compelling; they're words that steady us. In fact, He inspired picturesque imagery that intends to capture our imagination. And He does so because, I'd imagine, we don't often feel immovable. We struggle to believe we are anything close to as enduring as a mountain.

Yet, this is what God says. Do we believe it? Do we trust *what* He's revealed?

However, verse 1 isn't sufficient. We actually need verse 2 to understand why verse 1 is possible. And to communicate the necessary condition for verse 1, the Psalmist again surveys his surroundings. Verse 2: **As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people.** To grasp this rightly, in our mind's eye we might temporarily transport ourselves to Israel, atop Mount Zion, and slowly turn 360 degrees, taking a panoramic shot. What would we see? Mountains. Though we're on top of Zion, we'd see mountains surrounding us taller than us. Mount Scopus would be to the North. The Mount of Olives would be to the East. We'd see others, in particular that direction, most of which are higher than Zion.³

Mountains surrounded Jerusalem. Immense mountains. And mountains of that size aren't scaled easily by scores of people. Thousands of enemies couldn't quickly ascend one side and descend from the other—sneaking up on God's people—without significant advance notice. Because of that, it was considered to be safer than many other cities.⁴ The city walls provided security for God's people. So did the mountains outside the city walls.

So, what is the connection between verse 1 and verse 2? In verse 1, the imagery is that God's people are like a mountain. They're immovable. Why is that? It's only possible due to verse 2. Because like the mountains that surrounded Jerusalem, the Lord surrounds His people. In essence, they can't move me, they can't move us, because they can't move Him.

This is the beauty of what God has done. In the gospel, what describes Him ends up describing us. We skipped over two clauses in verses 1 and 2. First, at the end of verse 1 the Psalm says that those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, that **abides forever**. Not only can they not be moved, they will *never* be moved. Why is that? Verse 2 explains: **the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.** God's people abide forever, because God surrounds them forevermore.

Let's stay in the same city, but fast-forward a number of years to the final week of Jesus's life. Remember the keeper of Psalm 121? Hear Jesus pray to Him: **I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name** (John 17:11). And then a few lines later, He again prays for God's people, **I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one** (John 17:15).

Jesus knew that the Lord surrounded His people. He's participated in it Himself. And so, within earshot of His disciples, He asked that the Father might *continue* to keep them, to surround

³ Willem VanGemeren, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 906; Walford, Jacobson, Tanner, 911.

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 79.

and protect them. Later, one of *those* disciples would write, **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time** (1 Peter 1:3–5). We abide forever because He surrounds forever, keeping and guarding His people.

Note secondly,

2. Even when they’re surrounded (v. 3)

Meaning, the first point is true even when we’re surrounded by enemies too. Verse 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.** Derek Kidner writes, “Now emerges the bleak situation in which these bold words have been spoken: one in which evil has apparently the upper hand and the righteous are wavering.”⁵

To explain this verse, the scepter would be a symbol of foreign rule or dominion.⁶ The Psalmist writes, and the people would sing, that the scepter of wickedness—this foreign rule or dominion—shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous. Land means land, of course, but it also likely points to *more* than land, including *all* that God’s people receive in this life.⁷ Blessings or curses on the land they lived would be intricately connected to their lives. With this in mind, Alec Motyer translates the word, “lot.”⁸ So, we might render this phrase “the rule of wickedness shall not rest—or enduringly remain—on all that belongs to the righteous.”

But really the key to understanding verse 3 is the last phrase of it, **lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong.** If you used the word “lest” last week, let me know after the service. I’m not sure I’ve used it outside of a hymn in a decade. Instead of “lest,” the NASB translates it, “so that,” meaning this last phrase is really a result clause.⁹ One final note on verse 3: **stretch out their hands to do wrong** is an idiom meaning to turn away.¹⁰

That’s a lot of explanation for one verse. But let me attempt to pull it all together. After declaring that God’s people will never be moved because Yahweh is ever-surrounding them, the Psalmist elaborates upon the reason why, “For the rule of wickedness shall not enduringly remain on all that belongs to the righteous to the extent that God’s people would turn away from the faith.”¹¹

I know that might’ve felt like we were in the weeds, but if we don’t put it together carefully, we might say certain things that are untrue. Verse 3 isn’t saying that we’ll *never* live under the earthly rule of wickedness. If I said *that* to you this morning, you’d not only question me, you might doubt the veracity of what God’s revealed. But that’s not what it says. What it says, quite simply, is that verses 1 and 2 remain true, even when it’s *also* true that we’re surrounded by enemies. Even in those times when we’re *temporarily* under the rule of wickedness, that rule is not—it will *never* be—strong enough to cause you to turn away.

To believe this *demand*s that we do not always trust what we see. It requires one to see what’s unseen. That, though we’re surrounded by enemies, there’s Someone between us and them, keeping and guarding us.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, TOTC, 474.

⁶ VanGemeren, 907; Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 656.

⁷ Ross, 656.

⁸ Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 373.

⁹ Ross, 656.

¹⁰ Ross, 656.

¹¹ Ross, 655.

