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## *The Climb of Your Life: The Belay* Psalm 125

*[Begin with video of free climbing.]* Pretty breath-taking, isn't it? Can you imagine the skill and the courage it requires for someone to climb like that—the strength to be able to do pull-ups with your fingers, to jam into the tiniest cracks and crevices, to place those gummy-soled shoes on a ledge ¼ inch wide and push yourself up to the top? Impressive.

But there's something even more impressive about that video... or crazy. What? No rope! No safety! That guy was free-climbing that cliff face. One slip and he's dead! Pretty extreme, isn't it? Some would say pretty insane! Of course, for those who hate heights, it's all insane, but normally someone tackling a climb like this will do so with some security in place.

Ordinarily, a climber has a partner and uses a safety rope, harness, carabineers and other protection. The more experienced climber goes first, attaching his chocks along the way and hooking into them. When he reaches the top, he then anchors the climbing rope. What is that anchor called? A belay. A rope is on belay when it is wrapped around a rock or mechanical device or the person himself. The belay stops someone from falling to her death if she slips.

When the second climber is ready, she calls out, "Belay on?" The person at the top replies, "On belay!" Then she says, "Climbing" and waits for the response, "Climb on!" Then, and only then, can she be sure that she is safe to go... safe in the hands of the person on top; safely "on belay."

Unless you are a crazy free-climber, no one would tackle faces like these without the security of knowing that someone trustworthy was on the other end of that rope; that the belay is on and you may climb with confidence. This morning's psalm is like the Lord calling out to his people, "Climb on!"

We are continuing this morning in a series based on the Psalms of Ascent, a collection of songs sung by pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem. It could be a long and perilous journey, and as they sang these songs along the way, they were encouraged. Last week's Psalm 124 was a look backward. The pilgrim paused, turned around, and remembered with amazement God's faithfulness during perilous times: "If the Lord had not been on our side!" Remember?

If 124 was a look backward, 125 is a look to the future. It asks this question: “I know that God has been faithful in the past, but can I really count on him to be faithful in the future, too? The answer comes quickly in verse 1:

*Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.*

There was nothing in Judaism that represented security like Mt. Zion, the mountain of the Lord at the center of Jerusalem. This mountain was where Abraham took his son Isaac, prepared to sacrifice him to the Lord. This was the mountain David purchased to build his capital city. Upon this mountain Solomon built his temple. Around this mountain the great walls of Jerusalem were erected.

But notice this: it is not the city or the temple or the walls that represent God’s enduring faithfulness. Good thing, too. The city was destroyed many times. The walls were destroyed many times. The temple was destroyed, rebuilt, and destroyed again and has never been rebuilt. But underneath it all, spanning the millennia, sits the mountain that has never been moved... never been torn down, never changed. In fact, when you visit the underground excavations in Jerusalem, at the end of a long tunnel, you come to the place where Herod’s huge building stones meet bedrock... the bedrock of Zion. Even some of Herod’s stones—some as large as a Greyhound bus—have been pulled down but not Mt. Zion. It still stands.

That mountain is the emblem of security for God’s people, but not as you might expect. You might expect the psalmist to say that God is like Mt. Zion—enduring, permanent, unshaken—and that we come to him for our security. But that’s not what he says. The Psalmist says that we, God’s people, are like Mt. Zion—enduring, unshaken—and that he comes to us for our security.

Look at verse 2: As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore. When you stand on Zion and look out, you see deep ravines and mountains that ring the city. There is no way to approach Jerusalem without making a long upward climb. Sitting there as it does—on a mountain surrounded by other mountains—Jerusalem is in a place of great strength and security.

Do you see how reassuring this image is? Those who trust the Lord, we God’s people are like Mt. Zion. God has secured us, God’s people God’s people—set us up in strength... immovable, unshaken God’s people—and after the Lord has established us, he then surrounds us. He who makes us a “citadel... becomes our sentinel” (Spurgeon). He enfolds us. There is no direction we can turn where we do not find God on guard... protecting, preserving, watching over us, and making us secure. In fact, the word “belly” comes from an Old English word that means surround!

The Toones travelled to Salt Lake City in September for a wedding. Every morning, Cyndi and I went for a walk, and one day as we rounded a corner, we saw two of these running toward us: huge, silver Great Danes. We raised German Shepherds when I was growing up. Big dogs don't bother me, but these guys weighed 150 pounds apiece. We had 300 pounds of dog rushing toward us. I pushed Cyndi behind me and, as they began to circle us, I kept pushing her around, trying to keep me between them and her. But with the dogs circling us, it was impossible to keep both of them away from my wife who would have been the size of a doggy treat to them.

The people of God don't have this problem. The Lord enfolds us. He surrounds us, not with his protection or wisdom, he surrounds us with Himself. And then he says to our enemies, "You just try getting past me to my beloved!" There is no place we can go, not a direction we can turn, where God is not there, on guard. And how long does God's protection last? Until he tires? Until he gets distracted? Until someone more fun comes along? No, the people of God whom He has established like a mountain—He will surround and protect both now and forevermore. We are safe in his care. As Jesus said of his sheep, "No one can snatch them out of my hand!"

