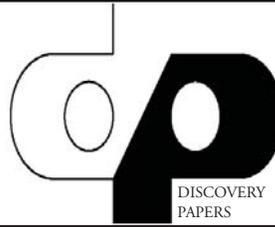


EMBRACED BY GOD

SERIES: ASCEND



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Psalm 125
5th Message
Paul Taylor
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In April of this year, a clothing factory in Bangladesh collapsed. Over 1200 people died in that tragedy—almost half of the casualties from the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City. It was a terrible event. One of the enduring images from that catastrophe is incredibly moving. As the rescuers dug through the rubble, they discovered a man and a woman buried together. He was embracing her, presumably trying to protect her. But he wasn't successful. They had both died.

This is probably one of the most basic instincts toward someone who is facing danger. Embrace them. Surround them with your arms. This is what mothers do to their babies. It's what fathers do for their children. It's what lovers do for each other. When you see someone going through something difficult, you want to embrace them. To protect them. To give them peace.

This morning we continue our summer series on the Psalms of Ascent. These fifteen psalms have been used by God's people for centuries as a way to guide them into worship. They sang them as they made the pilgrimage up to Jerusalem as a means of preparing themselves for worshipping their God. We're studying them this summer for the same reason. Our hope is that these psalms will move us in that direction.

This morning we're looking at Psalm 125. This psalm is written from the perspective of a community that is in trouble. A community where things aren't going the way they are supposed to be going. A community that is literally surrounded by enemies. But one powerful image stands out in this psalm. It's a picture of God embracing his people. In this psalm, we will see a community surrounded by enemies, but even more we will see a people who is **Embraced by God.**

Based on several factors, it's likely that this psalm was from the period of Israel's history just after the exile. That was a period when the people of God were back in their land, but they weren't really free yet. Jerusalem and the rest of the land was still under foreign control. Different world powers would conquer each other and control of Israel would pass between their hands. Sometimes the leaders in Jerusalem would get fed up and try to assert their independence but they would always get beaten down again.

So this was a very unstable time. There was no confidence about who would be in charge tomorrow. There was no telling who might come and collect taxes for some building project thousands of miles away. There was no knowing whether your own government would cause trouble. The setting pictured in this psalm is of God's people gathered in Jerusalem while enemies encircle the city. It was a common one during this time. One commentator described this psalm as coming from "a society struggling with the pressures that weighed on it" (Allen, L.C. Psalms 101-150. Word Biblical Commentary, 2002).

When I read that, my first thought was that it sounded familiar. We know about pressures that weigh on us. There are a lot of heavy things happening around here. In recent weeks, we've faced unexpected death. We've seen marriages struggle, some of them dissolving in divorce. We've had life-threatening health problems. Serious issues with depression and mental health. I left out of our pastoral staff meeting two weeks ago after praying for a lot of these issues with a huge sense of the pressures that we are under as a community.

What are you facing this morning? Some of you are worrying about what you have to do this afternoon. Some of you are burdened by loss or guilt or loneliness. Some of you are just so busy with life that you don't even know what you're facing. What's usually true for me is that I don't know what I'm facing until I slow down to consider it. Maybe this morning can be a chance for you to slow down and think about what you are facing. I've found that running fast to leave issues behind you is not the best long term solution.

I think we can relate to ancient Israel as they sing a psalm in the midst of pressures. As we read through Psalm 125 and allow it to guide us, we're going to see that this psalm helps us to figure out how to worship in the midst of pressure. Sometimes we think that we have to get through the hard times before we can think about God or what it means to worship. But in reality, some of the deepest moments of worship occur in the midst of pressure.

In this psalm, we're going to see that God's people are tough. They struggle with pressures, but there is something that holds them up. They are honest about the danger they face, but there is a sense of hope as well. We'll see how this psalm redirects our attention toward God. We'll see

how it invites us to rethink our response to the situations that we're facing. And we'll see what our worship looks like in the process.

Look for God

Let's start by reading the first two verses of this psalm.

Psalm 125:1-2:

A song of ascents.

¹**Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever.**

²**As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.**

The psalm starts out by talking about "those who trust in the LORD." It's important to start here because this establishes the group of people that the psalm is talking about. This psalm is not about everyone. It's about "those who trust in the LORD." That's not to say that some of what the psalm says about those who trust in the LORD isn't true for other people, but the psalm isn't talking about that.

