

Security

The Permanence of God (v1-2)
The Problem of the Wicked (v3)
A Prayer for Peace (v4-5)

This time 2 years ago I was in a little country in Africa called Rwanda. I've been blessed to have a teaching ministry there, with a group of pastors and evangelists over the last 5 or 6 years, teaching a theology certificate course.

You might remember Rwanda for the genocide that happened in 1994, when a million people died in the space of 100 days. So gospel work is really important for a country that understands forgiveness in a way that not many of us do...

Anyway, being in Rwanda I wanted to see the gorillas. That's an expensive prospect – it costs \$1500 USD for a one-day permit, and so we decided to go for a cheaper tour where you're not guaranteed to see the gorillas, but lots of people do see them, and it costs \$75 instead of \$1500. You get the picture ;-)

Anyway the cheap tour is climbing a volcano. If you've been to the Napa Valley, it might be like climbing Mount Saint Helena from the valley to the peak – about 4000 feet. Except that you are starting at an altitude around 8,000 feet and climbing to over 12,000 feet...

It was amazing, but pretty difficult, especially given the altitude. Basically you start at the bottom of the hill and you climb straight up a muddy path until you reach the crater at the top, which is a beautiful lake.

It's pretty cool – the crater forms the border between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We had to have Rwandan soldiers with us for security – there are Congolese rebels in the mountains who have kidnapped and killed Western tourists. The soldiers also act as security guards for the gorillas, guarding them from poachers.

We didn't see any threats, but then again, we also barely saw our soldiers because they climbed up the mountain straight through the jungle – they were completely silent as they did it, and just popped out once in a while to let us know they were there. But they

were always there, surrounding us and keeping us safe even when we couldn't see or hear them...

As we open the Bible this morning, Psalm 125 reminds us of the mountain fortress of Zion where God's people found security surrounded by tall hills, but more than that, where they found security through being surrounded by the Lord. This is a psalm all about security.

So as we open God's word, why don't we pray that the Lord will give us that same security in Him too.

Our heavenly Father, you are the one who surrounds us, the one who watches over us, the one who brings peace. Teach us to trust you with our eternal security as we open your word today. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen

If you've been with us in recent weeks, you'll remember that we are studying the Psalms of ascent – psalms sung by Jewish pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem three times a year for the festivals. These were songs for the journey, sung by generations of God's people.

And a little bit like life, the psalms reflect the different moods we all experience along the journey. Some of the psalms reflect the dangers that we might encounter along the way: they might focus on the threats; the enemies; the difficulties. Other psalms focus on the steadfastness of God. And still others contain a mixture of hopefulness and realism.¹

I think today's psalm fits into that last category. It's a psalm of arrival in Jerusalem.

Just for a moment, I want you to put yourselves in the shoes of the pilgrim. Imagine what it was like after perhaps days or weeks of travel, dealing with the heat and the cold, the dustiness and thirstiness of an arid land; making your way through territories where bandits might attack, sleeping rough with one eye open for danger.

What a relief to finally arrive in Jerusalem. Look at v1:

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

² As the mountains surround Jerusalem,

¹ Alec Motyer, *Journey: Psalms for Pilgrim People*, p20-21 c.f. Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*

so the Lord surrounds his people
both now and forevermore.

Zion was the place where King David built his palace when he first captured Jerusalem. It had been the fortress of the Jebusites, a natural stronghold, and David strengthened it further with fortifications, and called it the city of David.

And so Mount Zion came to represent first of all the peace and security of King David's rule – the peace and security granted to him by God, we read in 2 Samuel 5.

But more than just a physical city, Zion came to represent an ideal, a kingdom and a throne that could never be overturned. A bit like Camelot in the King Arthur stories, the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke of Zion as the place where God would lay a cornerstone that can never be shaken (Isa 28:16); the place where God's people would weep no more (Isa 30:19); the place where God's people would return after the exile (Isa 51); no longer the City of David but the City of the Lord (Isa 60:14)...²

The idea of Zion is that it represents the security of God. But it wasn't just an ideal – geographically Mount Zion was surrounded by mountains. Mountains that made attack very difficult, mountains that only strengthened the stronghold of Zion.

The psalmist enters Jerusalem at the end of the pilgrimage and everything he sees reinforces the unshakeability of putting your trust in God.

