

Trust in the Lord

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on November 20, 2022.

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.
As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his people,
from this time forth and forevermore.
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.
Do good, O LORD, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts!
But those who turn aside to their crooked ways
the LORD will lead away with evildoers!
Peace be upon Israel! (Psalm 125).¹

In the one hundred fourth psalm, the psalmist praises the Lord in a poetic recounting of creation, which includes the making of mountains:

[You] set the earth on its foundations,
so that it should never be moved.
You covered it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
At your rebuke they fled;
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight.
The mountains rose, the valleys sank down
to the place that you appointed for them (Ps. 104:5-8).

“The mountains rose,” and since then they have stood high upon the earth and in the mind of man. In their monumental existence mountains naturally yield metaphors. Anthropomorphizing the western summits, John Muir memorably wrote, “the mountains are calling and I must go.”² Surely, the mountains do call us to consider something grander than ourselves. Robert Macfarlane writes,

At bottom, mountains, like all wildernesses, challenge our complacent conviction—so easy to lapse into—that the world has been made for humans by humans. Most of us exist for most of the time in worlds which are humanly arranged, themed and controlled. One forgets that there are environments which do not respond to the flick of a switch or the

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² Charles Watkins, “Get to the Know the Story behind Muir’s ‘The Mountains Are Calling’ Quote,” *Basin and Range Magazine*, accessed November 18, 2022, <http://www.thebasinandrange.com/get-know-story-behind-the-muir-mountains-calling-quote/>.

twist of a dial, and which have their own rhythms and orders of existence. Mountains correct this amnesia. By speaking of greater forces than we can possibly invoke, and by confronting us with greater spans of time than we can possibly envisage, mountains refute our excessive trust in the man-made. They pose profound questions about our durability and the importance of our schemes. They induce, I suppose, a modesty in us.”³

And by “modesty,” I presume Macfarlane implies an induced humility. Only the fool lifts up his eyes to the mountain and shakes his fist at God. When my mother-in-law saw the Rocky Mountains for the first time, she wept.

It’s not only the height and breadth of a mountain that speaks but also its stature of permanence. That which we consider ancient is “as old as the hills,” and to do the impossible is “to move mountains.” Mountains so easily yield metaphors, because they have been there, cannot be moved, and continue to endure. And this is where the psalmist starts in the one hundred twenty-fifth psalm, pointing to a mountain known to all of Israel, Mount Zion, and speaking to the often unsettled and fearful, saying: Those who trust in the Lord are stable and secure.

He secures you

The pilgrim arriving to worship in Jerusalem, perhaps singing this very song of ascent, would look up to Mount Zion, the ordained pinnacle (quite literally) of Israel’s worship. It was the holy resting place of God’s tabernacle, and later temple, the locale of the dwelling presence of the Lord. To look up to Zion was a reminder to Israel that in Jerusalem is “the holy habitation of the Most High. / God is in the midst of her; she shall not be / moved” (Ps. 46:4-5). And it is here in Jerusalem that Mount Zion speaks, in its very presence. But the psalmist’s simile is not theological as much as it is geological, as if to say, Look up to *that* mountain:

Nothing can move it, a rock-solid mountain
You can always depend on.⁴

Those who trust in the Lord are like that!

Of course, trusting in the Lord is not merely believing he exists. James reminds us, “Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (Jas. 2:19 NIV). No, trust runs deeper, like the roots of a mountain, implying not only knowledge and assent but relationship. We do not put our trust in the mountain but in the Maker of mountains. We do not put our trust in ourselves but in our Creator. We do not put our trust in *a god* but *the God*, our heavenly Father, who

chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through

³ Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of Fascination* (London: Granta Publications, 2017).

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 75.

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Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved (Eph. 1:4-6).

Yes! That's who we put our trust in: Our trust is in the Lord!

It is no wonder that Scripture often describes the Lord as our rock (Ps. 18:2), and why those in Christ are called to be “steadfast,” “immovable” (1 Cor. 15:58). Like a mountain, the mature Christian is not “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14) but instead is rock-solid. Instability reveals immaturity, but Christlikeness yields stability, like a mountain.

This is why, in a seemingly unsettled world, we must look consistently to the solid foundation of the gospel. Our trust, from beginning to end, is in the reality of who God is and what he has done for us in Christ. We look not to the man-made mountain of our merits but to the righteousness of Christ. We look not to our attempted atoning ascents to the summit of God's holiness but to the cross of Christ. We look not to our relentless pursuit of the peak of perfection but to the resurrection of Christ. It is in Christ's life, death, and resurrection in which we rest, stable amidst the storm, like Mount Zion, immovable, enduring.

One of the important, but often neglected, encouragements to us of this truth is our baptism. Baptism is, as the Westminster Confession puts it, “a sign and seal of the covenant of grace.”⁵ It is not a sign *of* faith but *to* faith, of everything that is ours in Christ: justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification.⁶ It signifies not what we have done but what God in Christ has done for us, sealing us unto himself. Our Larger Catechism teaches us to look to our baptism “all our life long” with thankfulness for it, leading us to be humbled for the sins we commit and simultaneously remembering the grace God gives.⁷ In his *Institutes*, John Calvin says that baptism provides a “sure testimony to us that we are not only ingrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings.”⁸ When we consider the “sure testimony” of our baptism, we are reminded that our salvation is as stable as Mount Zion and secure forevermore.