The psalmist continues to refer to this same group of people in several different ways. In verse 2, they are "his people." In verse 3, they are "the righteous." In verse 4, they are "those who are good," and "those who are upright in heart." Finally, in verse 5, they are "Israel." This is characteristic of Hebrew poetry: using multiple terms to refer to the same thing.

We need to know that these are the same people because later on, it could get confusing if we think that "those who are good" are a different group than "those who trust the LORD." As if some of those who trust the LORD are good and some of them aren't. That isn't what is going on. There is one group of people here in view throughout the entire psalm.

Notice how this group is primarily defined, even here in the Old Testament. They are defined by where they put their trust. Not how much of the Law they obey or even who their parents are. Even in the Old Testament, we see God's people characterized by their faith.

So if you have faith in Christ, then you're a part of this group. You are "his people." You are "the righteous." You are "those who are good." You are "those who are upright in heart." And you are, in a theological sense, "Israel." This psalm is talking about us. You don't have to have a

church attendance record. You don't have to be a leader in the church. You don't have to live the perfect life. If you trust in Jesus, this psalm is talking to you.

What does it say about these people—about us? They are safe. God's people are safe. In the midst of pressure, we are safe.

There are two different images used here. First, the psalmist says that they are like Mount Zion. That's Jerusalem: the city that they are in. The psalmist says that city can never be shaken but endures forever. That's a pretty significant thing to claim in ancient times. The psalmist is saying that even though there are enemies encamped outside your city, you are as safe as the city itself because it will stand forever.

God's people know this because he has promised it to them. In Isaiah 31:5, God says this: "Like birds hovering overhead, the LORD Almighty will shield Jerusalem; he will shield it and deliver it, he will 'pass over' it and will rescue it." In Psalm 46:5, God says of Jerusalem, "God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day." God has promised that the city will not fall.

The next verse is a beautiful picture. The psalm says that as the mountains surround Jerusalem, God surrounds his people. Jerusalem itself is a hill. And it is surrounded by other hills. There are these little valleys in between the hills of Jerusalem and the hills surrounding it. Most of the hills outside the city are taller than the city itself. If you're standing in Jerusalem, you can look around and see hills all around you, taller than your city. Can you imagine it?

Here's the cool thing that the psalmist does. I've said that the setting for the psalm is of enemies encamped around the city. What the psalmist does is change their perspective. He says, "You are worried about the armies camped on the hills surrounding your city. But your God is like the hills that those armies are camped on. And he is surrounding you for your benefit, now and forever, to protect you and keep you safe."

The psalmist tells God's people to take their eyes off the enemy and look at what's underneath. What's underneath is God, embracing you with these beautiful hills. In the midst of trouble, the psalmist suggests that God's people do something very simple. Change your perspective. Look again at the situation and see what else you see. In particular, look for God at work. **Look for God.**

Isn't this what we need sometimes? To simply look again at the situation that we are facing and find God in it rather than focusing on what threatens us? It is so easy to get stuck on whatever it is that we are facing. It's so easy to let some circumstance cloud out everything else. To make

us forget about what should be so obvious.

There might be enemies camped on those hills, but who made the hills? God did. And just as they encircle the city, so God surrounds you with his love.

I like the picture that this Psalm gives us because I think it gives us an accurate picture of God's role in the midst of pressures. A lot of people have observed that when crisis strikes, the result is often something very positive in our spiritual life. We are aware of our brokenness in a new way or we are reminded of how fragile life is or we are awakened to the reality of God.

But then we often ask whether God caused that crisis for the sake of the good things that happened. Did God cause the disease that made me realize the importance of life? That's where this picture helps us.

In the midst of enemy armies on the hills surrounding Jerusalem, the psalmist doesn't say that God brought those armies to attack Jerusalem. What he says is to look at the hills that they are standing on and realize that God embraces his people just like those hills. What he does is reorient God's people toward his presence.

He reminds them that God is there, embracing them, amidst the pressure.

