

RUF Bible Study – Songs of Ascents
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Psalm 125 – Security

*Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.
2 As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people,
from this time forth and forevermore.
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.
4 Do good, O Lord, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts!
5 But those who turn aside to their crooked ways
the Lord will lead away with evildoers!
Peace be upon Israel!*

English Standard Version

*Those who trust in GOD are like Zion Mountain:
Nothing can move it, a rock-solid mountain
you can always depend on.
2Mountains encircle Jerusalem,
and GOD encircles his people--
always has and always will.
3The fist of the wicked will never violate
What is due the righteous,
provoking wrongful violence.
4Be good to your good people, GOD,
to those whose hearts are right!
5GOD will round up the backsliders,
corral them with the incorrigibles.
Peace over Israel!*

The Message

In the early eighteenth century John Wesley, Charles Wesley, and George Whitefield attended Oxford University where they formed what came to be known as “The Holy Club.” It was a religious society built around extreme discipline. Together they created a great stir at Oxford as they applied rigorous standards of discipline in Bible study, communion, prayer, and fasting.

To be part of The Holy Club you had to rise very early each morning, carry on rigorous devotions, make nightly notes in your journal, fast twice a week, and you had to visit prisoners at the Oxford jail. One night his colleagues looked out the window, and saw Whitefield outside kneeling in prayer with his face in the dirt. It began to rain, turning dirt to mud, but he continued to pray. These young men were, not surprisingly, ridiculed and jeered by fellow students.

Could you have been in The Holy Club? Would you want to be in it? Why do you think they formed it?

I think it came out of a good place and a bad place in their hearts and lives. The good part is a desire for holiness and happiness. God says that if we follow his law, we will be prosperous and successful. Too many of us have joined UnHoliness Clubs.

But I think the bad place was one of insecurity. The thinking is, if I can just do everything right, then I will be safe and secure. I’ll know my position. I will have assurance. I won’t have to fear of backsliding out of faith. I can take care of this uneasiness, fear and low-level panic.

Have you ever thought that way?

Psalm 125 is for you. “The emphasis of Psalm 125 is not on the precariousness of the Christian life, but on its solidarity.”² Let’s look at the dangers, the false places we go for security and the offer of security God has for us.

Dangers

Life was dangerous in the ancient world. There were roaming marauders, ready to attack at any sign of weakness. Watching took constant vigilance. Villages and cities needed elaborate and extensive defense systems like walls and moats.

I’ve been rereading my favorite novel, *Lonesome Dove*, by Larry McMurtry. Two Texas Rangers pull together a 3,000 strong cattle herd and drive them to Montana from south Texas. Various cowboys die from lightning, snake bites and other unexpected evils. Not to mention, along the way they are constantly on the lookout for Indians, hostile to the takeover of their land. Several times, the cowhands lose men. Everyone is scared. Blue Duck is out there, and he’s not only a cold-blooded killer, he’s cruel and brutal in what he’ll do to you before you die³.

Do you feel like your walk with God is like that? These psalms are collected together and presented as God’s people walking the pathway to Jerusalem to worship God. It’s not totally unlike a long walk across the dangerous plains of Nebraska, Colorado and up to Montana.

Are you on the lookout for someone who might come up in the night and slit your faith throat or cut off your love scalp? The first danger or threat on our walk to Jerusalem, our cattle drive is that of depression and doubt.

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³ Things that involve testicles.

If you're like me then, when you read, *Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever*, you think, But I *am* moved! I can be gray and dismal, faltering and moody. I go back and forth from sadness to joy, success to failure. I felt that way just this week, and wanted to attribute it somehow to Seasonal Affective Disorder or something like that. I was bummed. I slept poorly a few nights. I feel like I'm gaining too much weight. I am thinking about and dealing with trials and troubles of people in RUF and in the church. I have various checkbook fiascos that prove my incompetency. I wonder if I am slowly killing the collegiate ministry of RUF at OU. And then I feel bad for feeling bad. I wonder if faith will ever truly happen in my life, if I can ever really be a Christian the way God wants me to be.

Do you ever feel that way?

"Here's an amazing thing – Israel and us have an up and down history, but they, we, are always God's people. "God is steadfastly with them, in mercy and judgment, insistently gracious. We get the feeling that everything is done in the sure, certain environment of the God who redeems his people. And as we learn that, we learn to live not by our feelings about God but by the facts of God. I refuse to believe my depressions; I choose to believe in God... My feelings are important for many things. They are essential and valuable. They keep me aware of much that is true and real. But they tell me next to nothing about God or my relation to God. My security comes from who God is, not from how I feel. Discipleship is a decision to live by what I know about God, not by what I feel about him or myself or my neighbors."⁴

The second threat or danger is *pain and suffering*. Unpleasant things happen to us. We lose what we think we cannot live without. Pain comes, and we conclude there is no justice. Why does God permit this? Anxiety creeps into our hearts. We wonder if the scepter of wickedness will always be with those who do evil.

