

SECURITY

“GOD Encircles His People”

*Those who trust in GOD
are like Zion Mountain:*

*Nothing can move it, a rock-solid mountain
you can always depend on.*

*Mountains encircle Jerusalem,
and GOD encircles his people—
always has and always will.*

*The fist of the wicked
will never violate*

*What is due the righteous,
provoking wrongful violence.*

*Be good to your good people, GOD,
to those whose hearts are right!*

*GOD will round up the backsliders,
corral them with the incorrigibles.*

Peace over Israel!

Judea was designed to produce in her inhabitants the sense of seclusion and security, though not to such a degree as to relieve them from the attractions of the great world, which throbbed closely past, or to relax in them those habits of discipline, vigilance, and valour, which are the necessary elements of a nation's character.

In the position of Judea there was not enough to tempt her people to put their confidence in herself, but there was enough to encourage them to defend their freedom and a strenuous life. And while the isolation of their land was sufficient to confirm their calling to a discipline and destiny separate from other peoples, it was not so complete as to keep them in ignorance of the world or to release them from those temptations to mix with the world, in combating which their discipline and destiny could alone be realised.

GEORGE ADAM SMITH

Climbing is difficult. The tug of gravity is constant. There are barriers to be surmounted and hazards to be met. Ordinarily, though, with a moderate amount of determination and stamina, people complete the climb they begin. But sometimes the foothold gives way and there is a slide backward.

The Rocky Mountains, where our family loves to hike, are mostly sedimentary rock. There are places where the rock, under the impact of ice and water, erodes to a loose, crumbly stuff called scree. A misstep there can send you cascading down a mountain slope for hundreds of feet.

Backslider was a basic word in the religious vocabulary I learned as I grew up. *Exempla* were on display throughout the town: people who had made a commitment of faith to our Lord, had been active in our little church but had lost their footing on the ascent to Christ and backslid. My uncle Oscar was a backslider. He had been a warm, ardent Christian. In his middle years, on the basis of a mere wisp of rumor, he acquired hundreds of acres of useless land. Not long afterward the Department of the Interior decided to build a hydroelectric dam on that land. Suddenly my uncle was a rich man. The excitement of making money got into his blood; attendance at worship became infrequent. He became impatient with his children and with me, his nephew. His work habits became compulsive. That was when I first heard *backslider* applied to someone I knew. He died of high blood pressure and a heart attack. Everyone in his

family visibly relaxed.

Two girls, older than I, whom I very much admired, attractive and vivacious, went away to college. They returned for vacation wearing brighter lipstick and shorter skirts. From the pew in front of me on a Sunday morning I heard the stage whispers between two grandmotherly types: "Do you think they have backslidden?" One became a pastor's wife, the other a missionary with her husband in Africa.

Backsliding was everywhere and always an ominous possibility. Warnings were frequent and the sad consequences on public display. The mood was anxious and worried. I was taught to take my spiritual temperature every day, or at least every week; if it was not exactly "normal," there was general panic. I got the feeling that backsliding was not something you *did*, it happened to you. It was an accident that intruded on the unwary or an attack that involved the undefended.

Later in life, as I read Scripture for myself, and still later when as a pastor I had the responsibility for guiding the spiritual development of others, I acquired a very different way of looking at the conditions under which the Christian walks the way of discipleship. In both the Scriptures and the pastoral traditions of the church I found a background of confidence, a leisured security, among persons of faith.

Someone Else Built the Fortress

The emphasis of Psalm 125 is not on the precariousness of the Christian life but on its solidity. Living as a Christian is not walking a tightrope without a safety net high above a breathless crowd, many of whom would like nothing better than the morbid thrill of seeing you fall; it is sitting secure in a fortress.

The psalm uses familiar geography to demonstrate the truth:

Those who trust in GOD
are like Zion Mountain:
Nothing can move it, a rock-solid mountain
you can always depend on.
Mountains encircle Jerusalem,
and GOD encircles his people—
always has and always will.

Jerusalem was set in a saucer of hills. It was the safest of cities because of the protective fortress these hills provided. Just so is the person of faith surrounded by the Lord. Better than a city wall, better than a military fortification is the presence of the God of peace. Geographically the city of Jerusalem had “borders and bulwarks of extraordinary variety and intricacy”¹ which illustrated and enforced the reality of God’s secure love and care.

