

A Shelter from All Danger

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Date: 17 January 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. Today, as we continue in the series Songs for a Troubled World through Selected Psalms, the psalm we're going to look at this morning is Psalm 91.

Now, this is a very well-known psalm, and for generations, Christians have used the psalm to gain great comfort. Dylan read it for us earlier, but I wonder if as we were reading through the psalm, you were hearing it, you were reading it, and I wonder if in your mind you were going, it's a lovely psalm, isn't it? Lovely words, really nice thoughts.

It's just a shame it isn't true. It's a shame, especially now, verse 10, no plague will come near your tent, is something that doesn't really seem to be true.

I mean, 15,000 roughly daily new coronavirus cases, and many of those people are people who read and believe the psalm. And so, how can we really believe what Psalm 91 says in our current circumstances?

That's what I want to talk about this morning. I think it's a very important question, because there's many psalms like this, and there's many assurances like this in the Bible that just seem too good to be true. And so, how do we apply this psalm to our current circumstances?

[1 : 2 0] That's what we're going to spend the next few minutes thinking about. The first thing we need to do, of course, is understand what the psalm is actually saying. And so, let's do that. Start at verse 1.

Verse 1 actually acts as a header for the whole psalm, and the rest of the psalm really unpacks the first verse of the psalm. So, it starts, whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

It's a wonderful phrase, and it summarizes what this whole psalm is about. And what you'll notice there is that that first verse consists of a condition and a result.

The condition is a person who rests or dwells in the shelter of the Most High. The result is that they will rest in His shadow.

They will enjoy His protection. For a person in a desert country, a shadow is protection from harm, protection from heat. It's a metaphor of all forms of protection.

[2 : 2 1] And the rest of the psalm actually then goes into outlining what that protection looks like. This first verse actually paints the picture of Middle Eastern hospitality.

And we've got to understand in that culture, hospitality was taken very seriously. We see some examples of it in the narratives of Israel. But basically, what this verse is referring to is the rule in Middle Eastern hospitality that the host had the 100% responsibility to protect his guest.

If you were a guest in someone's home, then you were under his shadow. You were under his protection. And he had the full responsibility of keeping his guests safe.

And so this psalm is actually talking about God's hospitality being like that. If you are truly in His home, if you are under His roof, you then can be assured of His 100% protection for His guests. And then the rest of the psalm, as I said, goes on to unpack what each of these phrases is. Who it is who is dwelling in His shelter.

[3 : 3 6] Who are those people? And what it means then that they enjoy His protection. So who actually dwell in the shelter of God? We go on to see, especially towards the end of the psalm, when God Himself comes in and we hear His words.

We read who the psalm actually applies to. Verse 14, Because He has set His heart on me, I will deliver Him. I will protect Him because He knows my name.

And so the person who truly dwells in God's shelter is not anyone. It's not anyone who believes in God or not anyone who likes the idea of God. It's those who specifically set their heart on Him in love and, importantly, know His name.

Know who He truly is and love the right God, not just their idea of God. This is actually covenant language. It's talking about His covenant people. People He's brought into a real relationship with Him to know Him and to love Him and to worship Him.

Not just anyone. And so the psalm is talking about particular people. And what does it say about those covenant people? What is God going to do for those who are in His home, who are in His covenant?

[4 : 52] Well, what does it mean to rest in the shadow? We see in the rest of the psalm. And what we read is nothing less than real, full, physical protection.

We mustn't fall into the trap of spiritualizing the psalm and say, Oh, it's just talking about spiritual protection. Well, no, it's not. It's talking about actual arrows that fly in the day.

It's talking about actual pestilences. It's talking about real physical dangers. It's talking about the dangerous world we live in. And it says that for those in God's shelter, He will protect them from those real physical dangers.

That's what it says. And what it results in, we see in verse 5, is a fearlessness by God's covenant people. You will not fear the terror of the night.

You will not fear the arrow of the day. You will not fear the plague and the pestilence that ravages. A fearlessness that frees God's people to live in a completely different way to those who are not in God's shelter and don't have the assurances of Psalm 91 for them.