Many of us pessimistically feel like we're living under the Damoclean sword. Do you remember that legend? A happy prince looks up and sees that right over his head is a sword dangling, held up only by a thin hair. It might break any time. How can he laugh and live with such a threat? Many of us live that way. If things are going well, and we're happy, then we just know something terrible is around the corner.

The psalmist knows all this. He's familiar with sickness, death, despair, persecution, rape, pillage, famine, earthquake. He's not familiar with anesthetics, aspirin, eyeglasses, hospitals, and nuclear generators. Pain and suffering were certainly part of his daily life. Could you imagine what it would have been like to live 3000 years ago. Women, many, perhaps most, of you would have died in childbirth. If you had bad eyes, you don't get to see. If you had a cavity, your teeth rotted out. Sure, you wouldn't have had the threat of dying in a car accident or from a gunshot wound, but carts and spears can do just as much damage.

The psalmist knew pain and suffering. So how can he say this? Why is his confidence still in tact? He says, The fist of the wicked will never violate what is due the righteous provoking wrongful violence. Evil cannot violate, cannot cancel God's purposes. The evil fist, the scepter of wickedness is not permanent. Danger and oppression are never too much for faith. They weren't too much for Job or Jeremiah or Jesus. Evil is always temporary. The worst does not last. Nothing counter to God's justice has any eternity to it. Do you believe that?

Third threat is of a different nature. It's the threat of *the possibility of defection*. We ask the questions now and then, How do I know I won't fall away? How do I know that I have not already fallen away?

"It is not possible to drift unconsciously from faith to perdition. We wonder like lost sheep, true, but God is a faithful shepherd who pursues us relentlessly. We have our ups and downs but he is faithful. We break our promises, but he doesn't break his. Discipleship is not a contract in which if we break our part of the agreement, he is free to break his; it is a covenant in which he establishes the conditions and guarantees the result."⁵

Without getting into a huge theological treatise on the nature of election and perseverance of the saints and whether or not Once Saved, Always Saved it true, I want to bring it down from theory and tell you, you may quit if you wish. But defection requires a deliberate, sustained and determined act of rejection. You will have to kick against the goads, as it were. You will have to prove yourself an unbeliever and it won't be easy if you've numbered yourself among the people of God, of faith.

We all are struggling. There is no perfect Christian. Brennan Manning calls it the Victorious Limp. "All the persons of faith I know are sinners, doubters uneven performers. We are secure not because we are sure of ourselves, but because we trust that God is sure of us. The opening phrase of the psalm is 'those who trust in God' – not those who trust in their performance, in their morals, in their righteousness, in their health, in their pastor, in their doctor, in their president, in their economy, in their nation – 'those who trust in God.' Those who decide that God is for us and will make us whole eternally."⁶

False Places

That quote pushes us to consider where we find false security. The psalm speaks of "Those who trust in God," – not those who trust in their performance, in their morals, in their righteousness, in their health, in their pastor, in their doctor, in their president, in their economy, in their nation – 'those who trust in God.' Those who decide that God is for us and will make us whole eternally."

Preachers love to quote Harold Abrahams from the movie "Chariots of Fire." He says, "I will raise my eyes and look down that corridor; 4 feet wide, with 10 lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. But WILL I?"

GI (Gastro Intestinal) Joel won the \$25,000 and first place at the 1997 Scrabble tournament, which is a tremendous achievement in the world of competitive Scrabble. Author Stefan Fatsis captures the moment in his book *Word Freak*: "It's the

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only thing I've ever put a lot of hard work into,' Joel says. 'When I can prove that my approach to the game is just as good as their approach – my concentration on strategy as opposed to their concentration on rote dictionary memorization – it elevates my self-esteem. It's the one thing I'm really good at, and if I can't accomplish something in this field, it's unlikely I'll accomplish something in any other field.'

“So this basically validates my existence.’ He pauses. ‘I’m not kidding.’”⁷

If you can't relate to this, then you aren't into competitive Scrabble. But you can insert just whatever it is that you are into. It's something to be sure.

The options for places where we can find a false sense of security are numberless. I could not begin to mention them all. There are the obvious ones:

- Your finances.
- Your love life.
- Your looks.
- Your place in society.
- Your health.
- Your status.
- Your career.
- Your role as a parent.
- Your position within the company.
- Your place in your niche, like Joel. You are up on technology. You are an athlete. You are a fast reader. You wear cool clothes. You are a national merit scholar.
- Your school.
- Your neighborhood, house and car.
- Your family.
- Your church attendance.
- Your grades.
- Your family name or your parents.
- Your parenting style.
- Your views on certain theological, social or political issues.