On that hike up Mount Mansfield with Owen—a 5–6 hour climbing venture in the middle of nowhere—there also happened to be no cell service.¹² So, what did I do to convince my wife I could take our 9-year-old up the mountain? I bought a one-year subscription to *AllTrails+*, where you could download a map of the trail that remained accessible even without service. And most useful, if you inadvertently stepped off the trail—which could be disastrous in some of those areas—your phone would vibrate to warn you. Why would anyone ever step off the trail? Because they trusted something they saw wrongly.

For a starker example, a church member sent me an article recently about the reality of spatial disorientation for pilots. If you don't know that term, it means there are times a plane enters a storm where neither the horizon nor the ground is visible. In those moments, the pilot is spatially disoriented. They can't trust, necessarily, what they see. So, what do pilots do? What are they trained to do? Against their instincts, against what their eyes are telling them, they trust their instruments.¹³

The life of faith is often seeing what's unseen. Scripture helps us do this. Singing scripture—like the Psalms—does this. So, even when wickedness seemed to have the upper hand, these pilgrims sang to themselves—recited together—what they knew to be true. **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. For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous lest (so that) the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong.**

Surrounded by the enemy? Know this. See this: there's Someone closer, someone between them and you. And He acts on our behalf. Note third what He does,

3. Opposing evildoers and giving peace (vv. 4–5)

These assurances, the truths of verses 1–3, blossom into a prayer in the final lines.¹⁴ Verse 4: **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!**

Many would say that in 2 Samuel, chapter 7 is the most significant chapter. In that chapter, rather than David building a house for God, God promises to build David's house, assuring him that one of his descendants would sit on the throne forever. Yet, what I want us to notice this morning, is that after David hears from God, he responds to the promise. Hear it in 2 Samuel 7:24: **You established for yourself your people Israel to be your people forever. And you, O Lord, became their God. And now, O Lord God, confirm forever the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, and do as you have spoken.**

Do as you have spoken. That verbiage might cause us to bristle, as if David is commanding the Sovereign Lord. But what is David actually doing? He's merely repeating God's word—His promises—back to Him in prayer. It's not an act of irreverence. David's *only* hope was God coming through on what He'd said. So, he prays, **do as you have spoken.**

What's the connection to Psalm 125? This is precisely what the Psalmist does. He's repeating God's word back in prayer. What were we told in the introduction to the Psalter, Psalm 1? **The wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.** God assures us that this is true. And, in line with that, what does the Psalmist pray in Psalm 125: **Do good to**

¹² Some of you are going to be tempted to pull Julie aside after the service and tell her not to let me do that again. I beg you to reconsider. :)

¹³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/when-your-worst-storm-comes>

¹⁴ Kidner, 474.

those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts! What does the Psalmist mean by good? Does he mean intrinsic goodness? No, in the context it's clear he's referring God's people—described as the righteous—in verse 3. So, if Psalm 1 tells us the Lord knows the way of the righteous, we can plead with Psalm 125 that God would do good to them. We can pray that God would do as He's spoken.

And what of the wicked? If the way of the wicked will perish, according to Psalm 1, Psalm 125 reminds us, and it's good to be reminded of this: **those who turn aside to their crooked ways the Lord will lead away with evildoers!** Why can we say that, or pray that? Because God has assured it.

Maybe we don't pray like this because our prayers sound as if we have hope *elsewhere*. If God doesn't answer my prayers, I'll still have most of my life together. However, the Scriptures depict the people of God as *much* more desperate. As in, **if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins** (1 Cor. 15:17). If we pray like the Psalmist, everything hinges on Him being true to His word, Him doing as He said. Alec Motyer asks, "What do you do when the promises of God are denied by the facts of experience? Turn the promises into prayers and plead them before God."¹⁵

He's assured us that He will do good to the righteous. This is yet more evidence that He surrounds them as the mountains surround Jerusalem. And He's assured us that the wicked will not endure. The worst does not, and will not, last.¹⁶ And because of both of those truths, **those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.**

The final clause of this Psalm is really something of a benediction. If *all that* is true, if that present and future is inflexibly certain, then we can rest. Because the scepter of wickedness does not ultimately rest upon those who trust Him, this benediction of God does:¹⁷ **Peace be upon Israel.**

Conclusion

Seeing a mountain from a distance is one thing. But nothing acquaints you with one quite like climbing it. From my writing spot on the NETS campus, Mount Mansfield seemed to be huge. Many days you couldn't even see the peak because of the clouds. And yet the hike only amplified the size. Or maybe I shouldn't say amplify. It clarified.

One of the beauties of Mansfield is that nearly half of the trail lies *above* the tree line. So, long before the summit—for miles of the trail—one can see for miles, across Lake Champlain to the New York Adirondacks. Vista followed vista after vista. With each backward glance, everything below became smaller. The trail just went on and on. The peak which seemed to be "just right up there" took hours more of ascent to reach. And when we finally arrived at the summit, town squares below appeared to be the size of a dime. And—here's the point—no sane person that ever climbed a mountain like that—having a mountain's immensity *clarified* with each step, says, or even considers, "I think I could move this."

Year after year, Israelites would've ascended Mount Zion. Once in Jerusalem they would've been surrounded by mountains. And in *that* spot, Israelites would've sung *this* Psalm: **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.**

¹⁵ Quoted by Dale Ralph Davis in *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, 88.

¹⁶ Peterson, 83.

¹⁷ VanGemeren, 908.