[6 : 00] A fearlessness that causes God's people and frees them up to be able to do God's work in this world. And we see throughout the history of God's people, we see examples of that in the patriarchs.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. People who left safety of what they knew and went into dangerous situations that God called them because they knew God's protection. They could trust God's care for them.

People like the Israelites under King David and under Joshua when they went into Canaan, even the very first time, with enemies that were hugely overwhelming.

They were greatly outnumbered and yet they knew God's protection. They didn't go in there spiritualizing and go, well, God will protect us spiritually. They knew God would protect them from the actual arrows of the Canaanites.

And he didn't. They went in there fearless because they knew God's protection. And more recently in the history of God's people, we see it in missionaries. They're going into difficult and dangerous situations because they know Psalm 91 and promises like these.

[7 : 07] They know the benefit of being God's people, that they can rest in his real physical protection. Missionaries like James Chalmers in 1901, who took the gospel to New Guinea, which then was just an unknown, dark, savage land.

Missionaries like Bernard Mizecki in 1896. He was a Mozambican missionary who was working in Zimbabwe with the Shona people during a rebellion, a Shona rebellion.

And he refused to leave when all the other missionaries were told, it's too dangerous for you to stay. He stayed there doing God's work because he was fearless. He knew God's protection. Or Jim Elliot, who went to Ecuador in the 1950s, which was still a savage and hostile land to share the gospel with the tribes there.

Or John and Betty Stamm, who chose to go to 1930s communist China, which was very dangerous and under a great big revolution at the time.

You see, these were people, God's servants, who were fearless, and they could do his work because they knew he was protecting them. But there's a problem.

[8 : 23] The problem is that each of these missionaries were killed doing that work. James Chalmers in New Guinea was clubbed, cut up, and eaten by one of the tribes there.

Bernard Mizecki was stabbed to death by the Shona rebels. Jim Elliot was ambushed and killed on the Karare River. And John and Betty Stamm were captured and beheaded by the Red Army.

Do you see the problem? These people who trusted Psalm 91 and trusted in God's protection, how can, given the fact that they suffered and died like they did, how can the promises of Psalm 91 of safety still be true?

The thing is, they are. They are true. But to understand how they're true, we need to know the difference, a very important difference, between being safe and not suffering.

Those aren't the same things. And while this Psalm promises real active safety for God's people and promises God's active care in looking after them, it is not a guarantee of no suffering, it's not a guarantee of no trouble, and it's not a guarantee of no death.

[9 : 47] I mean, we're all going to die. In fact, in this very Psalm, look at verse 15 in your Bibles, God says that His people are going to go through trouble. He implies it. When He calls out to Me, I will answer them, I will be with them in trouble.

You see, God says there that His people will be in trouble, but He will be with them. He will give them a safety, even in their suffering. The question, of course, is, well, if God can do that, if He is able to do all of these things and keep His people safe and protect them, why doesn't He just keep them from suffering anyway?

Why does He still allow them to go through suffering when He's actively with them? And when He's powerful to prevent that suffering, why does He allow it? Well, the reason is, and this is very important, if you're taking notes, write this down.

Suffering is a necessary means to drive us to the safety that we need in God. Suffering is a necessary means to drive us to the safety that this Psalm is talking about.

It's like a hurricane shelter. I don't know if you've been in a country that experiences hurricanes, but southern parts of America, certain parts of China, certain parts of Central America, they experience annual hurricanes, and in those places, a lot of people have built hurricane shelters underground.

[11 : 16] Thing is, they don't go to those hurricane shelters unless a hurricane actually comes, and they experience the problem, and that's what drives them to the shelter. And in the same way, the suffering in this life that God allows to His people, even though He could prevent it, is actually what drives us to find Him, to draw closer to Him, to enjoy His presence more, to rest in His shelter.

And in our case, what we continue to read, and when we look at this in terms of the broad biblical story, we are driven to the shelter of God by the hurricane of suffering in this life because something much worse than the hurricane is on its way.

And we need to be in the shelter when that arrives. Look at verse 8. You will only see it with your eyes and witness the punishment of the wicked.

See, and that line helps us to get the bigger perspective of what the psalm is talking about. All the suffering, all these problems of a broken world, plagues and sickness and enemies, are actually pointing to the greatest and far worse suffering that humans will experience.

