

“As the Mountains Surround Jerusalem”
Psalm 125

James 2:1-10, 14-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor.

Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?
Can faith save you?

¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do

not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Psalm 125

¹Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

²As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his people,
from this time on and forevermore.

³For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest
on the land allotted to the righteous,
so that the righteous might not stretch out their hands to do wrong.

⁴Do good, O LORD, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts.

⁵But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways
the LORD will lead away with evildoers.

Peace be upon Israel!

Prayer

“As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his people,
from this time on and forevermore.”

Guardian God,

We place before you now the things that most trouble us:
our pains, our worries, our fears and sorrows and challenges.

You surround us to shield and protect us
so that we can be free to live the lives of generosity and goodwill
for which we were created.

You do not give us empty, insipid promises
that nothing will ever go wrong for us

if we just believe hard enough.
Instead you give us the rich and full promise
that in you is life, and the life is the light of all people;
that with you, nothing will be impossible;
that you, by the power at work within us, are able to accomplish
abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.
That is the guardianship we need today, O God;
yours is the only promise that will do
in these disorienting and extraordinary times.
Guardian God, surround us to shield and protect us in your way.

Comforting God,
You surround us to embrace us.
And we could all use something like a hug right now—
those who bear wounds and infirmities
physical, emotional, mental, spiritual;
the bereaved, the misunderstood, the shamed, the beleaguered;
those who are afraid they can no longer make it,
and those who no longer care;
the forgotten,
those who are far from home,
and those who are unable to leave their home;
the baffled, crying children separated from their parents;
the Christian mission worker unjustly confined;
the parents who cannot feed or protect their children
from bombing raids and famines
designed, ordained and appointed
by kings and strategists in high places, far away.

Comforting God, surround us to embrace us, and for Christ's sake,
teach us to embrace those whom he would and did embrace
when the body of Christ was his own physical body.

Ordering God,
you surround us to remind us where we are,
and that the boundaries have fallen for us in pleasant places.

Teach us to value our environment
and to take our shoes off when we are on holy ground.
God who can bring order from chaos,
while reserving the right and maintaining the absolute authority
to put our ingeniously sophisticated plans and clever designs
into a blender and hand them back to us as a puree,
surround us to remind us that in you alone,
we are on solid ground and always have a place.

Interceding God,
surround us to stage an intervention.
Make us hear you constantly saying how much you love us;
correct our missteps, and interrupt our addictions.
They are legion, and we are stunningly adept
at getting ourselves lost in them.

Intervening God, interrupt our straying from the path,
our losing the thread,
our missing the point.

Uplifting God,
surround us like a gently flowing river
to carry us into the flow of your truth,
lifting us on a tide of faithfulness
so that our feet are swept along in the easy current
of your breathtaking grace and beauty.

We miss that, O God, far too often;
we're looking down at our cell phones
or we're absorbed by trivialities
and pointless commercial diversions.

Uplifting God, surround us like a bevy of helium balloons
and lift our feet from the ground
in the giddy, freeing, gravity-defying recognition
that there is a God in this universe—
the God of our lives and of *all* the universe—
who loves us more than we can possibly realize.

In Christ's name, and in the joy of the salvation he has bought us, we pray. Amen.

The Sermon

Psalm 125 is one of the fifteen Psalms labeled "Songs of Ascents," as in goings-up.

That inscription at the beginning of each of those 15 psalms, "Song of Ascents," is not conclusively understood by Bible scholars.

It may refer to the structure of the psalms that, in a way, seems to climb from verse to verse; or it may refer to "going up to Jerusalem," songs that would have been sung by the people as they went "up" to Jerusalem, to the Temple, for pilgrimage.ⁱ

"I was glad when they said to me,
'Let us go to the house of the Lord'" (122:1).

"I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth" (121:1-2).

"To you I lift up my eyes,
O you who are enthroned in the heavens" (123:1).

Going to the Temple meant something to the Israelites as a people and to each individual who had a relationship with God.

Beaten as a nation,
weary of being attacked as a people and as people,
powerless against the overwhelming might of occupying forces

and trying to survive in a world, let alone a whole universe,
where things always seemed to be stacked against them,
it always felt like—and it was usually true—
that they were surrounded by enemies
who were pitilessly oppressive to the nation of Israel
and who spoke and acted dishonestly, deceitfully,
and with destructive, personal cruelty to each one of them.

So to ascend to Jerusalem—to go up to the Temple—
was to remember that God is stronger
than even the most oppressive enemy.

The first of those Songs of Ascents, Psalm 120, says,

“In my distress I cry to the LORD:

‘Deliver me...from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.’

Woe is me, that I am an alien in Meshech,

that I must live among the tents of Kedar.

Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.

I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war.” (120:1-2, 5-7)

In other words, “reputation, a community, and a home”ⁱⁱ have all been taken from the Israelite who prays that psalm.

Millions of people—68.5 million people, to be specific, according to the United Nationsⁱⁱⁱ—are today displaced from their homes, by violence, by gangs and thugs and absolute lack of the basic necessities of survival.

But our circumstances don’t need to be that physically dire for us to know the delicate value of our roots in reputation, community and home, and how lost and anxious and frustrated and lonely we feel when any of those are threatened.

And so, the pilgrims went on their way up to Jerusalem,
as families, as neighbors, as communities,
to go and meet God again—

like the white cop and the black youth, both of whom, in the intensely fraught aftermath of a high-tension tragedy, recognized in each other that they both just needed a hug and a break more than a lecture;

like those who have recognized through simple experience and observation what has been proven time and time again in study after study: that children who from infancy feel their parents' arms around them are healthier in practically every category: diminished pain, decreased autoimmune problems, enhanced immune function, and measurably improved alertness and performance, to name just a few;^{iv}

like the Christians, Muslims and Jews
in the United States, the Middle East and elsewhere
who voluntarily and enthusiastically encircle and protect
members of the other communities
in moments of extreme danger
and at times when they are most vulnerable—
such as when they are praying;

All going up to Jerusalem to worship together:
“I was glad when they said to me,
‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’”

The covenant people of God knew
that they were God's people,
and that God surrounded them in love,
as the mountains surround Jerusalem.
And then Jesus taught the people of God
that *all* people are God's people.
And then he gave up his body, for us and for all people,
and left us *in* the world, to be the arms of God *for* the world.

So we are now the ones who, in Christ's name,
are called to surround all of God's people with the love of Jesus.

And now, every time we see anyone
whom the world does not embrace,
the Letter of James invites us to respond,
not only with our words, but with our open, surrounding arms,
to the question:

My brothers and sisters,
do you really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

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ⁱ Richard J. Clifford, “Psalms” n. 120, in Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Fifth Edition* (Oxford University, 2018), 885.

ⁱⁱ Clifford, “Psalms” n. 120, 886.

ⁱⁱⁱ UNHCR Global Trends 2017 Report (video), UNHCR.

^{iv} Touch Research Institute, University of Miami School of Medicine, “Research at TRI: General Information About TRI Research” (<https://www6.miami.edu/touch-research/Research.html>)