

RETURN TO JOY

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The Life that Fell Apart Returns to Joy - Psalm 125

By Peter Eng

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Psalm 125:1-5 (NASB)

A Song of Ascents.

¹*“Those who trust in the LORD
Are as Mount Zion, which cannot be moved
but abides forever.*

²*As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
So the LORD surrounds His people
From this time forth and forever.*

³*For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest upon
the land of the righteous;
That the righteous may not put forth their hands to
do wrong.*

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

⁵*But as for those who turn aside to their crooked
ways,
The LORD will lead them away with the doers of
iniquity.
Peace be upon Israel.*

The Babylonians came. They destroyed the city, killed the warriors, and brought the flower of the land to Babylon. The Jews were no strangers to displacement. Their life fell apart when the Babylonians defeated them. They knew what it was like to lose everything and to restart life from scratch. This psalm describes the return to joy from this devastation.

We have no wish for such loss. But we have encountered lighter shades of that night. There can come a time in our life when God gives liberty to the wicked to pluck us out of our comfort zone. Even though some of our suffering may be due to our own sins or failure, the rod of God’s chastisement have done worse. In addition, some of the righteous in the land were swept up with the chastisement meant for the wayward.

A tidy life can fall apart in a flash. This psalm recalls an earlier desperate time of exile, and affirms those who trust in God are unmovable like Mount Zion. This seems such an ironic assertion in the face of what the Jews faced in their exile. And for many of us, our displacement makes it impossible to think of ourselves as unmovable in Christ.

Our life can be like Jesus’ warning to Peter, ³¹*“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded [permission] to sift you like wheat; ³²but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers”* (Luke 22). Peter was going to be crushed and tossed into the air like wheat with chaff. He will not know earth from sky as he tumbles about in the air. He will desperately seek direction and not find it. After being tossed in the air, he will land on the sifting tray, he would think it is over, only to find himself tossed into the air once more—helpless, desperate for this ordeal to stop.

Such things happen to God’s people. But not without God’s permission!

In the spiritual realm to which we are not privy, Satan could demand in some way, that we are sifted. And when God gives the go-ahead, we experience our displacement. This psalm returns us to joy in the LORD. "Look at Mount Zion," the psalmist says. "It's going nowhere is it?" "When you trust in Yahweh, you are not going anywhere. You are staying right here where he is." And standing on Mount Zion, he looks around and sees even higher mountains around Jerusalem. He uses this image to tell us that the LORD (Yahweh) surrounds his people.

When we are tossed about, displaced by events beyond our control, we must recall a reality larger than our situation. For Simon Peter, it was larger reality that Satan had to ask permission to sift him. For Job, it was the larger reality that all his life, God had placed a hedge around him to keep Satan out (*Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Job 1:10.*)

A larger reality is working around our turmoil. Even though Satan may sift us and confusion prevails, he does not control our life. His actions remain circumscribed by God's sovereign control.

When the Jews were exiled to Babylon, those who trusted in the LORD did not move from Mount Zion (figuratively). While the scepter (rule) of the wicked descended on the land, it shall not rest there. It would be a passing moment. As the prophet Jeremiah had told them, it would be for seventy years. This was an entire generation or two, but that rule of the wicked over the land shall pass. We may want it to pass faster, and we may not like God's timeline. But God is sovereign – and good.

He tells us our wind-tossed life is under his sovereign control. He has not abandoned us even though we may feel that way. The heart that finds confidence in the LORD is unmovable, like Mount Zion. As a song of ascent, the pilgrims to Jerusalem recount with wonder God's fulfillment of his promise to restore them. Jerusalem has been restored and the temple rebuilt. The scepter of the wicked passed over the land, but did not rest on it.

Even the righteous need the promise of victory to stay true. If we are told, "Do everything right, and in the end, wrong shall triumph, and the wicked shall rule", what ordinary person can find the fortitude to persevere?

We need to know the triumph of God to find our joy and not lose hope. We need the promise that when the wicked rule, God remains in control and that wicked rule will pass, *"So that the righteous will not put forth their hands to do wrong."*

When Jesus came with the Good News of the Kingdom, he taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come." We are to pray for God's kingdom to come on earth. Our goal in life is not to leave the earth and be transported to heaven. Human destiny is here on earth. We are to ask God to realize his will "on earth as it is in heaven." God will have the victory. We are not escaping a world where the devil has the victory and we escape to heaven through death. Satan does not have the last laugh. Jesus Christ our Lord defeated death by rising from the dead. And he will COME to earth to reclaim it for himself. He will rule the earth and we will reign with him. In the meantime, we declare and live out the Good News of God's kingdom here on earth.

