

Refuge

*I will say to the LORD,
“My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”
(Psalm 91:2 ESV)*

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
(Psalm 42:2 ESV)*

*And those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.
(Psalm 9:10 ESV)*

My God In Whom I Trust

March 29th, 2020

Psalm 91

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Introduction:

Well good morning church! If you have your Bible with you I'd love for you to open it now to Psalm 91. If you know anything about Psalm 91 then you know already why we are starting here. This is THE PSALM of refuge. Derek Kidner said about Psalm 91:

“This is a psalm for danger: for times of exposure and encirclement or of challenging the power of evil.”¹

Well that describes our situation rather well – doesn't it? These are LITERALLY times of exposure! Times when we are facing the challenging power of evil. Martin Luther loved this Psalm too; he said:

“This is the most distinguished jewel among all the Psalms of consolation.”²

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 16 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 363.

² Martin Luther cited in W.S. Plumer, 848.

Now, given that I did a full podcast episode on this Psalm and sent that out to you earlier this week, my intention is not to reproduce all that material here. Today I want to walk through the Psalm at ground level fairly quickly before really pressing into what I imagine are the very urgent questions that we're all asking. Namely:

What exactly is being promised here?

And who precisely can lay claim to these promises?

And then finally, of course what does it mean actually to dwell inside the shelter of those Most High?

The text itself divides very simply. In the first two verses the Psalmist is speaking about himself – “I will say to the Lord, My refuge, my fortress” etc. Then in the middle section he is speaking to us. He says: “You will not fear! A thousand may fall at YOUR SIDE”. Then in the final section, verses 14-16 the Psalmist becomes a prophet and he speaks on behalf of the Lord. The “I” in that section is God. He says: “I will be with him”. “I will rescue and honour him.”

So our three sections as we read through the text are these: We have: My Refuge, Your Refuge and God's Pledge.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1:

My Refuge:

¹ He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

² I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”

Notice quickly the 4 metaphors and the 4 names for God.

In terms of the metaphors he calls God a “shelter”, a “shadow”, a “refuge” and a “fortress”.

As I mentioned in the podcast, we aren't SURE who wrote this Psalm. It comes right after Psalm 90 - which was written by Moses and it uses a lot of the same language as Psalm 90 so some people think this Psalm too was written by Moses. Others think that it was written by David - largely because David so often talks about how the Lord is his refuge and stronghold. We don't know and it doesn't really matter and it is sort of helpful not to know because then you can import BOTH narratives into your understanding of this Psalm. You can imagine Moses inside the tabernacle tent - with its four outer coverings making it a cool and quiet REFUGE in the desert.

You can visualize Moses in that dark space. You can imagine him looking up and seeing the inner layer of curtain with all of the cherubim stitched in - something that only Moses, Aaron and later the high priest would ever see from the inside. You can imagine Moses in there - seeing and hearing from God in a special way - and then writing this.

Or if you prefer, you can think of David. Hiding out in the rocks and caves of the desert. Taking refuge in the stronghold that we today call Masada.

Whatever you like - because both men were looking at the self-same God and coming to the exact same conclusion. If you are in this God - then what could you possibly be afraid of?

The four names are interesting too. He refers to God as The Most High - Elyon in Hebrew, he refers to him as the Almighty, El Shaddai; he calls him Yahweh and Elohim. And I think the point for us is simply this: the better you know God, the more likely you are to trust him in troubled times.

And that is precisely the encouragement that we find in the middle section of this Psalm. The Psalmist has told us what he sees. He has brought us into HIS EXPERIENCE - but now he is suggesting that we have our own experience. He wants us to believe and trust in the very same things that he is believing and trusting in.

We begin to hear about that in verse 3:

Your Refuge:

3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence.

W.S. Plumer says here:

“By the snare of the fowler, we may understand any mischief plotted by Satan or his servants.”³

Remember – the devil is a dog on a chain. He will always do what he is inclined to do. He will hate and harass God’s people. He will lie. He will scheme. He will plot – and as we learned in the Book of Daniel, for a time, his plans may appear to succeed. But in the end, they will be turned in such a way as to serve the purposes and plans of God almighty. In the end all things WILL work together for the good of all those who are called according to God’s purpose.

By the way, I love how the old KJV translates verse 3. It says:

“Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, *and* from the noisome pestilence.”
(Psalm 91:3 KJV)

Whatever else this pestilence may be it is surely a NOISOME pestilence, is it not?

There is real danger in it – don’t get me wrong – but the penumbra of PANIC AROUND IT is absolutely overwhelming – are you feeling that?

I imagine that at the very least, during the Spanish Flu or the Black Plague you could at least find a moment of quiet – you could lie down and think of something else without your phone beeping at you every 5 seconds notifying you that one of your neighbours has posted yet another ill-informed and panic laden thought on social media.

