



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Sermon

10/3/19

Under the Cover of His Wings

Psalm 91

© 2019 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

We have entered Lent which is a period of forty days of based on Jesus' forty days of testing in the wilderness. It is a time to reflect on our lives, our spiritual disciplines and to seek the Lord.

Today I want to look at the set Psalm. It is beautiful Psalm; one we can all benefit from meditating on often. It is poetry about God's protection. There are many reasons to seek God's protection - avoiding temptation is just one of them. But in temptation we need to put our trust in God. We need to value him and his ways more highly than our immediate desires.

Structure of the Psalm

In Psalm 91 the writer tells us that he trusts God and encourages us to do the same. He repeats a pattern telling us of the Condition, His own testimony, Assurance, God's Defence, and the Dangers avoided. This is followed by a beautiful assurance of God's protective relationship with the one who trusts in him.

Living under the shadow of the Almighty

So what is the condition that we might receive such great benefits? We are to "dwell in the shelter of the Most High" or "make God our dwelling place". The personal examples tells us more, it is to have God as our refuge and fortress - to trust in him. A refuge is a place of safety, like a pedestrian refuge in the middle of the road, or where a refugee flees to. You would not flee to place that you did not believe could protect you. Similarly, the villagers and defenders retreat within a fortress for protection when under attack.

So we are to live in him or his secret place and turn to him for help and safety.

What is his protection like?

It is like shade from the hot sun. In hot climates, it is only mad dogs and Englishmen who go out in the noonday sun, because it weakens and exhausts. I well remember in Singapore the relief when we entered an air conditioned bank and how reluctant we were to go outside into the oppressive humid heat.

His protection is likened to a fortress but the military metaphor is taken further it is like a shield and rampart – that is defensive wall. (The Hebrew root is of something circular like a shield or an encircling wall.) It has the sense of encircling protection.

His protection is like a mother bird covering her chicks with her wings. They are kept warm and safe from attack under her wings. So too, God protects us as we keep close to him. Do you remember how Jesus lamented over Jerusalem saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gather her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Mt 23:37)? Do you feel the longing of God to protect his people?

This is taken further by reference to the fowler's snare. (v3) A fowler is one who catches birds, a snare is a string trap.

How might birds be saved from a snare? Either by being warned off the danger or by being released once caught. We might understand this in terms of temptations and snares of sin. We know that God does warn us and sets us free from the traps into which we stumble. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:13:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

The Psalmist proclaims protection from plagues and pestilence – epidemics, sickness and afflictions. You will remember in 2014, there was that dreadful Ebola plague in the West of Africa. Of course, it was feared that it would spread to more nations and indeed there were 8 deaths in Nigeria. Helen and I were planning to go to Tanzania and the question arose, “Should we go?” But we had clear guidance from the Lord to go. It was then a great comfort to us, when Barbara Larsen gave us a scripture before we left – “You will not fear the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.” We went in that confidence, it did not come near us and obviously we returned safely.

Some scholars have identified the darkness, arrow, pestilence and plague with the names of demonic gods of neighbouring peoples. A footnote in “The Passion Translation” of the Bible reads:

[These] are seen by many Jewish scholars as a reference not merely to pestilence and natural dangers but to the realm of spiritual darkness that would come against God’s servants. These spirits are equated to “arrows that fly in daytime” or “a pestilence that walks” in the darkness. God’s sheltered ones are kept from the harm that could come from natural sources or supernatural sources. What a wonderful place to hide and be secure! In that case, the assertion here is that God will protect us from powerful demonic forces.¹

In v11-12, we are told God allocates angels to protect us and the scene changes from defensive protection to protection as we are on the way. Now it is protection against dangers of nature, lions and snakes. And yet here, too, there may be supernatural dangers in mind. “The Passion Translation” offers the idea that “the Hebrew includes the words for “lions,” “snakes,” and “dragons” (Heb. *basilisk*) as the three great symbols of satanic power.” But the one who trusts in God will trample on them. Jesus echoed this when he said to his disciples,

“I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.”²

Right response to these promises:

What should be our attitude to these promises? This is made very clear for us in the temptation of Jesus. We pick up the account at Luke 4:9:

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; ¹¹ they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" ¹² Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

The point is that that would be a presumptuous use of the promises of protection. Jesus declares that the promises apply to situations which result from obedient service not when setting up an artificial situation to test God’s care.

Does this mean nothing bad can happen to us?

We must remember when dealing with the psalms, that they are poetry expressing the heart. They are emotional rather than logical and systematic! This does not mean they are untrue, but it is heart-felt truth rather than intellectual truth.

The main thrust of the psalm is that we will be protected from troubles. Logically, troubles will still come. You only run for refuge when there is a threat. He says, “I will be with you in trouble.” The Bible is not unrealistic. Bad things do happen but this psalm is assuring us of God’s protective hand through it all. This is what Paul talks about in Romans 8. In all things God works for the good of those who love him. Bad or difficult things may happen, but God works in them for our good. Dr Michael Wilcox put it like this, “*In* all these things, we are not saved from them, we are saved in them. The negatives are transmuted into positives; by a divine alchemy the lead turns to gold.”³

Dawn’s Healing

How might that work out? Dawn, a friend of mine developed an unusual, incurable cancer. She told me of her confidence that she would be healed because some time before, she had received the last verse of this psalm as a promise from God.

¹ Footnote on Ps 91:5-6 in “The Passion Translation” © 2017 BroadStreet Publishing®

² Luke 10:19

³ Wilcox, M, 2009, “The Bible Speaks Today, Psalms 73-150”, IVP, Leicester. P82

With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation. She reasoned that 45 years was not long life and therefore she would not die. After many tests and trips to hospital and much prayer, she suddenly became well again. The next test result showed no evidence of the cancer at all. After re-testing the consultant announced that she did not have the condition and since it was incurable, she never had had it and the many previous tests were all mistaken!

God's Relationship

It is not only protection that God offers, he goes further with the promise of relationship. In the final section, the God himself speaks through the psalmist - do you hear the intimacy here? "Because he loves me; because he acknowledges my name; because He calls upon me – then in that relationship of trust I will act for him or her.

His response is generous:

I will rescue her;	I will protect him;	I will answer her;
I will be with him in trouble;	I will deliver her;	I will honour him;
I will satisfy her with long life;	I will show him my salvation.	

Is that your relationship with God? Do you love him? Do you acknowledge his name and character? Do you call upon God for help – trust rather than in desperation?

Conclusion

If you don't know that relationship with God, Paul gives us a clue in the passage from Romans 10, we heard:

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame. ... Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

If that is a mystery to you, I strongly encourage you attend the Alpha course this afternoon – it is a good place to explore these truths.

We need to understand that if God is going work in our difficulties, reworking them to our good – then it is a long term good and we need to have a long term view. So we need to decide not to give way to fear. Fear is the opposite of faith and drags us down. How often God tells people in the Bible not to be afraid. Robert Louis Stevenson said, "Quiet minds that rest in God cannot be perplexed or frightened, but go on in fortune or misfortune at their private pace, like a clock during a thunderstorm."

St Augustine said, "Trust the past to God's mercy, the present to his love and the future to his providence."

And Karl Barth, "To hold to God is to rely on the fact that God is there for me and to live in this certainty."