

Promises, Discernment, Comfort

Savior in the Shadows

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Bible Text: Psalm 91:1-16
Preached on: Sunday, September 13, 2017

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Would you take your Bibles and let's turn to the Old Testament book of Psalms, Psalm 91. It's page 497 in your pew Bible if you are needing to use one of those. Please turn and follow along as I read Psalm 91, beginning at verse 1. I'll read through the end of verse 16.

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." 3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. 4 He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. 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. 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. 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."

This is God's word. Let's pray.

Father, we have just read from your word a Psalm that we need help in understanding. We could certainly misunderstand this Psalm, we could certainly misinterpret it as many have, so we ask that you would help us today, help us to find comfort in these words not with a fragile foolish peace but a wise peace. And may we know that for those who truly trust in you, you will indeed keep us safe. We pray that in Christ's name. Amen.

I want you to see a picture, if you would in the overhead. It's an article from Life Magazine in 1956 and I know that you can't read it, I'm not asking you to read it, I'm just wanting to tell you a little bit what this is about. Notice the headline "The News is Tragic and Danger Lingers After Hasty Burial." This was the story in 1956 of five Christian missionaries who were murdered at the hands of the Auca Indians, the very people the missionaries were attempting to reach with the Gospel of Christ. You'll notice in the picture on the left is the actual scene from the plane. There on the beach, that location, five bodies run through with spears. On the right hand side is a picture of Jim Elliott caught up in some of the debris in the river. And you'll see a picture now of the five missionaries: Roger Youderian, Pete Fleming, Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully.

This was a big story in 1956 and it was one of those occasions that really put steam and a recharging of the modern mission movement but my point in showing you this story and just reminding you about it is to ask this question: how did Psalm 91 apply to these missionaries? Words like "no evil shall be allowed to befall you"? Now, I want you to think, I want you to think with me this morning: how did Psalm 91 apply to these five missionaries? You see, this Psalm raises some very serious questions. If you are a serious Christian, there are certain passages, many passages in fact in the Scripture, that if you're a serious Christian you are going to look at and say, "God, help me to understand this," because this Psalm is saying something to us. What is it?

The first question I would ask is: is this Psalm promising or guaranteeing that the person who trusts in the Lord can avoid trouble in this life? Or to put it another way: is this Psalm promising that nothing bad will happen to those who trust in the Lord? Is that what this Psalm is promising? Let me give you a little tip: some say yes. Some actually say yes. Some actually say that this Psalm is promising that nothing bad will happen to those who trust in the Lord. Is that what it's saying? It certainly seems to, doesn't it? I mean, I've heard it preached that way many years ago. I heard it preached that way many times but let's say you're sitting here and you say, "Well, I don't know that it means that." So if it doesn't, though, if it doesn't mean that, then what does it promise? I mean, what's it here for? What comfort does Psalm 91 bring us?

So here's what I'd like to do today, I would like for us to look at Psalm 91 and ask some questions. We'll ask questions like: what are the promises? In other words, what's being promised here? It's pretty clear, I think, what's being promised here and we'll see the beauty of it. Okay, the beauty of the promises but secondly we'll ask: how are we to understand these promises? And thirdly we'll ask: what comfort are we to receive from these promises.

So first: what are the promises? Look at verse 1, the very first verse, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty." Now "He," that would represent the person who trusts in the Lord because in verse 2 it says, "I will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'" So here's a person writing, praising to God, worshiping to God, and saying, "The person who trusts in the Lord, who dwells in the shelter." Some translations actually say "the secret place." I did

some searching over the last few weeks and in Jewish thought, this phrase "secret place or shelter" refers to the temple. In other words, it's speaking here of the person who consistently worships God, the God who is enshrined in the temple. Now this is Old Testament thought that verse 1 and 2 is speaking about the person who regularly, consistently, faithfully worships God, puts their trust in God, the God who is enshrined in the temple. There is the promise that God will extend his shadow over the one who places themselves under his care.

