

Psalm 125
Our Security in God

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We all have memories from childhood and adolescence that have shaped us. I grew up in a God-fearing and God-loving home. This formed me, along with the teachings and experiences in a Pentecostal church. I remember being a teenager and listening to multiple sermons about the thermometer of the Christian life: the danger of being a lukewarm Christian, the passion of a hot Christian, or the disinterest of a cold Christian. Now when I was younger, I greatly feared doing something that was wrong. So of course when I heard that being a lukewarm Christian is about the worst thing a Christian can be, I fervently confessed my laziness and lack of faith in Christ. I committed myself to trying harder to be a 'hot' Christian – someone holy and righteous, passionate, certain of their faith. And then, inevitably, when I felt my prayers and Bible reading waning, when I noticed that doubt and confusion replaced faith, I dropped to my knees in remorse and angst that I had again fallen victim to being a lukewarm Christian. If only I had read Psalm 125 in my youth, understood Israel's history, and had language to speak about discipleship I wouldn't have tormented myself so much! You see, Psalm 125 is the discipleship skill that shouts "you are secure"; "your faith is secure", "do not be anxious, you are safe". But at a deeper level, like all discipleship skills, it points us not to ourselves, but to who God is.

As we've been studying the faith skills needed for discipleship, I hazard a guess that we've been learning more about who God is rather than who we are. We've learned that the first step of discipleship is our decision to turn away from the lies of the world and instead turn to God. In that daily decision, we're declaring that God's ways are the ways that bring us true and full and complete peace. The second step of discipleship is learning that God is our help by protecting us from the evil which threatens to separate us from God's love. Then we considered the third discipleship skill which is worship. God commands us to worship so that we are brought together

in unity with God and one another. The fourth faith skill is servanthood. We know that God is above us, not below us or equal to us; not someone we command or make demands from. God is on high and we serve the merciful God. The fifth faith skill declares that God is on our side. We boldly bear witness to his help in the face of monsters, raging seas, and all that threatens to consume our faith, hope, and love. In all of these, we are living by God's promises: he forgives, he helps, he brings peace, he shows us mercy, he is on our side.

Discipleship is about knowing who we are and knowing where we're going. The faith skills of discipleship are primarily about knowing God.

This morning we get to Psalm 125 - the sixth song of ascent. It says "you are secure". But, more accurately, it tells us "God keeps us secure!". The Psalm begins with a rather audacious claim: *"Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever."* The Psalmist opens by saying 'those who trust in God', not those who trust in their performance, in their morals, in their goodness, in their health, in their doctor, in their pastor, in their economy, in their spouse or family, or in their education. Those who trust in God cannot be shaken.

When I read this verse, I cannot relate to what the Psalmist says. How often has my own faith and trust in God been shaken. It was shaken when, growing up in a Pentecostal church, I had not received the gift of speaking in tongues and questioned whether I was even Christian. I was shaken when, at 15 years old, my grandfather – a pillar of faith in my formative years – passed away. It was shaken when, as a young adult, I lived in Uganda for a year and both witnessed and experienced abuse, leaving me traumatized. My faith was shaken several years later when I

experienced deep hurt within the church from church leaders. My faith was shaken this summer when I found out my sister may only have a few years left to live (which, thankfully, is not the case). No doubt my faith will continue to be shaken in the coming months and years.

I know I am not the only one whose faith has been shaken. Consider the first patriarch of Israel – Abraham. God promised Abraham and Sarah that in their old age, Sarah would conceive a child through whom God would make Abraham the father of many nations. Both Abraham and Sarah expressed their doubt in God’s promise by laughing at the Lord.

Or consider the Old Testament judge, Gideon. After seven years of oppression, God’s people cried out to God for help. An angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, saying “The Lord is with you”. Gideon looked around him, wondering how God could be with them when Israel endured great suffering (the consequence of their having done evil). Gideon concluded that God had abandoned his people. His faith was shaken, he doubted God’s promises and presence. But the angel was persistent that God wanted to save His people through Gideon’s leadership. Gideon again doubted God’s promise and needed proof that indeed God would do what the angel had said. Gideon tested God twice.

And then there is the well-known New Testament disciple nicknamed “doubting Thomas”.