City life in the ancient world was dangerous. The outside world was filled with roaming marauders, ready to attack at any sign of weakness. Constant vigilance was a prerequisite for community life and for the development of the arts of civilization. Cities needed elaborate and extensive defense systems to make them safe. Immense effort was expended on building walls and digging moats.

We still live in that kind of world, and we still build those defenses although the forms have changed somewhat. The process is not only political but personal. The outer world is only an extension of an inner, spiritual world. Psychologists who observe us talk of the elaborate security systems (Sullivan) and the defense mechanisms (Freud) that we use to protect ourselves.

People of faith have the same needs for protection and security as anyone else. We are no better than others in that regard. What is different is that we find that we don’t have to build our own: “God is a safe place to hide, ready to help when we need him” (Ps 46:1). “Mountains encircle Jerusalem, and GOD encircles his people.” We don’t always have to be looking over our

shoulder lest evil overtake us unawares. We don't always have to keep our eyes on our footsteps lest we slip, inadvertently, on a temptation. God is at our side. He is, as another psalmist put it, "behind and before" (see 139:5). And when it comes down to it, do we need anything more than our Lord's prayer for us: "Holy Father, guard them. . . . I'm not asking that you take them out of the world / But that you guard them from the Evil One" (Jn 17:11, 15)? With a prayer like that offered to the Father on our behalf, are we not secure?

A Saw-Toothed History

All the same, we do become anxious, we do slip into fearful moods, we become uncertain and insecure. The confident, robust faith that we desire and think is our destiny is qualified by recurrent insecurities. Singing Psalm 125 is one way Christians have to develop confidence and banish insecurity. The psalm makes its mark not by naively whistling when life is dark but by honestly facing the typical insecurities that beset us and putting them in their place.

One threat to our security comes from feelings of depression and doubt. The person of faith is described in this psalm as "a rock-solid mountain . . . nothing can move it." But I *am* moved. I am full of faith one day and empty with doubt the next. I wake up one morning full of vitality, rejoicing in the sun; the next day I am gray and dismal, faltering and moody. "Nothing can move it"?—nothing could be less true of me. I can be moved by nearly anything: sadness, joy, success, failure. I'm a thermometer and go up and down with the weather.

A couple of years ago a friend introduced me to the phrase "the saw-toothed history of Israel." Israel was up one day and down the next. One day they were marching in triumph through the Red Sea, singing songs of victory, the next they

were grumbling in the desert because they missed having Egyptian steak and potatoes for supper. One day they were marching around Jericho blowing trumpets and raising hearty hymns, and the next they were plunged into an orgy at some Canaanite fertility shrine. One day they are with Jesus in the upper room, listening in rapt attention to his commands and receiving his love, the next they are stomping around and cursing in the courtyard, denying they ever knew him.

But all the time, as we read that saw-toothed history, we realize something solid and steady: they 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. If I break my leg I do not become less a person. My wife and children do not repudiate me. Neither when my faith fractures or my feelings bruise does God cast me off and reject me.

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. "As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the LORD is round about his people." The image that announces the dependable, unchanging, safe, secure existence of God's people comes from geology, not psychology.

A Damoclean Sword

Another source of uncertainty is our pain and suffering.

Unpleasant things happen to us. We lose what we think we cannot live without. Pain comes to those we love, and we conclude that there is no justice. Why does God permit this? Anxiety seeps into our hearts. We have the precarious feeling of living under a Damoclean sword. When will the ax fall on me? If such a terrible thing could happen to my friend who is so good, how long until I get mine?

The psalmist knows all this. Sickness and death, despair and persecution. He is familiar with the rape and pillage of military invasion and the famine and earthquake of natural disaster. Psalm 125 was written by a person who did not have anesthetics in his hospital or aspirin in his medicine chest and whose government did not have hundreds of billions of dollars to spend on national defense. Pain and suffering were most certainly part of his daily life. Why did they not destroy his confidence?