I like that picture. It always sounds a bit funny to me when people say that God wanted them to lose their job so they could learn dependence. Or that God caused some tragedy for the sake of the good that will result. That's certainly possible—there are situations in Scripture where that's true. But I'm not sure we know God's purposes. I'd rather be reminded that God is there, embracing me amidst pressure. I don't know whether he caused this to happen, so I'd rather not say that he did. But I know he's there. When I look again, I can look for him.

It's too easy to go through life and not see the hand of God. It's too easy to see the enemies but not the hills. To see the financial struggle, but not the support from the community. To face health issues and forget about the family that is with you in it. To feel alone and ignore the people waiting to be with you and support you. To face death and forget about the resurrection that is promised on the other side.

Where is God in the midst of your situation? If you look for God, you'll find him embracing you. The great thing about God's embrace is that it means different things to us depending on where we are. To the guilty, an embrace is forgiveness. To the suffering, an embrace is comfort. To the weary, an embrace is refreshment. To the angry, an embrace is softening.

Look for God. Look for his embrace.

You Have a Choice

The next part of this psalm we're going to look at is only one verse, but it has some powerful implications.

Psalm 125:3:

**³The 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.**

So first of all we need to understand exactly what the psalmist is talking about here. What is the scepter of the wicked, what's this evil that's being talked about? What is going on?

Remember that another world power has control over Israel. That's the "scepter of the wicked." The "land allotted to the righteous" is the land of Israel. So what the psalmist is saying is this: Israel won't be occupied for too long, otherwise, you'll be tempted to a violent rebellion. The bad guys won't be in charge so long that you'll have to take matters into your own hands.

If you put this in more general terms that might apply to us, it's something like, "the hard times won't last so long that you'll be tempted to do something that you might regret later." We need to think through this statement for a bit.

First of all, I think we can understand the temptation being talked about. When things are tough, we are tempted to take matters into our own hands. When something goes wrong, we want to step in and make it right.

Let's imagine that there is some kind of conflict in my home. Let's imagine that one of my children hit their sibling. If I ask them why they did that, there is always an answer. The answer usually has to do with something else their sibling did to them first. "He yelled at me," "She grabbed my book," or my favorite "He was looking at me."

This is where what they taught you in high school about physics breaks down. Newton's law of motion says that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. But in my house, most actions have a much larger and more extreme reaction.

And this is true of me too. When someone does something wrong against me, I feel justified in taking matters into my own hands. I feel like it's my right to "use my hands to do evil."

But this statement in Psalm 125 is interesting because there are two different things built into it.

On the one hand, there is a promise. God is promising that these circumstances won't last forever. God is a god of justice and he will bring justice to the earth. The scepter of the wicked will not eventually prevail. The bad guys won't win. Pain and death and evil will pass away. That's why Jesus came and when he returns, the process that he began will be brought to completion.

So this verse comforts us in the midst of hard things. But it also gives us a warning. The warning is about restraining yourself. The psalmist is saying that this situation won't last so long that you have to take things into your hands. You can wait it out. That means if you do rise up—if you do use your hands to do evil—then that's on you. You can't blame the situation. God has said that it won't last so long that you're forced into anything.

So in the midst of pressure, the first encouragement that this psalm gives us is to look for God. Look underneath and around and behind whatever is happening and look for the presence of God, embracing you. The second encouragement is to realize that this situation doesn't force you into anything. You have a choice on how to respond. **You have a choice.**

In other words, you don't have to do stupid things. You don't have to hit your brother when he yells at you. You don't have to get defensive when your spouse accuses you. You don't have to ostracize the person who hurt your feelings. You don't have to pay back evil for evil.

This is the incredible transformation that Jesus taught. The most natural way of living is by following the old "eye for an eye" rule. You hurt me, I'll hurt you. You occupy my city, I'll fight you for independence. But God promises his people that he will take care of the situation. And he gives us his Holy Spirit to help us in that struggle. So we don't need to take it upon ourselves.

A similar sentiment is echoed by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 10:13, he says, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; 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 stand up under it." He says that whatever you are facing has been faced by someone before you. And nothing you are facing is so great that you can't handle it.

Mike Tyson was a famous boxer during the 1990's. In 1997, he was disqualified from the heavyweight championship match because he bit the ear of his opponent, Evander Holyfield. Listen to what he said about

that, "This is my career. I have children to raise. I have to retaliate. He butted me. Look at me. My kids will be scared of me." That's taking matters into our hands. A lot of us can understand that. Look at what he did to me. I had to react. I had no choice.

