**THEME FOR THE YEAR - THE BIBLE: HOPE FOR ALL**

**Sermon theme:** God is with us with his protection and victory, throughout our lives and to eternity.

**Scripture reading**: Psalm 124 and 125

**Objective/Summary:** In the midst of all the uncertainties that tomorrow and the day after present, we have this one certainty: God is with us. He protects us from all sides just like the mountains around Jerusalem. He also gives us victory in his Son, Jesus Christ. And he is with us day by day through his Holy Spirit. If we just depend on him for our every day, we will be like Mount Zion that cannot be shaken.

**Author:** Gert Jordaan (‘Gereformeerde Kerke van SA’)

Sermon outline

In Psalm 125, God teaches us about how He protects us from day to day. What is immediately obvious is the striking comparison in verse 2, “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people ...” In this comparison, the mountains around Jerusalem are a paragon of protection, because the mountains surround the city and protect it against attacks. That is how God protects his people. Now, tomorrow, the day after and every day “for evermore”, the psalm proclaims.

1. **God protects us, although invisible, continually**

As the mountains surround Jerusalem … The Jews would have understood this comparison very well, because they knew what the mountains around Jerusalem looked like. The Jews who didn’t live in Jerusalem themselves as well. Remember: in those days, every Jew tried to make the trip to the temple in Jerusalem to go and sacrifice and worship there every year. Such a journey was known as a pilgrim’s journey: a pilgrimage. When the pilgrim came close to Jerusalem, he saw them: *mountains surround Jerusalem*.

What do Jerusalem’s mountains look like? For most of us who have never visited Jerusalem, the psalm conjures the image of a city that is nestled safely between high mountains. But that was not the scene that greeted the pilgrim when he/she neared Jerusalem. On the contrary, any visitor to Jerusalem would tell you that the mountains surrounding Jerusalem are, in fact, not magnificently high at all. Photos also depict the mountains around Jerusalem as actually nothing more than high hills or mounds. To tell you the truth: from the vantage of the city, one is often unable to see the mountains.

Nevertheless, the psalmist uses these very hills as an image of God’s protection, because Jerusalem’s hilly mountains are precisely an excellent example from which one can learn how God’s protection works. Believers must realise: **Just like the mountains around Jerusalem are not always visible around Jerusalem, the same goes for the God of protection who is not visible to the naked eye**. But it does not mean that God is absent. Even though we cannot see him, we know that He is there. Like the mountains around Jerusalem. In faith, we know that.

It makes one think of the history of the prophet Elisha in 2 Kings 6, when he was besieged in the city of Dothan by the Arameans. What the Arameans could not see was that the Lord had placed a mountain of horses and fiery chariots around Elisha in protection. Elisha’s servant was also unable to see it, until the Lord opened his eyes to see: just like the mountains that surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds believers with his protection.

In this way, God also promises to surround his children with his protection, no matter where life leads us. His protection is not visible to the eye, but in faith we are aware of it constantly, and we know: He is here with us, around us, like the mountains around Jerusalem!

1. **What is God protecting us from?**

What is God protecting us from? Does He protect us from crime and violence? From sickness and danger? From financial disasters? Naturally, He can because He is almighty. And He also does it – even more than we think. In the words of Psalm 121: “The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand …”

Time and time again, when we get to the other side of a crisis and look back, we realise: If it wasn’t for God, we would never have made it. Psalm 124 says it this way, “ … if it had not been the Lord who was on our side … then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters …” Yes, God keeps calamity and danger from us, like the mountains protect Jerusalem from all sides.

Sometimes, God allows disaster to overcome his people, and then he does it for a very good reason. In this way, at the time when this psalm was written, God allowed Israel to be ruled by the Gentiles. It is the “*sceptre of "wickedness”* spoken about in [Psalm 125] verse 3. For Israel, it must have felt like God had forsaken or rejected them. But God does not reject or leave his people. He just tests hearts. And testing only lasts for a while. For this reason, the psalmist says in verse 3, “For the sceptre of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong …” The testing will only last until God has attained his goal with it. And the goal is to turn his people away from an even bigger threat: the threat of sin.

Verse 3 states: “… lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong …” The eventuality of the sinful like is terrible. Verse 5 states that “… But those who turn aside to their crooked ways the Lord will lead away with evildoers!” But because God protects his people like the mountains of Jerusalem, he will not allow sin to get the upper hand over his children. Therefore, He allows trials in our lives, in order that we turn away from sin and return to Him.

1. **God is with us, safe and secure**

In verse 1, we read, “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides for ever.” Imagery again, but this time the comparison is with Mount Zion. Like the other mountains around them, Mount Zion is a mere hill. Why then was it such a suitable example of steadfastness? Because, to Israel, Mount Zion was a symbol of God’s presence. And God’s presence is unchangeable, safe and secure. This is how Israel thought about Mount Zion – as the residence of God. That is why it is associated with the temple mount – the temple, throughout the Old Testament, was a symbol of God’s presence.

Remember: the temple was just a *symbol* of God’s presence. His presence is unshakably safe and secure, even though it cannot be seen. But when the time of the New Testament arrived, God allowed his presence to become concretely visible. This he did by sending his Son into the world: Jesus Christ, the true Immanuel, that is, God with us. From that time on, the temple and Mount Zion were no longer necessary, because in Christ, God’s presence became a visible reality.

When the psalmist then says that those who trust in God will remain as steadfast as Mount Zion, it points to Jesus. Up until the coming of Christ, God surrounded his people with his protection, as the psalm mentions here. But when Jesus came, God’s protection moved over to a decisive victory. The victory occurred when Jesus Christ paid for sins on Golgotha. He set us free from the judgement of our sins. And with his resurrection, he set us free from the power of death. What is more: By doing this, Jesus restored peace between us and God. “*Peace be upon Israel*!” That is how the Psalm ends. It is a benediction. Simultaneously, it anticipates the peace that the Prince of peace, Jesus Christ, effected through his victory on the cross. Jesus Christ is the true Mount Zion in whom we hold steadfast, to whom we cling our whole lives, and with whom we will eventually also enter eternity.

But now, while we are still on our way to eternity, we already experience the “God with us” of Mount Zion in a different, wonderful manner. Because after Jesus ascended to heaven as victor and sat at the right hand of the Father, he poured out his Holy Spirit on his Church. From that time onwards, the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts. As a result, we are now really like Mount Zion – God’s residence, unshakeable to eternity!