

Sermon for the Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Proper 24) (20 October 2024)

God Is Our Refuge and Shelter (Psalm 91:9–16)

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Psalm 91 sits in stark contrast to our other readings. The other readings talk about the suffering of Jesus that he went through for our sake, and also make reference to the suffering of believers who follow in Jesus' footsteps. Then, we have Psalm 91, which mentions things like:

- “No evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent.”
- “They will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”
- “You will tread on the lion and the adder.”
- “I will rescue him and honor him.”

These are beautiful words and comforting promises from God. But is that what life always looks like? Is this how your life has always looked? I don't think so. What about Jesus? When Jesus hung upon the cross, giving his life as a ransom for many, in the words of our Gospel reading, was he protected from evil and suffering? Of course not.

We believe that the Bible in its entirety is inerrant—that is, without error—and that God himself is its ultimate author. So, what did God mean, when he inspired the author of this psalm to write these promises of protection and love, when the reality of life seems to look far bleaker? How can God say, “With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation” (Psalm 91:15), when Jesus says, “whoever would save his will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it” (Mark 8:35)?

The answer is simple. When we read this psalm, the proper way of reading it is by looking at it through a Christ-centred lens. That is, by looking at it in

light of who Jesus is, and what Jesus has done for us. This reminds us of the time when Satan actually quoted part of this psalm to Jesus, while testing Jesus in the wilderness. Satan said if you're the Son of God, throw yourself off the temple, because it's written God's angels will protect you, and bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.

It's interesting that because of this, many have come to see Psalm 91 as a Messianic psalm. A psalm that's about not just us, not just believers, but also Jesus himself, who unlike us, perfectly made the Lord God his refuge and dwelling place. And that's true, it is also about Jesus, the Son of God. Well, Satan wasn't wrong about the quote. The psalm clearly does say that God's angels will protect us. But what was Jesus' response?

"Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" This at least helps us understand one thing about this psalm. We can't use God's promises of protection as an excuse to willfully put ourselves in danger or live recklessly. If we do that, we're not putting our faith in God, we're just being prideful. Pride assumes that God somehow owes us something, whereas actually God doesn't owe us anything. We're the ones who owe him everything, because he's our Creator and Redeemer. The bottom line is we can't do foolish things, and expect God to reward us for it.

But of course, there are times when we don't do anything foolish, and yet we still suffer. In fact, sometimes we suffer precisely because we do the right thing. And this is where it's essential to view this psalm through the lens of Christ. Let's take a look again at what the reading from Isaiah says:

"Surely he [Jesus] has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted." (Isaiah 53:4)

The people thought that God was punishing Jesus, by letting him die on the cross, but was that actually true? Of course not! In fact, our Hebrews reading talks about Jesus' perfect sinlessness, for we're told that Jesus' tearful prayers were heard by God because of Jesus' reverence (Hebrews

5:7). It was *precisely because* of Jesus' love and faithfulness towards God the Father and us, that he was crucified and suffered terribly.

For non-believers, it might have looked like the Father was punishing Jesus, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. As Peter says in his first epistle:

“When [Jesus] was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 4:23–24)

That's our wounds. Our wounds from sinning against God, each other, and even ourselves. Jesus bore even our sins on the cross to completely heal us. To purchase us from slavery to our sins by his blood, and to bring us into a loving relationship with him, and his Father in Heaven, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

To be sure, Jesus could have summoned an entire legion of angels to save him from death, as Psalm 91 says, and as he himself said when he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. But Jesus' response to suffering was not to give up, even though it was hard. Peter tells us that Jesus' response was to entrust himself to him who judges justly. In other words, Jesus did what Psalm 91 says believers should do:

“Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place— the Most High, who is my refuge— no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent.” (Psalm 91:9–10)

The Hebrew word for “dwelling place” refers to a “refuge or shelter”. Jesus made the Father his shelter and refuge. Not just when he suffered, but throughout his entire ministry and life. Jesus perfectly entrusted his soul to God the Father, knowing that after his suffering, would come the joy of the

resurrection, and the salvation of all who would trust in him as their only Saviour.

You see, God did deliver Jesus from trouble. God did send his holy angels to help him. It just wasn't in the way that the world thought it would be. When Jesus was suffering in the garden, so much that he began to bleed from anxiety, knowing that he would bear the sins of the whole world, we're told in Luke's Gospel, that an angel was there with him, strengthening him. Not to send him away from suffering. But to help Jesus as he suffered.

Fellow Christians, this is exactly the protection that Psalm 91 offers each of us. God says in verse 15 says, "When they [the ones who trust in me] call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble; I will rescue them and honour them." Psalm 91 does not say that God won't let us suffer; but rather, God promises to be with us in trouble, in the midst of our suffering. God will never leave or forsake us at any moment in our lives, because by grace, he has called us to be his holy people in Christ, temples of the Holy Spirit.

There may be times when we don't feel this. Our Psalm says, "You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot." Our brother in Christ, the Prophet Daniel, faced some lions. The pagan King Nebuchadnezzar hurled him into a lion's den, because he made a foolish vow that he didn't want to take back. Daniel did the right thing; he did not worship King Nebuchadnezzar, but stayed faithful to the God of Israel, and for this reason, he was thrown to be eaten alive by lions. Just think of how he would have felt for a minute. I've worshipped God my whole life, I've made sacrifices to the Lord. I've served him in a pagan society faithfully, at the risk of my own life. And this is where it led me? But we're told that God his sent his holy angel to shut the mouths of the lions, and Daniel walked out the next day safe.

Daniel would have been terrified in that den, yet the Lord did not leave him. The Lord also never leaves us in our tragedies and sufferings. In fact, the protection God gives us as we suffer is the most precious and important

protection anyone could ever receive. God preserves our faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, the Apostle Paul is so bold as to say that nothing in all of creation can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Saviour. Jesus himself went before us, and crushed the head of the serpent, on the cross. Satan, and all the evil of the world, are powerless to harm you.

So, in light of this, continue to remain in Jesus, the True Vine, and you will never lose the salvation that you have in Jesus. Continue to remain in Jesus, so that this Psalm can become your prayer. So that just as Jesus trusted in his heavenly Father, and was delivered from suffering in his almighty resurrection, you too may trust in your heavenly Father and be raised with Christ Jesus. You not only have God's holy angels watching over you at this very moment, guarding your ways in Jesus Christ, but you have God himself as your refuge and shelter. Your most powerful ally in all situations of life, and the life that endures beyond the grave. Amen.