It's not hard to prove that any of these can be taken away in a second, and many more of them could be eroded over time. You could wake up tomorrow and find out your job is gone because the company is downsizing. Your boyfriend could break up with you. You could contract e coli from eating a bad burger. You could lose your house in a fire. You could get old and die. You could find out there is someone better, faster, smarter, stronger, more beautiful, more eloquent, more competent and you're no longer needed.

These are places of false security. They appear to be strong and stable, but really they are pretenders. They are false alliances. I'm a reality show junkie. I don't watch them all, but I can't think of any that I wouldn't watch if I had the opportunity. And one of the originals is Survivor, which I still watch, but now with my kids. You can be sure, if you are watching a show, if someone says he or she is safe because of an alliance, that that person is going to be voted out the next time at tribal council. Alliances rarely stick. Israel found this out in the book of Isaiah. And if you watch the show "24," all I should have to say is the one name and you'll know what I'm talking about – Nina Myers. Argh. Nina Myers.⁸

It's like you've been duped into giving your life savings into a time share scam pyramid scheme, and you've not yet realized you've lost it all.

But Jesus says in Matthew 7: 24 *“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”*

Go back and watch the classic movie "Citizen Kane" by Orson Wells, which is most likely a movie about the life of William Randolph Hearst. Hearst/Kane had all the possessions in the world, but one of his friends, comments: "That's all he ever wanted out of life... was love. That's the tragedy of Charles Foster Kane. You see, he just didn't have any to give."

Later, Kane toasts his friend, Jedediah: "to love on my own terms" and then is rebuked by his wife Susan: "Love! You don't love anybody! Me or anybody else! You want to be loved - that's all you want! I'm Charles Foster Kane. Whatever you want - just name it and it's yours! Only love me! Don't expect me to love you."

Love on your own terms. That is not possible. These false places of security will get you every time. They demand more and more of you, don't you see. You can have everything, and you still won't be happy. You still won't be secure. You can make a million and then it doesn't seem as secure any more, so you have to go for another million. That's the nature of false places, of idols. That's why John tells us at the end of his book, 1 John, "Dear Children, keep yourselves from idols." Idols are slippery soil, and you'll be building your house on the sand. It will come down.

⁷ *Word Freak*, p. 19

⁸ I can't say more or it will ruin the show if you haven't seen it.

God's Security

If there are dangers, and false places of security, then we eventually need to discuss the nature of the true place, the secure place, the place of this psalm. The psalmist tells us that it's Jerusalem, Zion, God's city that is secure. Jerusalem is a safe city, a protective fortress.

But we have to realize that Jerusalem merely pictures God's secure presence. It could also be a false security if we begin to trust in the city itself or the walls themselves or the temple. Better than a city wall or a military fortification is the presence of God's peace.

Have you ever been to a strong, high, walled city? The one that sticks out to me is in Edinburgh. The castle on the top of the hill seems impenetrable to me. I cannot imagine the forces it would take to overcome it. It is high, strong and secure. That is where our faith resides. *"Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. 2 As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore."*

The foundation of the city, of our faith, that which makes it strong, is the rock. And the rock on which our faith rests, as per Matthew 7, is Jesus Christ. Jesus tells Peter this in their conversation in Matt 16:16-18. *"Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' 17 And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.'"*

Peter must have been thinking of this, and adding it to his knowledge of the scriptures, when he quotes Is. 28:16 in 1 Peter 2:6 - *For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."* We build on Jesus by faith. We are to "trust in him." By believing in Jesus we become stones worked into the great spiritual temple God is constructing.

He continues in this 1 Peter 2 passage to think about the stone, the rock and pulls from Psalm 118:22, Acts 4:11 - 7 *So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," 8 and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense."*

Peter is saying, God is the owner of the vineyard. The leaders of Israel were the evil tenant farmers. The servants were the prophets, and the son who was killed was Jesus himself. Therefore, he is also the stone rejected by the builders who was to become the capstone of religion and the only sure foundation for his people. Peter pulls from Isaiah 8:14 and tells us rejecting God's anointed Messiah is no small matter. It has a fatal consequence, which is to fall down spiritually, or be lost forever.

In other words, there is a call to faith here. Jesus is the rock. The rock is secure. The rock shall not be moved. Do you have your life built on the rock? Are you secure after all? Are you putting your trust in the right thing? Are you truly secure or have you been putting your time, energy and money into the wrong things, things that will ultimately disappoint you, however fun and exciting they are now.

Can you say, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* Peter says that if you truly believe that, that if you live that way, then *whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."*

We don't have to build our own temples and fortresses. In Psalm 46:1 we read the truth that *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."* *"We don't always have to be looking over our shoulder lest evil overtake us unaware. We don't always have to keep our eyes on our footsteps lest we slip, inadvertently, on a temptation. God is at our side."*

This psalm has a promise, a prayer, a warning and a blessing.