Lord save us from this NOISOME pestilence!

Give us peace.

Be that heavy, multi-layer, sound suppressing TENT OF MEETING. Be the quiet place. Be the shelter. Be the cone.

We jump back into the text at verse 4:

³ Plumer, 850.

⁴ He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

I love what Matthew Henry says here. He says: “God is willing to guard his people as the hen is to guard the chickens, and as able as a man of war in armour.”⁴

That is a marvelous mixing of metaphors!

If God were only like a mother chicken I would not feel terribly secure. But thanks be to God – he is not only like a mother chicken – he is like a mother chicken dressed in steel and shining armour! He has the compassion and commitment of the momma bird combined with all the strength and overwhelming force of the Man of War.

That’s a good combo – that makes sense in my mind. I wouldn’t want to try and draw it – but I am happy that I see it here in the text.

We jump back into the Psalm at verse 5:

⁵ You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day,

⁶ nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

⁷ A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

⁸ You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked.

Now, whether or not this Psalm was written by Moses, it is important for us to read it in its covenantal context. This Psalm was written by Moses – or someone who had read Moses – but either way it is clear what point is being made here.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, just before he died. Moses made the people of Israel stand on two mountains on opposite sides of a valley in order to press upon them the choices that lay before them. “There were TWO ROADS”, Moses said. “A road that leads to LIFE and a road that leads to DEATH.”

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 16033.

In Deuteronomy 28, he said:

“If you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.² And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.³ Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field.⁴ Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock.⁵ Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.⁶ Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.” (Deuteronomy 28:1–6 ESV)

So that’s one road – that’s the good road!! The obedience road!! If you walk on that road the Lord will bless you and protect you.

But that’s not the only road. There is also the road of rebellion and destruction, he talked about too. He said:

⁵⁸ “If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God,⁵⁹ then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting.⁶⁰ And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you.⁶¹ Every sickness also and every affliction that is not recorded in the book of this law, the LORD will bring upon you, until you are destroyed.” (Deuteronomy 28:58–61 ESV)

So - verses 7-8 of Psalm 91 are really just a poetic expression of SAME.

The Psalmist is saying – there is a connection between blessing, protection AND OBEDIENCE. We’ll come back to that in just a moment.

We jump back into the text at verse 9 and I am going to read all the way through to the end of verse 13 without further interruption. Everything in this section will need to be unpacked in detail – and we’ll get to it at the end. You are going to want to know exactly what these promises and to whom they may be applied. But for now – the first thing we need to do, obviously is to hear them. So let’s do:

⁹ Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place— the Most High, who is my refuge—

¹⁰ no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent.

**¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.
¹² On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.
¹³ You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.**

Alright - that is the encouragement that is given by the Psalmist to all those who put their trust in God. He is saying – I have found God to be a refuge! I have been INSIDE! I know that God can be trusted. So you need to come inside! You need to trust God! You need the Lord your refuge and if you do then he will be to you as he has been to me. He will protect you and watch over you – he will empower you and enable you to walk boldly through this world – with devils FILLED.

That is the promise being made in the middle section. As to the precise details and the extent of the application – we’ll get to that in just a minute. Now we need to hear God’s pledge in return.

In the final verses, the Psalmist becomes a prophet – which was true of both Moses and David – so again, take your pick. Speaking for God now, the Psalmist says:

God’s Pledge:

**¹⁴ “Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name.
¹⁵ When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him.
¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.” (Psalm 91:1–16 ESV)**

Martin Luther says here: “By the cluster of promises at the end of the Psalm, the Holy Spirit quickens and refreshes our hearts with consolation.”⁵

Yes – and that is well said. Regardless of whether it is Moses or David WRITING here – ultimately it is the Holy Spirit SPEAKING HERE. He is speaking words of comfort and consolation to all those who put their trust in God.

⁵ Martin Luther as cited in W.S. Plumer, 851.

So – given the times that we are in, we want to be very certain that we have understood and correctly appropriated the precious encouragement contained within these verses. So we have some questions – some very urgent questions – with respect to the application of this text.

Urgent Questions In A Time Of Immediate Crisis:

The first question obviously is this:

1. What exactly is being promised in the middle section of this Psalm?

There is some symbolic language – surely – but it obviously something – and something amazing! Look at the text. Listen again to some of what is being said:

he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence.
(Psalm 91:3 ESV)

You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.
(Psalm 91:5–6 ESV)

A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. (Psalm 91:7–8 ESV)

no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent. (Psalm 91:10 ESV)

he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. (Psalm 91:11 ESV)

You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. (Psalm 91:13 ESV)

So what is being promised here? Nothing less than TOTAL and COMPLETE protection from every conceivable danger in either the physical or spiritual realm – is that not true?