But it doesn't always feel that way, does it? Sometimes we experience the wickedness of this world. We may be the chosen and preserved people of God, but it doesn't mean that the mean, brutal realities of this life never touch us. Isn't that what the psalmist means when he speaks of the "scepter of the wicked?" The scepter was a gold wand held by the king. It represented his authority and power. It is true that wicked people and wicked powers have been allowed to wield their force, but it is temporary. All evil is temporary. As the text says, "the scepter of the wicked will not remain." In other words, we may be touched by evil, but it cannot rest upon us. The scepter of evil touched Job, touched Joseph, touched David, touched Daniel, touched Jesus... but in the end it could not remain. It had to be lifted. Because evil never lasts. In the end, the scepter of the wicked is replaced by "Thy rod and thy staff which comfort me!"

However you are experiencing the touch of evil in your life, God promises that, in the end, you will not be shaken. All things will be made right. Wicked cancer, wicked relationships, wicked divorce, wicked lawsuits, wicked people, wicked culture... all of them will pass away. And the only thing that will remain is God and God's people—the ones he has preserved and surrounded with His very self.

It's a wonderful promise, but there is a warning in this psalm, too... a warning to the pretenders. *<sup>4</sup>Do good, O LORD, to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart. But those who turn to crooked ways the Lord will banish with the evildoers.*

The promise of this psalm is that all who belong to the Lord are secure in his care, surrounded by his love, unshaken by the wickedness that might touch them but will never remain upon them. The warning of this psalm is this: not all who claim or appear to belong to the Lord, do. There are some who have the appearance of holiness—they go to church, give money, talk the talk, do all the right things—but their hearts are not good. Their hearts have never been surrendered to Jesus who is the only one who can make an evil heart good and a dirty heart pure. They continue to ignore this heart disease, hiding what is on the inside while polishing up what is on the outside.

The psalmist calls these people crooked. They have turned to crooked ways. Jesus taught, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life... no one comes to the Father except by me." He warned of sheep and the goats, of the narrow and wide ways, but there are some pretenders who do not take Jesus at his word... who try to cut corners, shave edges, work the angles, go their own way. They don't intend to wander forever. They expect that their crooked way, their shortcut, will eventually lead them back to God, but it doesn't. In the end, the people of the crooked way—the pretenders—are banished with the evildoers who never tried to pretend that they were anything but evil.

Perhaps some here today who need to heed the warning of verse 4. No one else will know, but if you were honest with yourself and God, you would admit that you do not have an upright heart. That so far, you've been content to travel your life by your own crooked way. This psalm warns: it will not end well for you.

But for those who trust the Lord, it ends very well. Verse 5: "Shalom be upon Israel." Verses 1 and 5 are like bookends. Those who trust the Lord—notice, there's nothing else to do, nothing to prove, nothing to earn... it is simply those who trust the Lord; whose hearts are upright—to them the great promise of this psalm is, "I will make you like Mount Zion which cannot be shaken but endures forever." I will surround my people, both now and forevermore. I will belay you to myself, you will be free to climb, and I will never, never let you fall.

Whatever you are experiencing in this moment—whatever way the scepter of the wicked might be touching you—it will pass! It will not last. Evil never lasts! The pain, the loss, the loneliness... it will pass. If you are the chosen of God, he will save and establish and surround and preserve you forever... in this life and the life to come. If you trust in the Lord, you cannot be shaken. Do you hear that? You cannot be shaken.

Do you hear that, all you who died this year? Do you hear that Marilyn Bergevin and Luke Sehmel and Libby Halvorsen? You cannot be shaken. Do you hear that Marj Stewart and Ron Warter and Kyle Chapman and Mary Rodenbacher? You cannot be shaken! Can you testify to us Phil Farmer and Darren Fouquette and Susan Donnelly? You cannot be shaken! And you Suzanne Hilton and Marilyn Kemp and Josh Pearson and Maari Dickerson... you cannot be shaken, either.

You, all of you—all who belong to Jesus, the living and the dead, the Church militant and the Church triumphant—have been established like Mt. Zion. The Lord himself surrounds us. He has bound us to himself, and whatever this world dishes out in life and in death, we belong to the Lord Jesus. And we are free to climb! Belay on? On Belay! Climbing. Climb on!

## **Sermon Questions**

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
  1. What is the promise to God's people in verses 1-2? What one word would you use to describe it? When in your life did you need this reassurance?
  2. One of our doctrines of the Reformed faith is "eternal security," the idea that once you are saved, you cannot be "un-saved." Verses 1-2 seem to say one thing about this doctrine; verses 3-5, another. How do you handle this tension?
  3. What if any responsibility do we have for our own spiritual security? Explain.