Now, that's beautiful imagery. If you were to have lived in the Middle East, let's say you lived where there was very little shade and there was hot sun and you would treasure a place that you could find a shadow, an area where there would be shade, and so the Psalmist is using that kind of imagery in that kind of area of the world to say that when you place yourself under the care of God, when you trust God, it will be like being under the shadow of his wings.

Then in verse 3, we'll see another part of the promise. In verse 3, notice it says, "For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler." Now, again, imagery is being used here, the imagery of an animal that's vulnerable to a hunter. There is a trap laid, a snare laid to catch the animal, and God is actually using that imagery to say, "Look, the promise is that I'll deliver you from the snare of the fowler." That's some bold promise. But then it gets particularly powerful in verses 9 through 10 and I want you to look at this very carefully, "Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place," because you worship him, because you trust him, "the Most High, who is my refuge," look at this, "no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent."

Now, I hope you're paying attention to this. This Psalm certainly seems to be promising that nothing bad will happen to those who put their trust in the Lord. So how are we to understand these promises because I think if you're paying any attention right now, you're thinking, "Hm, now wait a minute. I know some people who trust in the Lord, in fact, I trust in the Lord but I've had some bad things happen." So already if you're listening there is a little bit of tension going on, okay? And that's good, that's good because you're paying attention and you're hearing what the word of God is saying but yet there is also what you've experienced, okay?

So let's ask: how are we to understand these promises? Is this Psalm promising that nothing bad will happen to those who trust in the Lord? Again, some say yes. Some say, "Preacher, don't we have benefits as God's children? Aren't we the King's kids?" I've got a AAA membership. I pay for that membership every year and there are benefits to that membership, right? And so sometimes don't we treat God kind of like a AAA membership? "Look, I pay my tithe. I worship you. I serve you. I do all these things for you." Now we never say this in the company of other people but sometimes down deep we're thinking, "God, I've done all this for you, I've done all these things for you, I've got some benefits coming my way. Where are they?" And so some would say Psalm 91 is the treasure chest of benefits. "Here's what God has promised and listen, listen close, if you really, really, really, really, really trust God, you can have these promises."

We've heard this, haven't we? Because, you see, the reverse is this: if something bad does happen to you, you must not be trusting God. Now, don't look at me like I believe this. I'm just telling you this is what some people believe. This is what some circles of the Christian church teach. You see, in other words, if you really, really, really, really, really, really trust the Lord, really, then you can have these promises. But conversely, if something bad happens to you, it's just simply because you really, really, really, really, really didn't trust the Lord.

And we've heard this kind of stuff before, haven't we? Take Job's friends. Job's friends came and they said, "Job, you know, all this bad stuff has happened to you because you really haven't trusted the Lord." But thank God, God answers that issue at the end of the book of Job to say, "You know," speaking to Job's friends, "you really haven't spoken truly of me." In other words, God knocks that ball right out of the park.

So how are we to understand the promises of Psalm 91 because they are pretty bold promises and they are beautiful promises but how are we to understand them? And I want to suggest to you three things. The first one is this: human experience. In other words, how does human experience stack up against these promises? So just think with me now, okay? If we assume that Psalm 91 is promising that nothing bad will happen to those who trust in the Lord, what happens when you lay Psalm 91 beside the experience of Joseph? You remember Joseph, right? Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. I would consider that something bad happening, right? He was thrown into a pit, left for dead, and sold into slavery. Then he kind of catches a break and he's working at Potiphar's house and then he gets falsely accused of raping Potiphar's wife and gets thrown into prison. I think I would consider that something bad happened, right? So what happens if you put Psalm 91 up against the experience of Joseph's life? We've got some tension going on, right? How about the life of Job. How about laying Psalm 91 beside Job? Remember what it said of Job? In the very beginning of the book of Job it says Job was a man who feared God and turned away from evil. We're talking about someone who loved God, who ordered their life around God's ways and his principles and shunned evil, sought good, turned from evil, yet I think you remember with me Job had some pretty bad things happen to him, didn't he?

