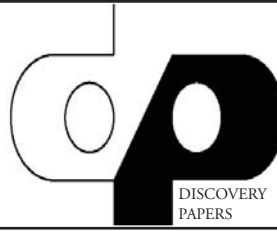


A SAFE PLACE TO REST

***SERIES: LET US KNEEL BEFORE THE LORD,
OUR MAKER***



Catalog No. 5332
Psalm 91
3rd Message
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November 23, 2008

Psalms 90, 91, and 92 are intended to be read together—with themes that build, combining emphasis on truth and love. Psalm 90 (our previous study) begins with a reference to God as a dwelling for his children, as does 91, the text we are considering here. However, they emphasize different outcomes—differences that are beautiful when seen together. Psalm 90 stresses our unworthiness before God and this text describes God’s tender protection of his own.

Psalm 91:1-2:

**He who dwells in the shelter of the
Most High will rest in the shadow of the
Almighty.**

**I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge
and my fortress, my God, in whom I
trust.”**

The Lord God is the home we are made to inhabit, a welcoming haven, a relief from the burden, the end of the journey. In verse 1 we see that his shade shelters us from the sun and the storm. In verse 2 we are made safe from our enemies and dangers. He is a fortress that protects us.

God, himself, is our home. This metaphor can open our eyes to wonderful truths about the love of God.

All of us have some acquaintance with homelessness. In most communities there are poor men and women who scramble each day for food and shelter. The love of God expressed through his people, “ministries to the homeless,” are familiar in most churches as well.

But consider another category of people who need to know that God is a welcoming home, a protective shelter: those who have everything, whose success has made them nomads. They may own multiple dwellings, with none to call home. Participating in virtual communities, they have no friends. The tyranny of the urgent drives them, making it impossible to put

down roots in any place. Theirs is homelessness by choice—no place, no people, no responsibilities that can make a lasting claim on them. And all of us know people that at the end of the day wake up and realize, “I have touched everything and belong nowhere.”

My parents are both 87 years old. They will soon be moving to a condominium near two of my sisters. They have moved often over the years and my father speculated, “Now that I am 87, I don’t think I am going to do this again. I think this is the last home I am going to occupy before going to my real home.” We experience God as our dwelling, as our place of security now, and we look forward to the fact that someday the veil will be removed so we see him face to face, and we will gain more of what we already have.

Psalm 91:3-8:

**Surely he will save you from the fowler’s
snare and from the deadly pestilence.**

**He will cover you with his feathers, and
under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and
rampart.**

**You will not fear the terror of night, nor
the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the
darkness, nor the plague that destroys at
midday.**

**A thousand may fall at your side, ten
thousand at your right hand, but it will
not come near you.**

**You will only observe with your eyes and
see the punishment of the wicked.**

These promises are not about divine oversight of the common lot of humanity; they are about individuals like you or me who live in a fearsome world. We have

temptations that pertain to us, arrows and snares, viruses, stalking enemies that might do us harm. God is not described as a grand protector for the whole nation, but as a shield for individual children in need.

Recall the old African American spiritual: “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows my sorrows. Nobody knows but Jesus.” Nobody knows what I am most troubled by. Nobody knows my deepest fears and shame. Nobody knows the stuff I wrestle with—but Jesus.

Dangers occur in the day and the night (Psalm 91:5). We can erect some defenses of our own—but not against enemies who attack in the dark, arrows that descend from a distance, or disease that comes without warning.

Verse 4 employs a picture of maternal care in the animal world (a mother bird sheltering chicks), an image Jesus used as well (Matthew 23:37). The deep and unswerving commitment of parents to protect their children, at the cost of their own lives if need be, helps us understand the heart of God toward us.

Yesterday, Leslie and I attended the wedding of the daughter of some old friends. A slide show during the reception brought back memories of a girl I have known all her life—raised with love from infancy to her wedding day. Her parents protected her, provided for her, and on this day amidst happy tears, presented her to her husband. Yet, the best stories of human (or animal) parenting pales in comparison to the care of God, the Father, for us.