And that is when God comes to judge this world for sin. And it's what He's been talking about and warning His people in Scripture for thousands of years and delaying out of His mercy, but it is coming.

[12 : 55] And that is ultimately what God wants to keep His people safe from. And all these things that happen in life are actually just indicators that should wake us up to what is coming.

In fact, if we go back in the Old Testament and we read when God first established His covenant with His people and He first called the Israelites out of Egypt to be His people and out of their pagan sinful practices and He brought them into relationship with Himself and He saved them, then He told them His law.

He said, this is how I want you to live in my world that I've made. And He said that if you do, it'll go good for you. If you don't, it won't. And part of that won't, part of the curses of the covenant, we read in Exodus, we read in Deuteronomy, we read in Leviticus, God kind of repeats Himself to warn His people over and over again, listen, if you don't live my way in my world, this is what's going to happen to you.

And listen to what He says. For example, Leviticus 26. If in spite of these things you do not accept my discipline but act with hostility towards me, then I will act with hostility towards you.

I also will strike you seven times for your sins. I will bring a sword against you to execute the vengeance of the covenant. Though you withdraw into your cities, I will send a pestilence among you and you will be delivered into enemy hands.

[14 : 26] See, these were curses for those who were in God's covenant for not living God's way in God's world and not keeping the covenant.

And all of these things in Psalm 91 describe, actually allude to the curses of not being in the covenant, not keeping God's covenant. And the truth is, if we're honest with ourselves, none of us keep this covenant.

None of us live perfectly God's way in God's world like we should. Which means that this psalm, like many psalms, don't apply first and foremost to us.

They apply first and foremost to the only person who has kept the covenant, which is Jesus Christ. You see, Jesus is actually the only one who's fulfilled this psalm perfectly.

Jesus is the only one who truly holds fast to God in love. And so these things, all of these things in Psalm 91 were true of Jesus.

[15:30] But in doing what He did, in coming to earth, in becoming one of us, in representing us, and then going on to suffer and die for us, for our sins, He came to make the shelter of God available to us, to His people, so that these things can also be true of us insofar as we are in Christ.

But notice that even Him who this psalm did perfectly apply to, even He suffered, and even He died. And so following Him, being His people, being saved through Him, is obviously no guarantee that we won't suffer if He did, but it is a guarantee that we'll be safe.

in fact, Jesus says this to His own disciples in Luke 21, from verse 16. This is very interesting. He's warning His disciples of what it's going to mean to follow Him, what it's going to mean to follow His footsteps and be His people, in that they will experience the same persecution that He experienced. They will experience the same suffering that He experienced.

Listen to what He says. You will even be betrayed by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. They will kill some of you. Okay, this is clearly what Jesus is saying to His disciples.

[16:59] You will be hated by everyone because of My name, but, verse 18, not a hair of your head will be lost. By your endurance, you will gain your life.

What? You will be killed, but not a hair on your head will be lost. What does He mean? Well, He's talking about safety and suffering, safety in suffering, safety even in death.

He's assuring His disciples that even though they will go through trials, even though they will suffer, and some of them will die, God has counted every hair on their head, and not one of them will go unaccounted for.

God is in complete knowledge and control of their circumstances, and He is keeping them safe even when it doesn't look like it. And that is the big picture that Jesus had Himself in His own life, and it's the big picture He wanted His disciples to have.

And it's the big picture we need if we're going to understand and believe Psalm 91. Even though Satan himself tried to get Jesus away from seeing this big picture, and Satan wanted Jesus just to focus on the small picture so He wouldn't achieve His purposes that He came to earth and He needed to go through suffering to achieve.

[18:15] Remember the wilderness temptations? Each of those was designed by Satan to try and get Jesus to go another path besides the path that His Father laid out for Him, besides the path of suffering.

Satan tempted Him to try, avoid suffering, and you know what? He even used Psalm 91. He quoted Psalm 91 saying to Jesus, Hey, the angels are going to protect you.

God's got you. God's got you covered. You don't need to suffer. But you see, Jesus didn't see the Psalm as a guarantee to be exploited or a promise of no suffering.