But for some of us, the problem is not in the surety of our stability but with the mole hills we swell into mountains. Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote,

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall

⁵ “The Westminster Confession of Faith,” 28.1, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 133-4.

⁶ Derek W.H. Thomas, *Let Us Worship God: Why We Worship the Way We Do* (Sanford: Ligonier Ministries, 2021), 97.

⁷ “The Larger Catechism,” Q. 167, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 133-4.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, XV.6, trans. Henry Beveridge, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, accessed November 18, 2022, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes/institutes.i.html>.

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Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed.⁹

Surely, there are no threats that surround us like the accusations of our inner-adversary for sins committed. Surely, there is no mountain above or below sea level that rises higher than the sinful constructs of the human heart. O the mind, mind has mountains, indeed.

Do we grapple with the gospel for fear of falling? Have you seemingly thought the inexcusable? Said the unjustifiable? Done the indefensible? Committed the unforgiveable? Do you fear salvation is lost? Lift your gaze up from yourself and look to the Lord:

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

Just as the psalmist's words transcend the locale of ancient Israel, so the Lord's promised protection transcends your sin. You are secure in Christ not because of the perfection of your thoughts, words, and deeds, but because what the Father ordained, the Son accomplished, and the Spirit applied to you through faith by the unmerited favor of God. You are eternally secure not for the barricades you build but because of the refuge God is.

He sustains you

Looking to the world to gauge the church's or your own spiritual condition is foolish. If the gates of hell shall not prevail against Christ's church (Matt. 16:18), neither will culture or government. And while we work, pray, and hope for the best, history teaches, the wicked *do* sometimes rise to power and influence, wielding a scepter of authority even directed against the ways of God and his people. If our trust is in the social or political realm rather than the heavenly, we quickly become unsettled, fearful. Stability and our sense of security vanish like morning mist on the mountainside. And the world would have us believe that we live on the cusp of chaos, a time where wickedness runs rampant, leading the unsettled and fearful to discouragement, even despair. But the psalmist brings clarity like morning light, promising,

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.

Note the psalmist's use of the word "rest," which carries a similar meaning to "abide": the scepter, or reign, of wickedness is not forever. Evil is temporary; God is not. He is sovereign, and "he decides who will rise and who will fall" (Ps. 75:7 NLT). He is the Lord, and he "works out everything to its proper end—even the wicked for a day of disaster" (Prov. 16:4 NIV). Yes, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Eccl. 3:1). In

⁹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief," Poetry Foundation, accessed November 18, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44398/no-worst-there-is-none-pitched-past-pitch-of-grief>.

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God's good time, Christ will return, and his righteous scepter shall rest on the eternally allotted land of the righteous in Christ, in the new heaven and new earth forevermore.

Until then, we must guard against falling into a victim mentality or allowing an increasingly secular culture lure us into its sinful ways. Guarding against this is part of trusting the Lord—resting in his sovereign purpose, plan, and provision. The sage says, “[God] has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Eccl. 3:11). While we are made in God’s image, and indeed made for eternity, we are momentarily constrained to time and space; God is not. We cannot see the future, but God has ordained whatsoever comes to pass.¹⁰ Our responsibility then is not anxiety and fear but to trust and obey, and praying that God would bless his people:

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

He saves you

Part of being made in the image of God includes the gift of his communicable attributes, those characteristics we imperfectly share with God. One of those attributes is justice, which explains why every human desires justice. Except for those whose consciences have been perverted, there is a universal desire to see good behavior rewarded and bad behavior punished. But like all the other communicable attributes, our justice is imperfect; God’s is not. I may consider myself good and my neighbor bad, but God’s Word says, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God” (Rom. 3:10-11). While God is all-glorious, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Goodness is not relative in the courtroom of heaven.

God’s justice is satisfied not in our best efforts but the sinless sacrifice of his Son. As Paul explains, “[We] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation, by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:24-25). So, goodness before God is granted in mercy, received by faith, and lived out by grace. And those who are in Christ live out their faith, as James puts it, by their good works (Jas. 2:17-18).

So, what are we praying when we pray that God will do good to the upright in heart and that he will lead away “those who turn aside to their crooked way”? We are praying that God would bless those who are good by grace through faith for Christ’s sake and keep us from those who would lead us astray. In God’s perfect justice, we are praying that he would continue to work out his perfect redemptive plan for his people unto glory for his glory.

And as God is just, we can be certain that justice will be served: “God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and every work” (Eccl. 3:17). Without a

¹⁰ “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the “The Westminster Confession of Faith,” 3.1, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 12.

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doubt, “each of us will give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:12); “For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5:10). The question is not whether we will stand before the judgment seat or not but in whose righteousness we will stand, our own or Christ’s? All who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, stand in Christ alone.

Until that day, we pray for our brothers and sisters, the Beloved, true Israel, Christ’s church. We pray for one another, asking the Lord to continue to bless us, to be more Christlike, conforming us more and more to his image. We pray that the peace we have with God will lead us to live lives of gratitude and grace, as stable and strong as Mount Zion, as secure as a fortress, trusting in the Lord today and forevermore:

Peace be with you. Amen!