We know that we are vulnerable, and yet God defends us in our vulnerability. We are unattractive (in our own eyes), weak, and incompetent. Much that assails us comes from inside—our own self-conception and baggage from the past. Our God will protect us from self-destruction as surely as from arrows and snares set by others.

Let me add an important observation here. These poetic images, and the promises behind them, need to be set in the context of all the witnesses of the Bible. God’s care of us does not mean that his children will not suffer. Making sense of suffering is the deepest human struggle, and the Bible is filled with stories and instruction that lead to hope and even joy, though we

don’t have answers to our questions.

Pain, confusion, and disappointment are often the circumstances in which we discover his care at the deepest level. Family turmoil, physical maladies, broken relationships, economic worries, and more were known by the first Israelites who sang this song and are common in our congregation today. A wrong notion of “the right to happiness” has led many to turn from the faith in anger or despair. We need to be sure that suffering is not certain testimony to failed discipleship on our part, or suggest that God is untrue to his word.

The promises of Psalm 91 are true. We may find them difficult to believe at times, but they are true nonetheless. The psalm is telling us about the heart of God for us. We who dwell in the presence of the Living God are sheltered by him, loved by him, known by him, defended by him, and have his gaze upon us all the time. There is no time when his love will fail us. He is the tender parent that will do anything for the best of his children. Perhaps there is a particularly hard thing that you have to face and you wish it were different; I would say to you: “God knows too, and he is your shield and defender. He is your fortress and refuge. He is your strength and shelter.”

Verse 9 starts with another reference to the Most High as our dwelling, but moves from an emphasis on shelter to battle.

Psalm 91:9-13:

If you make the Most High your dwelling—even the LORD, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.

This is a messianic text—ultimately about the work of Jesus. We partake in his work—engaging the evil one. The snake and lion are both used to depict the devil. Notice the intensification in verse 13—from cobra to sea serpent, and from lion to great lion. In the company of angels we join the battle with the devil, but need not fear being consumed in it.

These verses have a prominent place in the New Testament. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness—and at that point of physical depletion, the devil tempted him to question the promises of God and his calling as Messiah—quoting Psalm 91. From the pinnacle of the temple Jesus was urged to jump in order to prove that angels would indeed come to his aid.

When all of our resources are spent, faith that God will take care of us is the hardest. Taking matters in our own hands; making God perform on our terms, seems a reasonable alternative to faith. But the Lord refused and so must we.

Does God really know? Does he care? Jesus faced all of those questions more profoundly than anyone, and he trusted that God would defend him, and finally he was both raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of his Father. So we are being told in this psalm that we should trust our defender. We should trust the Lord who has called us to make our home in his presence.

The last verses of the psalm, in a delightful way, give us the voice of God in first person.

Psalm 91:14-16:

**“Because he loves me,” says the LORD,
“I will rescue him; I will protect him, for
he acknowledges my name.
He will call upon me, and I will answer
him; I will be with him in trouble, I will
deliver him and honor him.**

**With long life will I satisfy him and show
him my salvation.”**

I want you to take a minute and read those verses again and insert your name in place of the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘him’. You may be less sure that you love him than he is that you love him. This is a psalm filled with a marvelous perspective of the care of God, care for the minute things of our lives, the particular needs of our circumstances, and drawing us into the great work of the Savior, the Messiah who is changing the world. Finally, this is a text that has the voice of the Lord speaking to those who will hear of his commitment to us.

We are going to end our morning with communion. After Jesus had died and been raised, some of his disciples went fishing, led by Peter. In the morning darkness they realized the Lord was on the shore, and he had prepared some breakfast for them. He had cooked fish and there was some bread.

It was a few days before when these men ate a never-to-be-forgotten meal with Jesus. Once again, “Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them” (John 21:13). This time the Servant’s hands were scarred. In this setting Jesus restored Peter—letting his threefold denial be replaced with three declarations of love.

Psalm 91 ends with God’s voice declaring that he knows we love him even when we are not sure of it. The communion meal, like this great psalm, reminds us of God’s great care of us who need it desperately.

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