What isn't covered here? Safety in war, safety in plague, protection from spiritual attack – guardian angels – power and confidence when walking through a world full of devils – that's what's on the table!

The last verse in that middle section is sometimes misunderstood. This is not an invitation for us to pick up snakes or wrestle with lions - W.S. Plumer says helpfully here:

“Often in Scripture are spiritual adversaries compared to fierce and venomous creatures.”⁶

So this is what Luther was singing about in *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. In verse 3 he says:

“And tho' this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us. We will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim - we tremble not for him. His rage we can endure, for lo his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him.”⁷

That's what it means to walk with confidence through a world filled with devils, demons and spiritual adversaries – and that's what is being promised in the middle section of this Psalm.

Which of course, leads us to the next question – which now feels even more urgent:

2. Who precisely can lay claim to what is being promised in this Psalm?

The answer is found in verse 9 and then is repeated in verse 14. In verse 9 the Psalmist says it in his own voice, then in verse 14 God says it in his voice – God ENDORSES and AFFIRMS the conditions attached to these promises by the Psalmist. The conditions are these; verse 9:

⁹ Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place— the Most High, who is my refuge—

¹⁰ no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent. (Psalm 91:9–10 ESV)

⁶ Plumer, 851.

⁷ Luther, *A Mighty Fortress*.

So obviously this is a conditional construct – the ESV uses the word “because” to make that point, the NIV uses the word “IF”. It renders verse 9:

If you say, “The LORD is my refuge,” and you make the Most High your dwelling,
¹⁰ no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. (Psalm 91:9–10
NIV11-GK)

Either way – the point being made is very clear: these are all **CONDITIONAL PROMISES** and the condition is **MAKING THE LORD YOUR REFUGE**. If you do that, then these things may be true of you.

That’s what the Psalmist says – and then God confirms that in verse 14. He says:

“Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name.” (Psalm 91:14 ESV)

So there the condition is expressed as **HOLDING FAST TO GOD IN LOVE** and **KNOWING HIS NAME**.

That’s the person who can lay hold to these impressive promises.

Well of course, to state the obvious, no one meets that criteria perfectly, except the Lord Jesus Christ. No one really **KNOWS** God except Jesus. Jesus says that:

“I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me.” (John 7:29 ESV)

According to Jesus, Jesus **KNOWS** the Father in a way that no one else ever did or ever will. He knows the Father – and he **OBEYS** the Father – Jesus said:

I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. (John 14:31 ESV)

So Jesus KNOWS the Father, LOVES the Father and OBEYS the Father – and therefore only Jesus can claim these marvelous promises in their entirety. W.S. Plumer makes careful note of that in his commentary, he says:

“The promise is of an absolute exemption from all that could endanger life. This was true of none but Jesus.”⁸

None but Jesus.

Well then, why in the world are we reading this? What value is there in this Psalm for us?

That’s the very urgent question of the hour, isn’t it? And the answer – or at least, a big part of the answer, comes to us in 2 Corinthians 1:20 which says:

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. (2 Corinthians 1:20 ESV)

So – all the promises of God are now YES in Christ. Jesus can claim the promises of Psalm 91 IN THEIR ENTIRETY. So everything GOOD in that Psalm has now landed on Jesus Christ. It is all IN HIM. And that is why it is through him that we utter our amen to God for his glory – Paul is saying there that this is why we pray to Jesus now. We say our amens to Jesus now – AMEN? We pray in Jesus’ name – AMEN?

We pray to Jesus now because he has a storehouse FULL of the blessed promises of God – and he can give them out however, whenever and to whomever he chooses.

If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. (John 14:14 ESV)

Are you hearing that? Jesus has just taken over ownership of Psalm 91. Because originally, you had to know GOD’S NAME to access those promises – now Jesus says, you’ve got to know my name.

You have to be in intimate relationship with ME to access those promises!

⁸ Plumer, 850.

So – where does that leave us? I want to bring this plane ALL THE WAY IN for a landing. To what extent then can I – can you – as a believer – claim these promises?

Let me suggest that these promises can be claimed by all TRUE believers in three ways.

I. In an immediate sense

Meaning – as soon as you become a Christian you are subject to the tender and particular Providential care of Almighty God. W.S. Plumer says that – the same guy who said a minute ago that ONLY Jesus can claim these promises in their entirety – that guy also went on to say right after that:

“Yet God exercises a kind and special providence over his people.”⁹

And, based on the wording of the text, it appears as if that Providence takes place through angelic intermediaries. The text says:

he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. (Psalm 91:11 ESV)

When you become a Christian – when you take refuge in God through Christ – you are immediately assigned a guardian angel – the text says that – it says he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. Do you believe that?