A promise (v. 3) – the wicked will not rule over the people of God forever, but there will be a deliverance from God eventually. Knowing the outcome is a great help for staying on the right path now.

A prayer (v. 4) – those who are trying to serve God live in this world and need help. He knows the wicked will be judged, but he prays that the righteous will be blessed. God owes us nothing, but there is no end to the good things God has prepared for those who have been made righteous by the work of Christ, and it is proper to pray for an abundance of good things, as the psalmist does. We have a good God and we can ask him to be good to us and to others who know and love him too.

A warning (v. 5) – some within the city are not actually the righteous. Formal membership with the people of God is not enough in the end. We must actually be trusting and obeying God. We must belong to Jesus Christ.

A blessing (v. 5) – Shalom, peace to God's people. Peace over Israel. Relax. We are secure. God is running the show.

Are you in trouble? Are you having difficulty? Are you besieged by depression, doubt, pain, suffering, or the possibility of defection? You are not alone.

Singing Psalm 125 is one way Christians have to develop confidence and banish insecurity. The psalm makes its mark not be naively whistling when life is dark but by honestly facing the typical insecurities that beset us and putting them in their place."¹⁰

You are not walking on a railroad tie trying not to fall off. You aren't on a tightrope strung across the stadium, with people watching and waiting for you to fall. You are not precariously perched on a ledge on the Grand Canyon. This psalm gives you the profound truth that you are sitting in Jerusalem. Secure. If anything, you are roped together with the others around you as you seek to climb the mountain. They won't let you fall.

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Last year I went through a ropes course. The last activity available on the course was to climb a telephone pole about fifty feet in the air. Once at the top, you had to turn around on the tip of the pole and face the other way. Then you had to jump a bout six feet through the air to grab a bar hanging from two other poles.

I have to tell you that it was scary. There were many, many who didn't even try to do this. But I tried. Why?

Because I was hooked in. I watched the safety guy clamp the carabiners to my safety harness. I made sure to test those as best I could. I looked at the poles and wires and they looked pretty safe. I saw the inspection papers posted stating that the equipment was in good working order. I knew that there were still risks involved, but I felt safe, safe enough.

When I got to the top of the pole, I had to turn around and I wasn't so sure. But then I thought to myself, What's the worst thing that could happen? You can slip and fall, and people might gasp and laugh, but... the wires will catch you. You can turn around on a pole six inches off the ground. It's only hard because you're so high up, but you're safe. You're safe.

And I began to turn. And I began to turn faster. And I made it around. And I jumped for the trapeze bar. And I missed it. And I didn't die. Whew.

Let's get back to The Holy Club. You've heard of these three men of course.

John Wesley eventually organized the denomination that we today know as the Methodists.

Charles Wesley, John's younger brother, possessed a remarkable talent to write hymns, which eventually came to number nearly 8,000. Countless classics, like "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," fill his portfolio of works.

George Whitefield went on to become what many regard as the first true American celebrity. Whitefield's dramatic preaching ignited the great spiritual revival in America which we know today as the Great Awakening of 1740. An estimated 80% of all American colonists heard him personally at least once.

By their own testimony, however, not one of them was converted to Christ until after leaving fabled Oxford University and The Holy Club. It was not until two years later, as he lay ill in bed, that George Whitefield became a Christian.

Meanwhile, Charles and John Wesley went to Georgia from England where they tried to establish an orphanage, then tried to establish a religious colony at Savannah. They failed at both and returned to England. On the trip back to England, John Wesley was asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" He replied, "I know he is the Savior of the world." He was asked, "But do you know he is your Savior?"

Unable to answer, he began to doubt his salvation. Reflecting on his missionary endeavors, he wrote in his journal, "I went to America to convert the Indians, but who will convert me?" Shortly afterwards, his brother Charles became a Christian. Three days later, while John was reading a commentary on Romans, he felt his heart "strangely warmed" and gave his life to Christ – five years after The Holy Club.

One of the places we can go for false security is our own goodness, even our own Christian goodness. It can look like perfect church attendance, or praying every day, or coming to Sunday School more than most people, or doing good deeds for others. But it's not enough to want to be good. You must be truly secure in Christ alone.

We would do well to pray with St. Patrick:

"I arise today through God's strength to pilot me; God's might to uphold me, God's might to uphold me, God's wisdom to guide me, God's eye to look before me, God's ear to hear me, God's word to speak to me, God's hand to guide me, God's way before me, God's shield to protect me, God's host to save me from snares of devils, temptations of vices, from everyone who shall wish me ill...

Christ to shield me today against poison, against burning, against drowning, against wounding, so that there may come to be abundance of reward. 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 down, Christ when I arise...

I arise today through a mighty strength..."