

The third psalm in each of the five triads anticipates the pilgrim's arrival in Jerusalem. Distress, dependence and deliverance mark the spiritual pilgrimage of the people of God, and at the end of the journey there is peace, justice, prosperity, and contentment. The road weary pilgrims celebrate the Lord's Mount Zion blessing. The sense of place was understandably important. Jerusalem centered their worship, security, justice, and economy. Home was not so much where they were from but where they were headed.

For the people of God today, regardless of their ethnicity, there is no particular geographic center to their faith in Christ. The many Old Testament promises of the land have been fulfilled provisionally in the global church and will be fulfilled ultimately in a new heaven and a new earth.¹ There is no holy site other than Christ's promise that where two or three are gathered in his name there he is in the midst of them (Matthew 18:20). The New Testament language of the church takes on "brick and mortar" concreteness – language that at one time was applied to the temple in Jerusalem. In Christ, "the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:21). The language of sacred space becomes the language of sacred relationships.

The apostle Paul used building metaphors to capture the relational reality of the church. The foundation is made up of people—the apostles and the prophets, with Christ being the chief cornerstone. The global church becomes embodiment of the Jerusalem Temple (If I may venture an analogy: Amazon is to the global church what the first Woolworth's was to the Jerusalem Temple). The relational and spiritual character of this "house" built by *God of people* is no less material, temporal, spatial, and concrete than if it had been built with stone and steel. "The accent of Ephesians 2 lies not upon intangibility but upon the fact that the church of God is made of people, rather than of bricks."² The good news is proclaimed and lived through the local church, through the community, rather than through the individual. In a world of hostility the church is an alternative society, a visible sign of the kingdom.³ The local church has gone global. The people of God are drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev 7:9).

Mount Zion Personified

*Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be shaken but endures forever.
As the mountains surround Jerusalem,*

¹ The dispensational template interprets the Bible dualistically. Instead of seeing the promises to Israel fulfilled in the church and in the one new humanity created in Christ Jesus, dispensationalists argue that God has a separate destiny for Israel that involves reconstituting the nation, repatriating the land, and restoring the temple. God's promises to ethnic Jews will be fulfilled after the church is raptured, when Israel turns to her Messiah during the great tribulation. This interpretative template calls for two new covenants, one for Israel and one for the church; two different Last Days, one for Israel and one for the church; Christ's return comes in two stages, the rapture and the second coming; and there are two final judgments, the judgment seat of Christ and the final great white throne judgment. This dualism depends on a template imposed on the Bible, rather than a straight-forward reading of the biblical text.

² M. Barth, 320.

³ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 58.

*so the Lord surrounds his people
both now and forevermore.
Psalm 125:1-2*

Psalm 125 inspires the analogy between people and place. We have a tendency to prioritize place over people, but the psalmist saw first and foremost the relational value of place. In the final analysis it has never been about real estate. It has always been about people – beatitude-based believers who have put their trust in God. “Those who trust in the Lord” is a beautiful way to describe the people of God. The psalmist found in Mount Zion a place that symbolized the eternal security and justice experienced by the resilient saints of God. They personified what Jerusalem stood for, the people of God in the presence of God protected by the power of God. The ring of mountains surrounding Jerusalem on three sides, the Mount of Olives on the eastern side, Mount Scopus on the west, and Mount Zion situated more than two hundred feet below these two ridges symbolized Yahweh’s everlasting protection.⁴ Geography became the Lord’s object lesson to those who placed their trust in him that they would be kept for time and eternity.

The effectiveness of this object lesson however was temporary. By God’s design geography was transcended by God himself coming to us in person. Jesus Christ, the Incarnate One, fulfilled in himself all that the land symbolized. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). In the upper room, within hours of his crucifixion, Jesus laid out the new order of comfort and security that replaced the ancient object lesson, rocky Mount Zion. On bended knee, Jesus pictured his atoning sacrifice by washing the disciples feet (the Passion, John 13:1). Afterwards, he spoke of his second coming (the Parousia, John 14:3), followed by the promise of the Holy Spirit (the Paraclete, John 14:16), and a vivid description of his abiding relationship with all those who trust in him (the Presence, John 15:4). It is vitally important that we keep straight the difference between symbol and substance – place and person. The church has not always done this well. We have been tempted to engineer our own version of Mount Zion.⁵

Evil’s Temporary Rule

*The 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.*

Psalm 125:3

⁴ Allen, Psalms, 168. Ross, Psalms, 655.

