



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

Sermon

God our Refuge

Psalm 91; Proverbs 3:5-6; Philippians 4:4-7

29th March 2020

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This week and next I want us to focus on Psalm 91 both in the services and I offer it to you for your devotions. It is a great psalm which promises the Lord's care and protection. By these words, we are encouraged and given hope in trouble. It is written to direct our attention back to God in tough times – and we - suddenly, unexpectedly - are experiencing a global tough time.

It is so easy to focus our attention on anxious thoughts about what might happen. We need to take King David's advice from Psalm 56:3-4:

“When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid.”

First, he acknowledges he will be afraid. David had plenty of opportunities to be fearful through many battles and years of being hunted by King Saul. So when he is afraid what would he do? He would turn towards God and trust in him. He knew what God had said and he praised those words and wisdom. He is able to trust God because of what he has revealed and what he has promised. Then he comes around full circle because he now that trusts in God, he will not be afraid! Last week I talked about meditating on God's word or worrying about the troubles you see. If you worry, it becomes a vicious cycle tending down to despair. But if you meditate or focus on what God says, you find you are in a virtuous cycle which lifts you from despair into trust and rejoicing.

In Psalm 91 the writer tells us that he trusts God and encourages us to do the same. There is a pattern in the composition. In the first eight verses, he states the condition for the promises which follow and his own testimony of God's faithfulness. Then he gives us assurance of God's defence from a list of typical dangers. He repeats the pattern from verse 9. This is followed by a beautiful assurance of God's protective relationship of the one who trusts in him.

The foundation for all the promises is stated in verse 1-2 and repeated in verse 9. The rest of the psalm depends on the conditions in these verses. We are to “dwell in the shelter of the Most High.” We are to trust in God as our refuge and our fortress. Verse 9: There poetically restated it is to “make God your dwelling place” because he is a refuge.

The Psalmist gives testimony that he has done this and he knows God is faithful. He can say that the Lord is his refuge and fortress and God is trustworthy.



A refuge is a place of safety from danger. Refugees flee from a dangerous country to somewhere they believe they will be safe. When they are in the safe place they have found refuge or safety. When they are on the way there they are not yet safe. A pedestrian refuge is the island in the middle of the road where you can safely pause when crossing the road. Here is one near our corner. I photographed Helen taking refuge there with admittedly virtually no traffic in the current conditions – and then in photographing her I nearly stepped in the way of oncoming traffic myself!

When the traffic is busy in both directions, it is a safe place to stand waiting for a gap rather than balancing on the white line trying to be as thin as possible to avoid being hit from before or behind – or on the behind.

When under attack, villagers and defenders retreat within a fortress for protection. Similarly, we are to turn to Yahweh for help and safety and to live in that place of shelter.

The quote from Proverbs is a favourite for many and it too says we need to trust God and let him direct our affairs. Some things in life are too big for us – Corona virus is one. We need to do our reasonable best and trust him to direct our affairs and provide for us. We flee to him for protection. This last week I put a litany on the website. I hope you used it in prayer. It said, “Our hope is not in governments but our hope is in the Lord.” Why? Because he is our refuge.

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.

God’s protection is likened to a fortress or to a shield and rampart – or a defensive wall. The Hebrew word has that sense of encircling protection. He encircles us with his protection.

The Lord’s 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 his longing to protect his people?

The Psalmist proclaims protection from plagues and pestilence – epidemics, sickness and afflictions. This is of course immensely relevant to this very day. 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, that plague did not come to Tanzania and obviously (now) it did not come near us so that we returned safely.

I will explore the treasures of Psalm 91 further next week. For now, does this mean nothing bad can happen to us? 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. In verse 15 it 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 writes 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."¹

And so we can have peace as we go through difficult times. Paul in his letter to the Philippians told them to rejoice always. Paul knew real suffering – floggings, shipwrecks, persecution, hunger and more. But he could say rejoice in the Lord always. Don't be anxious but tell God your needs. As you ask him, thank him for he is your good father who protects and provides for you. Then his peace will protect your thinking, your feelings and your decisions. Paul says that peace is beyond our understanding. Have you experienced that? You can be in a stressful situation and find yourself so calm that you think, "Why am I so peaceful - I should be upset." That is the peace which passes understanding.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Make God your hiding place - your defence. Trust him and rest in his protection and know his peace guarding your heart. Amen.

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¹ Wilcox, M, 2009, "The Bible Speaks Today, Psalms 73-150", IVP, Leicester. P82