The answer is in these words: "The fist of the wicked / will never violate / What is due the righteous, / provoking wrongful violence." The key word is *violate*: cancel GOD's purposes that are being worked out. Israel had more than its share of oppression. The fist of the wicked was on Israel time and time again: Pharaoh, the Philistines, Tiglath-Pileser, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Caesar. To an outsider it must have looked much of the time as if the wicked fist dominated the Israelites' lives. From the inside the witness of faith said that it did not: "The fist of the wicked / will never violate / What is due the righteous, / provoking wrongful violence."

If the evil fist is permanent, if there is no hope for salvation, even the most faithful and devout person will break and respond in "wrongful violence." But God does not permit that to happen. Danger and oppression are never too much for faith. They were not too much for Job, they were not too much for Jeremiah, and they were not too much for Jesus. Evil is always tem-

porary. "The worst does not last."² Nothing counter to God's justice has any eternity to it. Paul's witness was "No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it" (1 Cor 10:13). "He knows when to say, It is enough."³

A Nonnegotiable Contract

The third threat to the confidence promised to the Christian is the known possibility of defection. The general truth under which the Christian lives in this regard is "once saved always saved." Once you are a Christian there is no getting out of it. It is a nonnegotiable contract. Once you have signed you cannot become a free agent again, no matter what the commissioner or the Supreme Court rules.

However true that is generally, and I think it is, there are exceptions. It would seem that if God will not force us to faith in the first place, he will not keep us against our will finally. Falling away is possible. We know of Judas. We know of Hymenaeus and Alexander, who "made shipwreck of their faith" (see 1 Tim 1:19-20). These are the ones described in the psalm as "the backsliders."⁴ The way of discipleship gets difficult; they see an opening through the trees that promises a softer, easier path. Distracted and diverted, they slip off and never return.

If it is possible to defect, how do I know that I won't—or even worse, that I haven't? How do I know that I have not already lost faith, especially during times when I am depressed or have one calamity after another piled on me?

Such insinuated insecurities need to be confronted directly and plainly. It is not possible to drift unconsciously from faith to perdition. We wander like lost sheep, true; but God is a faithful

shepherd who pursues us relentlessly. We have our ups and downs, zealously believing one day and gloomily doubting the next, 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 results.

Certainly you may quit if you wish. You may say no to God. It's a free faith. You may choose the crooked way. He will not keep you against your will. But it is not the kind of thing you fall into by chance or slip into by ignorance. Defection requires a deliberate, sustained and determined act of rejection.

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.

Mountain Climbers Roped Together

When I was a child I walked about a mile to school each day with my two best friends. Along a quarter of that distance there was a railway track. When we came to that stretch we always walked on the rails. Each of us wanted to make it all the way without falling off, but didn't want the others to similarly succeed. We would throw things at each other to upset balance, or say things to divert attention, cry out that the train was coming or announce that there was a dead body in the ditch.

Some have supposed that that is what Christian living is, teetering and wobbling along a rail, taunted by the devil and his

angels. With some skill and a lot of luck we might just make it to heaven, but it's an uncertain business at best.

Psalm 125 says that is not the way it is at all. Being a Christian is like sitting in the middle of Jerusalem, fortified and secure. "First we are established and then entrenched; settled, and then sentinelled: made like a mount, and then protected as if by mountains."⁵ And so the last sentence is "Peace over Israel!" A colloquial, but in the context accurate, translation would be "Relax." We are secure. God is running the show. Neither our feelings of depression nor the facts of suffering nor the possibilities of defection are evidence that God has abandoned us. There is nothing more certain than that he will accomplish his salvation in our lives and perfect his will in our histories. Three times in his great Sermon, Jesus, knowing how easily we imagine the worst, repeats the reassuring command "Do not be anxious" (Mt 6:25, 31, 34 RSV). Our life with God is a sure thing.

When mountain climbers are in dangerous terrain, on the face of a cliff or the slopes of a glacier, they rope themselves together. Sometimes one of them slips and falls—backslides. But not everyone falls at once, and so those who are still on their feet are able to keep the backslider from falling away completely. And of course, in any group of climbers there is a veteran climber in the lead, identified for us in the letter to the Hebrews as "Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in" (Heb 12:2).

Traveling in the way of faith and climbing the ascent to Christ may be difficult, but it is not worrisome. The weather may be adverse, but it is never fatal. We may slip and stumble and fall, but the rope will hold us.