But we do have a choice. We don't have to take matters into our own hands. Because our God says that he won't let injustice go on forever and he won't let it go unpunished. He will bring justice to the world. That's why we are told in 1 Peter 3:9, "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."

In the midst of pressure, we can look for God embracing us. And we can make a choice about how to react. When we are feeling overwhelmed, we don't have to isolate ourselves and run away from community. When we are angry, we don't have to lash out. When we are scared, we don't have to withdraw. When we are threatened, we don't have to get defensive. We have a choice.

Ask God To Act

So what should we do? Do we just sit there? Are we supposed to be completely passive? That's where the psalm ends.

Psalm 125:4-5:

**⁴Do good, O LORD, to those who are good,
to those who are upright in heart.
⁵But those who turn to crooked ways
the LORD will banish with the evildoers.**

Peace be upon Israel.

The psalmist has said that the evil won't last forever—the scepter of the wicked will not remain. So now he acts on that truth and asks God to bring it about. Banish the evildoers. Let there be peace upon Israel.

This is a standard request from a person who is in trouble. When people are oppressing you, when you are facing attacks by an enemy, one of the most natural things to do is to appeal to a higher court of justice. This happens on playgrounds all across America. When someone cheats playing kickball, you run to the teacher in charge and look for justice. It happens in living rooms when a brother is mean to his sister and she runs to mommy looking for justice. It happens in courtrooms all across America when a defendant files his claim to an appeals court before the ink on his verdict is dry.

When we are in trouble, assuming we haven't taken

matters into our own hands, we look for someone to bring justice. Figure out who is right, reward the person who is in the right and punish the person who is in the wrong. That is what the psalmist is asking for here.

“Do good to those who are good.” Remember: this is the same group of people that the psalmist started talking about: those who trust in the Lord. Because we know that we aren’t all that good and that we need God’s forgiveness, we sometimes get confused in the Old Testament reading about “those who are good” or “those who are upright in heart.” But don’t be confused: this is talking about God’s people. Those who trust in him. That’s what makes them good: their faith in God. Not perfect obedience.

So the psalmist asks for justice. This isn’t a random request. What he’s doing is asking God to do what God has already said he is going to do. God has made it clear, ever since he first began revealing himself to his creation, that he is a God of justice.

Isaiah 3:10-11 says this, “Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds. Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them! They will be paid back for what their hands have done.”

Psalms 33:5 says, “The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.”

What the psalmist is doing here is asking God to follow through on what he’s already said he will do.

If I tell my kids that we’re going to get ice cream this week, they will be really excited. They may even give me hugs, say what a great daddy I am, stuff like that. Of course, I’m above earning my children’s love with things like ice cream. Usually.

Because I’ve said that we’re going to get ice cream, my kids will be waiting for it. As the week progresses, they will wonder when it is that we’ll get ice cream. And pretty soon they’ll start asking me for it. They’ll say, “You promised that we could get ice cream. When are we going to go?” They will start asking me when I will make good on my promise. And they’ll keep asking me until I do.

That’s what the psalmist is doing. He knows that God loves justice. He knows that God wants to set things right. So he asks him to do it. “Do good to those who are good.” Bring justice to those who need to be brought to justice. And finally, “Peace be upon Israel.” This is kind of a summary of that request. God has chosen Israel as his people. He has chosen their city to dwell. He has promised to take care of them. So the psalmist asks for that: peace for Israel.

So what are we to do? We, who are pressured by the difficulties of life? What are we supposed to do? Well, we start by looking again and finding God in the circumstance. Then we realize that we have a choice. We don’t have to take matters into our hands. So what do we do? We ask God to do what he already said he would do: bring justice. **We ask God to act.**

I usually follow through on my promises. But it’s possible that I might tell my kids that we are going to get ice cream later this week and then not follow through. Sometimes things change. Maybe I had planned to do it on a particular day, but something happened that made that impossible. Maybe my car breaks down. Maybe I just forget or get too tired. It’s possible that I let down my kids. It’s possible that I say I’m going to do something and then don’t. I try not to, but that might happen.

But not with God. God says he is the one who brings justice. He says that there will come a day where he will let justice roll like a river down upon this earth. That all will be set right. He says there will come a day when wrongs will be no more and evil will be vanquished.