Thomas likely spent years with Jesus: witnessing miracles, traveling with him, and being taught by him. After Jesus’ crucifixion, Thomas heard from the other disciples that Jesus was raised from the dead. For an entire week, Thomas doubted, questioned, and did not believe that it was

true. It was only when Jesus appeared to Thomas and encouraged him to touch his hands and side that Thomas believed.

Not only do individuals doubt but the whole of God's people do too. Think about the stories of Israel - they crossed the Red Sea dancing and rejoicing and then they built a golden calf and complained that life in slavery in Egypt was way better than wandering around the wilderness. They doubted God's provision, protection, and presence. Or consider the events in the hours leading to Jesus' crucifixion. One evening Jesus' disciples sat with him around the table, breaking bread and drinking wine, but within hours they denied and abandoned him.

At first glance, it seems the Psalm is saying that among God's people, there is an absolute confidence, a resolute security, an unwavering faith. Those who trust, who rely on, who are confident in God will not be shaken. But from my own life and the life of other Christians, I know this is not true. Do all God's people begin their life as a Christian brimming with faith, hope, and love? Do all God's people continue their life as a Christian with ever increasing faith, hope, and love? Or do God's people also doubt, also question, also grow uncertain, also become confused, also become "lukewarm"?

The second verse presents a striking picture to help us make sense of all this: *As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore.* This is a picture of the everyday, the ordinary which reminds us that discipleship is about the everyday, the ordinary. When we read this, we may imagine a city surrounded by mountains, not entirely unlike Whitehorse. The word that comes to mind with that kind of image is security. It is a basic

human desire, a basic human need. Security is not something that existed only in the ancient world as nations took extensive practices to ensure safety: building high city walls or digging moats, for example. We find it here too. We see national desires for security by building walls around the borders, having border guards, expending billions on national security defense.

Not only do nations in the 21st century take significant steps towards security, but so do we in our personal lives. After all, security is not just a national desire, it is a basic human right. We, as God's people, need to be secure just as everyone else is. Just like nations build walls for defense, we do that too in our personal lives. The world builds security walls in different ways: financial investments and portfolios, family relationships and friendships, education and degrees, material wealth. Or if someone has stolen from us, we get more locks, more security cameras, more passwords and vaults to protect our possessions. We also build walls around our hearts and minds, often after a profound experience of hurt or betrayal or abuse. Our fragile and vulnerable hearts and minds are broken and we need security that it will not be damaged further. So we build a tight wall around our heart and our mind, preventing anyone from getting in or out. This is a normal reaction to being hurt.

We feel insecure in matters of relationships, finances, employment, leisure, personhood. And there are countless ways we feel insecure in matters of faith. We doubt God's love, God's mercy, God's presence, God's grace, God's help. We lose our joy – which is a gift from God - and are prone to depression. We feel insecure because of pain and suffering – our faith is insecure because we wonder why God allowed such tragedy to happen to us. There are things which are unpleasant and miserable that happen around us all the time. In fact, during the Psalmist's life, I

am quite certain that there would have been lots of unfavourable and miserable things that happened – natural disasters like drought and earthquakes and tornados. There were floods and fires and famines. There was sickness and disease and infant mortality but no hospitals or Tylenol or medical regulations. There was war and violence and torture during military invasion but no national defense system in which the government provided money and weaponry. The Psalmist knew pain and suffering, misery and discomfort, disaster and discouragement, doubt and depression.

So here we are faced with a dilemma: we feel insecure, we feel doubtful, we feel depressed, we feel anxious, we feel we have lost our faith. Do our feelings change who God is?

I will remind you of something I have previously said. Feelings are important. We need our feelings – they are part of what it means to be human, to be created in the image of God. It is good to be able to feel the depth of joy – like when a new child is born – or the depth of grief when there is some kind of loss and heartache. It is good to feel the surge of hope when you've been drowning in a black pit. And it is good to feel anger when evil devastates and destroys your world. All these feelings are good, and important, and needed to be human for we learn a lot about life through our feelings, lest we become numb and senseless and dull. But feelings are not so good at telling us the truth about who God is. Our feelings may not be accurate when it comes to matters of faith.