Arriving in Jerusalem is a reminder of the permanence of God, and the security that he brings to all who trust in him...

So that's the first stanza (vv1-2) – **The Permanence of God.**

Second stanza – **The Problem of the Wicked** (v3)

Now against the backdrop of the first section, we get to the middle verse of the poem which raises a bit of a problem with the premise of the first section.

God is permanent, yes, but the problem is that Zion does not remain completely free from the threat of the wicked... Look at v3 with me:

² Later Zion is the place where the redeemer will come, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins... (Isa 59:20)

³The 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.

We don't know exactly when this psalm was written, but it appears to come from a time when wicked rulers held power over God's people.

Whether it was one of the kings from the time when God's people were split into two kingdoms after the death of Solomon – plenty of those kings did evil in the eyes of the Lord and led God's people into sin. Or perhaps it was written at a time when foreign kings were threatening the security of Jerusalem – that was basically the case from 720BC until the time of Jesus.

We don't know which empire was threatening the Psalmist, and perhaps that's the brilliance of this psalm as it was sung in every generation. God's people have always lived with the scepter of the wicked somewhere nearby...Whether the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, the Romans or earlier empires like the Egyptians. Wickedness is an ever-present fixture in this world.

But did you notice what the psalmist says about the wicked? Look again at v3 (on screen). He knows that the wicked will not prevail. Their kingdoms *will not remain over the land allotted to the righteous*. Yes, they might have power for a time. Yes, they might even bring punishment upon God's people, that's one way to understand the *scepter* in this context. Yes, the wicked will threaten Zion... But God will remain faithful to his promises, and to the people of his promise.

And the history of the OT shows how God *did* keep his promise to his covenant people, even in the time of the exile. The exile happened because of the Israelites' apostasy, because they had wandered so far from God. And God used the scepter of the Assyrians and Babylonians to expel his people from the promised land, much like he had done to Adam and Eve so long before when he sent them out of the garden of Eden because of their sinful disobedience.

You see, sin matters to God, and he won't allow his people to engage in the wickedness of the people around them – I think that's the context of the end of v3. God doesn't want his chosen people to engage in evil – we are made for righteousness.

Because the problem of evil isn't just out there, in the wickedness of kings. Evil is something we find in each of our hearts. Jesus said:

²¹ For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

You see the problem of wickedness in the promised land is actually the problem of every human heart in every generation. We all fall short of God's standard of righteousness. We all use our hands to do evil.

And so in the middle of a psalm all about the security of God, our own sinfulness might leave us feeling insecure about where we stand with God.

PAUSE

That brings us to the third stanza in vv4-5. **A Prayer for Peace.**

The Psalmist ends by asking God to affirm his covenant blessings upon his covenant people (v4):

Lord, do good 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.

These verses take us back to God's covenant with the Israelites in the time of Moses, where God promised to bless his people if they kept his commandments, and to curse them if they strayed. The psalmist prays almost the same formula here, asking God *do good to those who are good*, while acknowledging that the Lord will banish *those who turn to crooked ways*.

It makes sense in the context of the exile – Lord, we promise not to stray from you again. But it also makes sense in the context of *anyone* who comes into the presence of God.

Remember the pilgrim was coming to Jerusalem to celebrate the festivals. To meet with God. To rededicate his or her life to the Lord. To confess sin, to repent, and to be met with forgiveness. That is the gospel that has always operated for God's people... Coming to God by faith, with a contrite heart, we will always be accepted into the open arms of our loving Father. Seeking to live earnestly for God, following his ways – that's what it means to have an upright heart. And turning back to God when we've sinned.

It's the opposite of the person in v5 who turns to crooked ways. The psalmist doesn't say anything about their heart, presumably because their hearts no longer belong to God. They've made their choice. They've walked down the crooked path and not looked back. Their journey is not towards Jerusalem but away from it.

As a young Christian, I grew up with a gospel presentation called Two Ways to Live. It was just like this psalm. When we stand before God there are really only two options – we fall on our knees and ask for mercy, or we turn our backs on God and go our own way.

I don't know everyone who is watching today, but you might be someone who has been walking away from God. Only you know that.

But if that's you, I want you to know that God is speaking to you through this Psalm today. This Psalm is His call for you to stop walking down the pathway you've been following, and to turn back to Him. Perhaps you've done some things that you're not proud of. Perhaps you've put your hand to evil. Hear the warning – that pathway leads to destruction.