So let’s ask him to hurry up with that. Let’s ask him to do it. Let’s beg him to bring that day so that we can enjoy his righteous rule. Pray that God will complete his work in the world and send Jesus back to establish his kingdom.

Jesus actually instructs us to pray this way. The Lord’s Prayer—the model for how we are supposed to pray—starts off with, “Our Father ... Thy Kingdom Come.” Bring your kingdom to earth. The end of the book of Revelation is an invitation to Jesus to come back and establish his justice, “Come, Lord Jesus.” 2 Timothy speaks of those who have “longed for his appearing.”

We wait for God, but we can ask him to hurry up while we’re waiting.

This is a bit of an interesting idea to talk about. For me, examples from family life are often helpful in understanding how to relate to God. I think God gave us fathers and mothers and siblings as a model for how to relate to him and how to relate to each other in the church.

But I have to admit that this case is a bit different. If I tell my kids that we’re going to get ice cream this week and they start asking me every second when we’re going to go, I’ll get frustrated. I’ll probably tell them not to ask me anymore. I may even tell them that if they ask me too much, I might change my mind. Too many questions—too many reminders—and they might miss their chance for ice cream.

But God doesn’t do this. It’s a bit curious to me, actually.

If I were God, I think I'd probably treat all of you like my kids. I said I'll send Jesus back, so stop asking. I'll do it when I'm good and ready. But God doesn't do what I would do. He actually invites us to remind him. All throughout Scripture, there are pictures of his people asking him to do what he has already said he is going to do. Come back. Bring justice. Take care of your people. Heal your creation.

So our waiting is a passive kind of thing, but it's not completely inactive. We ask God to act. We ask him to make good on his promises. We ask for justice and peace here and now. And ultimately, we ask Jesus to return.

I mentioned some of the pressures that we've faced as a church lately. I talked about coming out of our pastoral staff meeting feeling burdened and weighty with all the heavy stuff going on. This is the place that I'm often led. Throwing myself on God, asking him to do his job of being God and setting things right.

Pressure pushes us. The question is where it pushes us. A lot of time, pressure pushes us to push back. But here we see pressure pushing us to pray. Pray for God to intervene. Pray for justice. Pray for Jesus to return.

Conclusion

We started off thinking about the tragedy in Bangladesh several months ago and one man's instinct to embrace someone in hopes of protecting her. He wasn't successful. He couldn't protect the one he wanted to.

But this morning we have been reminded that our God embraces us. In the midst of the pressures that we face, God is there. We are embraced by God. And the psalm gives us some really helpful pictures of how God's people might respond to pressure.

It starts off with looking for God's embrace. Look at the hills that are holding up the enemy armies and see God in them. Look at the circumstances that you are facing in a different way and find God in them. God is there. God is here. He is embracing us even when we can't tell he's there.

Then we are reminded that God hasn't forgotten us. He won't let things last so long that we have to take matters into our own hands. We have a choice. We don't have to react. We can wait on God.

Finally, we saw that we don't have to wait quietly. We

can ask God to act. We can remind him of his promises. We can tell him of our frustration. We can ask God to act.

So at the end of the day, what we've seen without realizing it is what worship looks like in the midst of pressure. Worship starts with finding God and resting in his embrace. Worship acknowledges that God is in charge and that he will take care of the situation. Worship moves us to ask God to do just that. Asking God to act.

That's worship. That's relating to God in a real authentic way. Not denying the issues you face. Not performing for God. Not pretending everything is OK. Being real with what's going on without letting it force you into a bad response. And inviting God to intervene. This is worship.

Communion

And so, once again, we allow this psalm to lead us into a certain kind of worship. The ritual that Jesus gave us to remind us of him. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ serves as the constant reminder of looking for God amidst the worst of circumstances. It is a reminder of what can happen when you don't take matters into your own hands. It is a reminder of what can happen when you ask God to act.

Death can be defeated. Forgiveness can be received. Hope can be real.

So we're going to move now into a time of worshipping at the Lord's Table. As we take communion, I'd like to invite you to remember Jesus as a model of everything we've talked about today. He demonstrates this psalm to us. And at the same time, he is the God who will come back and bring an end to all the pressures that we face.