Too many Christians live as though there is no hope in life, and their only hope is in death. There is nothing further from the truth. The Good News of the Kingdom is that we will have victory over death in God's kingdom. Even when we die, we will rise from the dead and defeat death. The way of the ungodly will perish, and the way of the righteous will prevail.

When it comes to hope, again too many of us give up on our world as though God is calling us to heaven to escape earth. He is not. He is calling us to victory here on earth. God's will on earth will be as in heaven *"So that the righteous will not put forth their hands to do wrong."*

When we are surrounded by the prosperity of the wicked, we must remember that God wants to bless us with good gifts even in the midst of our turmoil. We come boldly before the throne of grace and ask, *"Do good, O LORD, to those who are good / And to those who are upright in their hearts."*

We find strength when we see the goodness of God in the midst of our struggles. God has not called us to stoically bear our pain while he remains silent. There may indeed be such times, but even in these times, we can call on him to "do good" for us, to show us his good hand and bless us with reprieve from our suffering. We come to the throne of grace to seek good from God.

Scripture teaches us, *"No trial has overtaken you except what others also experienced. And God is faithful. He*

will not allow you to be tried beyond what you can bear. When you are tried, he will provide a way out so you can endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13, own).

The right response in times of suffering is to call on God, "Do good, O LORD, to those who are good / And to those who are upright in their hearts." But some Jews gave up on God and "turn[ed] aside to their crooked way," that is, the way of the Babylonians. These were the ones who said, "Since being righteous does not work for me, I will now turn to the dark side."

These could not see that if they would trust in the Lord, they would remain unmovable. For these, "The Lord will lead them away with the doers of iniquity." When the time of reckoning comes, these who claim they belong to God, but do not, will be counted with the enemies of God. God's people and God's kingdom will have peace. But God's enemies and the kingdom of this age will be led away to judgment.

The Good News of the Kingdom is good news to God's people. The Bible makes it clear that God's kingdom is not a free-for-all. "For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" (Ephesians 5:5). God honors the choice of those who choose the kingdom of this age, and when Jesus returns they will not have a part in his kingdom.

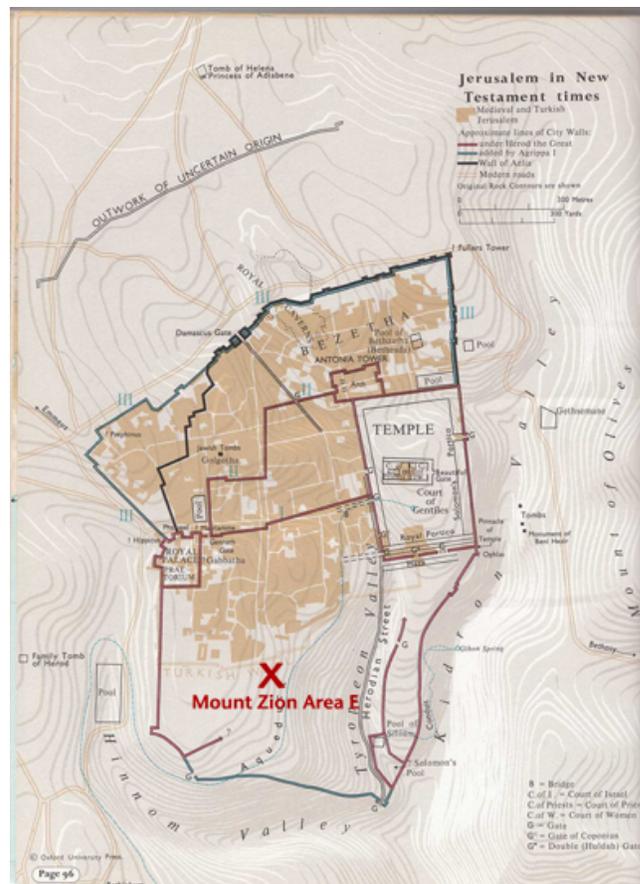
In the midst of turmoil, we return to God's joy as we return to God's peace. This psalm ends with a blessing, "Peace be upon Israel." Our confidence in God takes us through pain, uncertainty, and leads us to the path of peace in God. Let peace and joy be yours, my beloved, even all you who are called by the name of Christ, peace and mercy to "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16).



Notes on Mount Zion

Mount Zion (sometimes spelled Sion), is located within the city of Jerusalem, not a separate mountain as the name may suggest. It lies at the southwest corner of Jerusalem. Below is a map showing Mount Zion (and the area of an archeological dig).

To the south of Zion lies the Hinnom Valley. To the east lies the Tyropoeon Valley which drops to the City of David and then to the Kidron Valley. The Mount of Olives, across from the Kidron Valley, is higher than Jerusalem.



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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.