But I want you to hear the offer of this psalm as well, the prayer of the psalmist which is a prayer for peace (v5). You see, the Psalmist knows that we can find peace nowhere else but in the Lord. He knows that we find goodness and blessing and wholeness and forgiveness nowhere else but in the Lord. And he knows that we find certainty nowhere else but the Lord...

If you've been wandering away from God down the wrong path, will you turn back to him today? God wants to give you an unshakeable faith, just like the psalmist in v1... I want you to think about that and I'll come back to you in a minute.

I think there are others watching today who have been following Jesus for a long time – for years, or decades even – but right now your faith is shaky. Maybe it's the virus. Maybe it's the presence of illness in your family members. Maybe it's sin that has crept into your life. Maybe it's something else that is causing you to doubt God's covenant promises.

If that's you I want you to hear the word of the Lord today. In Psalm 125, God reminds us that he surrounds us like the mountains surround Jerusalem. For those who trust in the Lord (v1) we cannot be shaken. No wickedness, not even our sin, can separate us from the love of God when we trust in Jesus for our forgiveness.

Because at the end of the day, if it were up to us to 'be good' or to 'do good', none of us could be saved. If it were up to us to be 'righteous' or to make our hearts 'upright', then none of us could be saved. We'd be swept away by God's judgment.

But in God's kindness, this Psalm doesn't find its fulfilment in our ability to do good

It finds its fulfilment in Jesus. Jesus who was the greatest believer, the one who exhibited trust in God's sovereignty even as the wicked drove nails into his hands and feet in the land allotted to the righteous. Jesus who never retaliated, never used his hand to do evil, instead who prayed for the forgiveness of his tormentors.

You see, Jesus' death on the cross won the decisive battle over sin and wickedness for all time. On the cross, Jesus was crowned the righteous ruler over all powers and dominions, the king whose scepter is used for good and not evil. The one who will not allow wickedness to remain in his kingdom. The one who will ultimately banish all evildoers, and all who turn to crooked ways.

But in his kindness, King Jesus will also extend his scepter to offer forgiveness for all who turn back to him. And he is patient, not wanting any to perish but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9)...

This is the message of peace at the heart of the Christian gospel.

We're not right with God because of what we've done, but because of what Jesus has done. We're not saved because we surround ourselves with good works, but because God surrounds us with his forgiveness. We find peace because God offers it to those who put their trust in him and in his son, Jesus.

PAUSE

This Psalm is an invitation to come to Zion, to come to the heavenly Jerusalem. To join generations of pilgrims who trust in the Lord. To come and find security and peace with the true Israel of God as we are surrounded by the unshakeable goodness of the Lord...

The writer to the Hebrews puts it like this (Heb 12:22-28):

you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in

heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant [...]

²⁵See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. [...]

²⁸[...] we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, [therefore] let us be thankful, and [...] worship God [...] with reverence and awe.

Will you pray with me?

Further Prayers by Lisa Fillips

O LORD, You alone are worthy of our praise. May our hearts praise You today and may our eyes see You in the beauty of Your Creation. You say seek and ye shall find ~ may we seek You with all of our hearts and may we find our contentment, peace, comfort and shelter in You alone.

Help us to trust in You and Your unshakable, unfailing love for each one of us. Father we are experiencing turbulent times and yet ~ You are with us. This Covid crisis has not taken You by surprise. You will walk with us through this time. ~ You are with us. Help us Lord, to trust in You so that fear and anxiety will not be ours. May we rest secure in Who you are; the majesty and power of Your presence and Your love. We are not alone. ~ You are with us.

We thank You for the great love that you lavish upon us; and that we are called Your children. We thank you that You care for us with an everlasting love. We pray for our Pastor Dan and his family. Father, give them courage, energy, encouragement and stamina to press on with the responsibilities that encompass their work for You.

May we as the body of Christ support and pray for them. May we express our care and love for them as a precious part of our Church family. We thank You for our church family and our fellow Christians throughout the world; many of whom are persecuted for Your name's sake. Please give the leaders of our Country wisdom and bring a brotherly unity to our Country once again. Help us Father to seek justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with You O LORD. May we surrender our souls into Your care, with all the love and devotion of our hearts. We pray for Your peace in the name of Jesus Christ our LORD. You are with us. Amen.