You see, in the matter of faith, security comes not from our feelings but from knowing who God is. We may not feel secure but that does not in fact mean our faith is not secure. We may feel

doubt and depressed, but that does not mean God has changed. We don't always feel secure and safe. But even though we don't feel it, we are safe and secure because of who God is.

Let me put it a different way. In Israel's history, do God's people stop being God's people when they doubt and despair? Does God suddenly abandon his people because their faith is shaken, because they're asking more questions and need more answers? God's people are God's people even when we move between doubt and belief; between joy and grief; between hope and despair. Israel always remained God's people. And God always continued to show mercy and judgment, grace and discipline, love and patience. In all these moments, in every part of their history, in every detail of the story, we remain God's people. And God remains God. God continues to be merciful, gracious, patient, loving, holy. So no matter our security of faith, no matter our doubts or depression, we are still God's people. And God is still God.

Or think of it this way. Have you ever broken a bone or had surgery? When I sprained my ankle and needed crutches, no one regarded me with judgment or contempt or disregard or rejection because my body was bruised and broken and hurting. Have you ever been hurt emotionally or psychologically? Perhaps you have been hurting from anxiety or depression or grief or loneliness or confusion or loss. There are invisible emotional and psychological hurts and we are broken inside. But that doesn't mean we should be treated any differently, rejected, dismissed, or disregarded because our mind and heart are bruised, broken and hurting. So, when our faith gets a little bit fragile, when our faith becomes hurt because of some experience or conversation or interaction or question or observation, our faith gets bruised and broken and hurting. Does that mean that God dismisses us? Or rejects us? Or disregards us? Or treats us any different because

my faith is bruised and broken and hurting? Just like our family and friends don't reject us when we break a bone or when we're sad or anxious, God does not suddenly reject us when our faith is hurt.

Here's what the Psalmist is saying: the fact that my faith is prone to doubt and you have a confident faith does not mean I am less of a Christian than you. The fact that my faith goes up and down and yours is steady does not mean I am a lukewarm Christian. The fact that my childhood faith has crumbled to its very foundation and I've had to painstakingly and laboriously put it back together and your faith has continuously been growing, building itself up and up like a giant tower does not mean that my salvation isn't secure. The fact that the fruits of my faith sometimes don't ripen or fall to the ground before maturity and yours are ripe and mature doesn't mean that I am not secure in God.

So I can say with the Psalmist: *I trust in the Lord and I am like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Whitehorse, so the Lord surrounds me both now and forevermore.*

The difference between the disciple of Jesus Christ and the world is that the disciple doesn't look for security in the same ways the world does. The world builds their own defenses but we don't need to build a defense because God surrounds us. Our defense is that God is all around us.

How exactly do we have security in God? The key to our security is found in verse 3. Note that it does not say we are secure because God promises that we will always flourish, always be joyful,

always have faith, always know love. Rather it says *“For the scepter of wickedness shall not remain on the land allotted to the righteous, so that the righteous might not stretch out their hands and do wrong”*. The Hebrew word translated as remain means to rest, to settle, to remain, to violate. So the scepter of the wicked will not rest, will not settle, will not remain, will not violate. In other words, the actions of the wicked will not cancel out God’s purposes that are being worked out. It means that the evil and wrong and wickedness in the world will not be permanent, will not violate what God is doing. It means that the sin of the world will not be stronger or greater or more powerful than the righteousness of God. Thus, there is the firm conviction from God’s people that no wicked scepter will rest or remain or settle or violate or cancel or stop what God is doing.

You see, if the scepter of the wicked is permanent, then there truly is no hope for salvation. If the scepter of the wicked is permanent, then even the most faithful and devout and righteous person will respond by doing evil.

This declaration of security comes from the firm belief that God is alive, active, powerful, and at work. It is a remarkable thing to live out of the truth that God is active, present, and powerful. When we choose to live according to the truth that God is among us, God is at work, God is present, God is powerful; then it changes how we choose to live our day to day. When we choose to live by that truth, instead of by our doubts, how that would change how we look at the world. How that would change how we study, how we work, how we play. How that would change how we interact with our family, our friends, our colleagues, our neighbours. If we choose to trust that God is alive, that God is at work, that God is present, that God is powerful – especially when

calamity strikes, especially when there is a job loss, especially when a child dies, especially when cancer attacks, especially when a marriage falls apart; how that would change us.

