



Sermon

The Rock that is Higher than I

Psalm 91; Zechariah 9:9-12

5th April 2020

© 2020 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

I want to dwell further on Psalm 91 this week, that we may grow deeper in our confidence in God for trying times. We saw last week, that the foundation, the condition on which the benefits of this psalm depend is described in the first, second and ninth verses:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. ² I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

⁹ If you make the Most High your dwelling--even the LORD, who is my refuge ...

It is to dwell in the shelter of Almighty God and to rest in the protection. You can only rest when you are trusting. Think for a moment about Jesus stilling the storm. He was asleep in the boat while waves were breaking over the vessel and even experienced fishermen were panicking. To be able to rest he had to trust. Was he trusting in them? No he was trusting in the protection of Almighty God.

It is as we take refuge in his protection, as we (figuratively) run within the walls of his fortress that we find his protection, the rest he offers and the benefits described in the rest of the Psalm.

Psalm 61 the set Psalm for today, has a similar thrust:

Psalm 61:2-4 From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe. I long to dwell in your tent for ever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.

His heart goes faint, why? Because danger comes. What do we do? We call to God that he would set us on a high defensive place. "This is beyond me," he is saying – "I need your protection." He can testify that God has already been a refuge, a strong tower. And just as in Psalm 91, he longs to dwell in God's tent and find shelter under his wings.

Did you notice, Ps 61 says, "From the ends of the earth I call to you." In a sense, we here in New Zealand are at the ends of the earth. We are about as far as you can go from Israel. It may be that the ends of the earth is more of an emotional place than a geographical location. But we can take encouragement, here, now to call out to God for help and to find refuge in him.

Turning back to Psalm 91, from verse 5 the psalmist tells us if we are trusting in the refuge God affords, we will not fear a list of evils: the terror of the night, arrows, pestilence and plague.

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; 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.'" ¹¹

The point is that it 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. So in our current situation, it is one thing to trust in God's protection it is another to deliberately risk infection claiming he must protect us.

Do these promises mean nothing bad can happen to us? I said last week that the Psalms are poetry expressing the heart. They are emotional rather than systematic theology. This does not mean they are untrue, but it is heart-felt truth rather than intellectual truth.

Nonetheless, we are encouraged to trust in God's protection. 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. *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 very many previous tests were all in error!

Last week, I made the point that there is an acknowledgment that God will be with us in troubles not stop all troubles from happening. To say we have protection means we are protected from what the enemy of our souls intends as we keep our trust in God and believe and speak of him in accordance with his word.

Helen found a book at the Op Shop by Joyce Meyer called “Worry-Free Living.” I am grateful for this insight from that book. God’s protection is a process. In verse 15, he promises that when we call on him, he will answer us and be with us in our troubles. He will strengthen us and accompany us through our difficulties to victory, deliverance and honour. ¹

Here is the pattern: God is with you in your troubles then he begins to deliver you out of them and afterwards he honours you. It is a progression and as we keep our trust in God, we can know peace and joy as we go through it.

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 – in trust rather than in desperation?

He holds out to you rescue, protection, an answer when you call, help in trouble, deliverance, honour, long life and ... salvation!

Hope

Zechariah prophesied the Messiah would come riding on a donkey – that is in peace not on a war horse. Of course, it found fulfilment in the Triumphal Entry of Jesus to Jerusalem. But I am intrigued by verses 11-12,

¹ Meyer J., 2016, *Worry-Free Living: Trading Anxiety for Peace*, Faithwords, a division of Hachette Book Group, New York, p83

As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit. Return to your fortress, O prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.

He said that God will honour his covenant with his people. Even in a tough place of imprisonment and lack, he would free them. In the original setting it was the exiles returning from Babylon to Israel. But we can take encouragement too. He calls them to return to their fortress. Their fortress was God. He calls them prisoners of hope because they are held by hope. We speak of being captivated by an idea. If hope is real, it holds you in a place, position or attitude because of your positive expectation. We need to return to our fortress – our place of safety. I think there is a call to return to our first love of the Lord. Draw close to him and he will draw close to you.

In our country, we are in lockdown: not imprisoned but being protected – protective custody if you will. We are prisoners of the hope that we will prevent the spread of the epidemic by staying indoors.

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. We need to choose 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.

St Augustine said, “Trust the past to God’s mercy, the present to his love and the future to his providence.”

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

When your heart grows faint call to God from the ends of the earth for him to lead you to the rock that is higher than you. Amen.