We used to believe that. Matthew Henry, the old Puritan commentator certainly believed that, he said:

“He who is the Lord of the angels, who gave them their being and gives laws to them, whose they are and whom they were made to serve, *he shall give his angels a charge over thee*, not only over the church in general, but over every particular believer.”¹⁰

⁹ Plumer, 851.

¹⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 16041.

Over every particular believer. Do you believe that? I believe that. I believe that the moment you are truly saved an angel is dispatched to your Providential care, thanks be to God – BUT!!! That care is only extended AS and to the EXTENT THAT you walk in the ways that God has decreed and commanded for you. Thus, Matthew Henry goes on to speak about the limitation on this promise:

They shall keep thee in thy ways, that is, “as long as thou keepest in the way of thy duty;” those that go out of that way put themselves out of God’s protection.¹¹

Let me read that again: those that go out of that way put themselves out of God’s protection.

That leads me then to the SECOND sense in which these promises may be claimed by the believer. There is a sense in which they are immediately true but there is also a sense in which they are progressively true.

II. In a progressive sense

Meaning, the more we learn to obey God – the more consistently we will enjoy our blessings from God through believing prayer. That isn’t Prosperity Gospel – that’s just the actual Gospel. That’s just the New Testament. 1 John 3:21-22 says:

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;²² and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. (1 John 3:21–22 ESV)

The more carefully you obey God, the more access you have in prayer to the blessings of God. I’m not sure how anyone could even attempt to argue with that.

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (James 5:16 NKJV)

So there is a sense in which our access to these promises may GROW over time as WE GROW in obedience over time. By the grace of the Lord – thanks be to God!

¹¹Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 16041.

So there is a progressive sense to be mindful of here and also an ultimate sense.

III. In an ultimate sense

Here is what I mean by that; look at verses 7-8 again:

⁷ A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. ⁸ You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. (Psalm 91:7–8 ESV)

Well, to state the obvious, that has only EVER been true ENTIRELY of Jesus. Only Jesus had absolute, total control over the moment of his own death. He said in John 10:18:

No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. (John 10:18 ESV)

No other human being could talk like that. Not the Apostle Paul, not Peter, not John – and not William Carey or Billy Graham! That only, ever, perfectly applied to Jesus – and yet – there is a sense in which that will one day apply to us.

You see, the Bible says that when you die IN CHRIST you go immediately to the presence of God in glory – to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord – 2 Corinthians 5:8.

But that isn't the only death that people have to face – according to the Bible.

Revelation 21:7-8 says:

“The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” (Revelation 21:7–8 ESV)

So if you are in Christ these verses will be true of you in eternity. At the time of the second death – when people having been judged by God are being CAST INTO AN ETERNAL HELL – this

death shall not come near to you. You will only STAND and look upon the recompense of the wicked.

Like Moses and his family inside their house – having taken shelter under the blood of the Lamb – you will WATCH the DEADLY PESTILENCE lay claim to all those who have despised and forsaken the Lord – BUT IT WILL NOT COME NEAR YOU. You will be SAFE because you found refuge and shelter under the blood of the Lamb. Thanks be to God!

And that leads us to our final and most urgent consideration: How does one do that?

3. What does it mean to dwell in the shelter of the Most High?

Well once again the story of the Exodus is our best and most helpful illustration. In the story of the Exodus it meant to cover your door posts in the blood of the Passover lamb. It meant to be known and marked off as the people of God! If you did that – if you took SHELTER under the BLOOD OF THE LAMB then the Angel of Death slid silently and swiftly by your door. He could not come in – he would not come in – for these people had found REFUGE in the SHELTER and SHADOW of the MOST HIGH.

The same is true today in New Testament times. Jesus is our Passover lamb now – the Apostle Paul says that in 1 Corinthians 5:7:

For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. (1 Corinthians 5:7 ESV)

He died. He shed his blood on the cross and so now you need to take that blood and apply it to the house of your heart through repentance and faith.

You need to pray - right now and say: “Lord I am a sinner! I deserve death! The angel of death should come for me! I have rebelled! I have hurt others! I stand condemned! But I take shelter now under the blood of the Lamb! Forgive me through the shed blood of Jesus! Have mercy on me God! Be my rock! By my refuge! Give me shelter!”

That’s where it begins.

But it doesn't end there. Because truly forgiven people follow. Jesus said that, he said:

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46 ESV)

To be in a real saving relationship with Jesus is to follow him. It is to tuck yourself right in behind him – he's your mother bird now – clothed in heavenly armour. You are safe – when you are in him and behind him.

So - trust him! Obey him! Follow him! And he will guard you in all your ways.

THAT is a promise my dear friends – available to every single person watching out there – right now here today. That might be the best promise in all the Bible – and with the Psalmist, I heartily commend it to your care and keeping.

Thanks be to God. Let me pray for us.