This Psalm teaches and reminds us about an important decision we make as Christian disciples as we go about our living, our working, our playing, our cooking, our cleaning, our socializing. The Psalm teaches us that the people of God, the Israelites, went about their life with the certainty that God is active, present, powerful, and at work in all things. Consider all that the Israelites went through – famine and drought, exile and destruction, war and violence, slavery and oppression, marginalization and vulnerability – yet this Psalm is a bold declaration that there is no doubt that God is still alive, active, present, powerful and at work. After all, it was this sure belief that sustained their hope through the generations while they waited for the Messiah to come. Israel understood that God was at work and that it was God's work to redeem His people.

The difference between the disciple of Jesus Christ and the world is that the disciple believes God is present and at work to bring redemption, restoration, and recreation. The world works on their own but we just need to look around us and pay attention to where God is at work. God is at work whenever we see the different generations coming together to encourage one another – something that will happen this Thursday when the Parents of Littles group and the Positive Side of 60 group enjoy a meal together. We see God at work when people choose to give their time and energy on a Saturday morning to go to the Centre of Hope and help serve meals. We see God at work when young people want to spend their Friday evening sorting items at the Food Bank, which will happen this Friday. We see God at work when volunteers show up, week after week, to serve in the church: during the worship service or in the children's ministry or at Friday youth

group. We see God at work whenever we choose to forgive someone for the wrong done to us. We see God at work wherever people gather to worship, like on a Sunday morning or during the Chinese service Sunday afternoons.

Then we come to two strange verses in the Psalm: *“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 own crooked ways the Lord will lead away with evildoers.”*

For decades in Israel, there was a belief that good people flourish while evil people are destroyed. You read this belief over and over again in the Psalms and in other Biblical literature. We must remember that these are the songs that were born from the labourers, from the shepherds, from the marketplace vendors, from the people who did the everyday ordinary work. They represent hopes and fears, dangers and distractions of those who lived in the reality of daily life. These are the same people who rejoiced when the harvest was gathered and who mourned at the loss of a child; these people had the same reactions and responses in the everyday that we experience now. So out of such experiences there came the belief that the good prosper while the evil suffer. In other words, do good and good will happen to you. Do bad and bad things will happen to you. This belief was so deep, generation after generation, that we see Jesus Christ, hundreds of years later, addressing this very same issue when the disciples ask whether the man was born blind because of his sin or his parents' sin.

So these last two verses are a restatement of the popular belief that in this lifetime, the good will flourish while the evil will suffer. That those who trust in the Lord will be safe and happy during

their life while those who don't will perish and endure pain. This is not the teaching of Jesus, nor the Biblical view.

But this is not the point of the Psalm. The point is summarized in that last statement – *Peace be upon Israel*. This entire Psalm can be summarized by verse 5: peace be upon Israel. Being a disciple of Christ is like sitting in Jerusalem, fortified, strong, secure. Peace – God is in control. God is running this show. God is alive. God is at work. God is powerful. God is present. God is with us. God does not let evil cancel out his plans. God keeps us secure. What is certain and sure is that God will accomplish his salvation in our lives and perfect his will in our stories. So life with God is a sure thing.

Ultimately, discipleship means that we choose to live by what we know about God, not by what I feel about God, feel about myself, or feel about my friends and family and neighbour. After all, the image in this Psalm which announces that God is unchanging, secure, dependable, and safe comes from the image of Mount Zion not my feelings.

So when my faith gets bruised, broken and hurt; when doubt and uncertainty creep in, I can remain secure that God is still with me, has not abandoned me. Though our faith waivers, we are still His people and God is still God.

I will close this morning with a well-known Irish prayer:

As I arise today,

may the strength of God pilot me,

the power of God uphold me,

the wisdom of God guide me.

May the eye of God look before me,

the ear of God hear me,

the word of God speak for me.

May the hand of God protect me,

the way of God lie before me,

the shield of God defend me,

the host of God save me.

May Christ shield me today.

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,

Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,

Christ on my right, Christ on my left,

Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit, Christ when I stand,

Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.

Amen