⁵ In 1450 as he lay dying, Pope Nicholas shared his dream with his cardinals of a Vatican that would be greater than any emperor’s palace: A popular faith, sustained only on doctrines, will never be anything but feeble and vacillating. But if the authority of the Holy See were visibly displayed in majestic buildings, imperishable memorials, and witnesses seemingly planted by the Hand of God Himself, belief would grow and strengthen like a tradition from one generation to another, and all the world would accept and revere it. Noble edifices, combining taste and beauty with imposing proportions, would immediately conduce to the exaltation of the Chair of St. Peter.” (R. A. Scotti, *Basilica: The Splendor and the Scandal: Building St. Peter’s* (New York: Viking, 2006), 21.

From this brief description it is difficult to know exactly what the situation was, except to say that “the scepter of the wicked” was a reality within Jerusalem and that the people suffered under wicked rulers. Scholars speculate as to whether this was a foreign pagan power or one of Israel’s many evil kings. Whatever the cause and whoever presided over this rule of evil, the sojourner’s longing for justice and righteousness was deeply frustrated. We imagine the excitement that the pilgrims felt as they ascended to Jerusalem, where they expected to experience security, justice, and worship, only to find that the evil they thought they had left behind had migrated to this very place.

The psalmist is committed to giving the people of God a dose of reality. He knocks down any naive idealism that would paint a false picture of the harsh realities in Jerusalem. But he does this with a firm conviction that the rule of evil is temporary, that it does not belong among God’s people, and that the righteous will not succumb to the powers that be and the spirit of the times and “use their hands to do evil” (Ps 125:3).

This picture of reality is unnerving parallel to what sincere believers experience in the church today. Like the ancient pilgrims, believers expect to find security, justice, and worship in the body of Christ, but instead they find selfishness, power struggles, and self-help entertainment. Much of the New Testament pivots on this tension between who we are in Christ and what we actually do as Christians that violates our identity. Paul’s Corinthian correspondence illustrates this tension. He wrote to Christians who lacked no spiritual gift (1 Cor 1:7), but who were torn apart by partisan spiritualities (1:12), tolerance of gross immorality (5:1-2), sexual immorality (6:18), indifference to new believers (8:1-3), spiritual apathy (10:1-10), gender confusion (11:1-16), social class discrimination (11:17-32), and the use of spiritual gifts (14:20).

The good news is that goodness will prevail. The psalmist and the apostle are on the same page. The righteous will survive “the scepter of wickedness.” “God is faithful,” writes the apostle; “he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Cor 10:13).

It is sobering to realize that Jesus may have prayed Psalm 125 as he entered the gates of Jerusalem. No wonder he wept when he approached the city for the final time before his crucifixion (Luke 19:41). But he would have also been encouraged by this psalm because it puts evil in perspective – under the sovereign reign of God. For the kingdom of God will prevail and there will be no end to the goodness of God.

Goodness Prevails

*Lord, do good 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.
Peace be on Israel.*

Psalm 125:4-5

The psalmist concludes with an urgent prayer for justice in two parts. The first part is literally rendered, “Do good, O Lord, to the good [people] and to those who are upright in their hearts.”⁶ The second part applies to those who have boldly and persistently turned away from the faith. The implication is that within the walls of Zion there are good people and crooked people. The simple division corresponds to Jesus’ picture of the sheep and goats at the final judgment (Matthew 25:31-46) and the parable of the wheat and weeds (Matthew 13:24-30). The psalmist looks to the Lord to set things right, to reward the good with goodness and the bad with banishment.

Psalm 125 acknowledges the tension between the faithful and the faithless co-existing in the same community. We continue to wrestle even inside the church with “the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). Nevertheless, we must not allow our frustration and discouragement to turn to despair. The peace of Jerusalem rests in the hands of God and his justice will prevail. Instead of picturing Mount Zion nestled between two protective mountain ridges, “those who trust in the Lord” are drawn to the language of Jesus when he said, “Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can’t bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can’t bear fruit unless you are joined with me” (John 15:4 The Message).

⁶ Ross, Psalms, 657.