Jesus didn't have a protected by Psalm 91 bumper sticker. Because while He knew God's protection, and while He was in every way sheltered in God, and He knew that nothing could touch Him without His Father say so, He also saw the bigger picture.

It's the same as the night before He died in Gethsemane. Listen to these words from Luke 22. Father, if You are willing, take this cup away from Me.

[19:32] Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done. Then an angel from heaven appeared to Him strengthening Him. So Jesus knew God could take away His suffering and would protect Him because He was right there with Him in trouble like He promised.

But Jesus also had the bigger picture and realized that sometimes suffering is the path to go through in order for God's purposes to be achieved in this world and in our lives.

But notice as well that Psalm 91 still totally applied to Jesus even in this circumstance. The angels ministered to Him in Gethsemane just like Psalm 91 verse 11 says.

For He will give His angels orders concerning you to protect you in all your ways. Same as in the wilderness Matthew 4, 11 the devil left Him and the angels came to serve Him.

And even after He died God still did exactly what He said He would do in this Psalm. Verse 15 and 16 when He calls out to me I will answer Him I will be with Him in trouble I will rescue Him and give

Him honor I will satisfy Him with a long life and show Him my salvation which is exactly what happened when three days after His death Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into glory. [20 : 53] God kept all His promises of Psalm 91 for Jesus even though He went through suffering and death and that is seeing the bigger picture that is how we must read Psalm 91 with that bigger picture of what God is doing and how He uses suffering to achieve His ends and once we have that bigger picture in our mind once we have that big biblical picture in our mind then we can understand how the Psalm is true for those who are in Christ and then we can draw real comfort from it because if you are in Christ if you have come to believe in Him and entered into that covenant relationship He's made possible through the forgiveness of your sins if you've been baptized into His name and you know your sins are forgiven then you can be the person the Psalm is talking about because you can hold fast to God in love through Christ and by His Spirit you can know His name through the Spirit inspired scriptures and you can call on Him and have access to God in every circumstance because of what

Jesus has done to make that relationship open even to us as sinners and therefore because you can do those things you can also know that these promises will apply to you as much as they apply to Jesus which means you don't need to fear the arrow that flies by day or the bullet of the mugger you don't need to fear the pestilence that stalks at night or the deadly coronavirus pandemic because bullets and viruses can't touch those who are in the shelter of God without God's say so and He'll only let that happen if it's to drive us to the real safety that we're not fully in yet or because it's time for us to rest until the resurrection Henry Martin the Anglican missionary certainly believed that when he said these words I am immortal until God's work for me is done and then when it's done and it's time for us to rest until the resurrection nothing can stop that anyway nothing we do can stop that but until that time nothing we do can threaten us or nothing anybody else does can threaten us because we are in the shelter of God that's what it means that's what Psalm 91 means we are immortal until God's work for us to do is done and then nothing can change it so does that mean we don't have to wear masks you know if we're immortal until the time that God has already set to take us then why wear masks what's it going to do well no you know what that is that's the devil's reading of Psalm 91 that's testing God and we've got to remember

God uses supernatural but also natural means like wearing masks and looking both ways before we cross the road to protect us but whatever he uses we've got to understand when we look at this Psalm in the bigger picture that it is a sweet assurance for those who dwell in the shelter of God through Jesus Christ that God will as he says in these closing verses deliver you from all the dangers that threaten you God will protect you from all the evil that seeks to take your life God will be with you when the troubles of this world come into your life God will rescue you from those troubles at the perfect time not a moment too soon or a moment too late and he will satisfy you and you will know his salvation let's pray Lord we we thank you that these words of Psalm 91 actually do apply to your covenant people even today even though with our limited sight and our limited faith we sometimes are led to doubt your protection for us

Lord especially in this time as we face a pandemic as we face trouble as we continue to in this year and even after the pandemic's gone just the troubles of this life and the dangers of this life as we look at those things Lord help us to have the bigger picture in our mind help us to realize that the Psalm is true of us that you do keep us totally safe and nothing can happen to your covenant people without your say so Lord help us to cling to that promise and to live in light of that and therefore to be fearless to do your work in this world no matter what we face we pray this in Jesus name Amen God bless you