So what happens when you take Psalm 91 and you put it against the experience of Joseph or against the experience of Job? Or how about taking Psalm 91 and stacking it up against the experience of Jesus? You see, if Psalm 91 is promising that nothing bad will happen to those who trust in the Lord and that the reverse is if something bad does happen to you, you must not be trusting God, then what happens when you lay Psalm 91 against the experience of Jesus, the most godly person who ever walked the face of the earth, one who trusted the Father completely? I think you would agree Jesus certainly had some bad things happen to him.

Let's also take the experience of the five missionaries. You see, if we believe that Psalm 91 is promising that nothing bad will happen, how do you take Psalm 91 and stack it up against the martyrdom of these missionaries? And interestingly, Elizabeth Elliot, the wife of Jim Elliot, wrote a book and you'll see the title of the book on the overhead, it's

entitled "Shadow of the Almighty." Where did that come from? Psalm 91, the very first verse of Psalm 91, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty." Here's a woman who has lost her husband, a spear run through him of the very people he was trying to reach for the Gospel, and she writes a book about his life, entitles it "Shadow of the Almighty." When she was asked why, here's what she said, "The world called it a nightmare of tragedy. The world did not recognize the truth of the second clause in my husband's credo," Jim Elliot wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

So there is human experience. Take Psalm 91 and put it against human experience and we've got some tension going on but then, I want you to consider now Satan and how he uses Psalm 91. Let me put it this way: Satan would be delighted if you believed that Psalm 91 is promising that nothing bad will ever happen to those who trust in the Lord. Satan wants you to believe that. Satan wants me to believe that. He wants us to look at Psalm 91 and go, "If I really, really, really, really, really trust in God, nothing bad is going to happen to me." Satan wants you to believe that.

Now how do I know that? Why would I say that? Because you know, most of you know, I think, that Satan quotes from this very Psalm when he is tempting Jesus in the wilderness. Look at verse 11, "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." Now get the imagery here, the words of Psalm 91: there are angels, and we know there are, they are ministers to the saints of God, and there is a promise here, "he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." In other words, if you're getting ready to strike your foot against a stone, they'll just pick you up. No bad. No bad stuff is going to happen.

Satan quotes that very verse to Jesus in Matthew 4. Let's look at it. "Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple." Isn't that interesting? Psalm 91, secret place; the Jews thought of about it as being the temple. Satan takes Jesus to the temple, "and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone."'" Let's hold that verse right there for just a moment. Get the picture. Get the picture. Jesus is being tempted by Satan and Satan takes him to the temple as if to say, "Surely if God will rescue anybody, it will be you and he'll do it at the temple where he is said to dwell." In other words, perfect place, this is a perfect place to just see if God's promises are real. Let's just test this. Let's just see. In other words, "Go ahead and jump. Go ahead and jump, he'll protect you."

But he also said, "If you are the Son of God." If you are the Son of God. That's important because just a few verses prior to this in Matthew 3, Jesus is being baptized. The Bible says that the Spirit, the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove upon him and then a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Jesus is standing in the water, gets this heavenly affirmation, "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased." Now Satan comes along and says, "You know, if you're the Son of God, if you

are the Son of God, just go ahead and jump because Psalm 91 makes some pretty big promises that nothing bad will happen to you if you trust in God." But for Jesus to jump – listen – for Jesus to jump would not amount to trusting God but to testing God. Jesus knows that because he says, listen to his response, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" You see, for Jesus to do this, for Jesus to say, "Oh, okay, I'll show you I'm the Son of God. I'll show you that Psalm 91 is a promise that nothing bad will happen. I'll show you." For Jesus to jump would be to artificially create a test. In other words, it would be Jesus saying this, "I don't really think you will take care of me as your Son so to be sure, I'm going to place you in a situation where you must take care of me now and on my terms." And Jesus refuses to do that. Jesus said, "No." First off, he said, "I refuse to do that," and he's also implicitly saying, "That's not how you interpret Psalm 91." That's how the devil misappropriates or misapplies Psalm 91, he would have you and I to do it too, but Jesus is basically saying here, "That's not how we interpret Psalm 91."

So how do we deal with these promises? Well, there is human experience; there is how Satan misinterprets; then also there is simply this: Scripture. Scripture compared to Scripture. We're asking this: does Psalm 91 teach, does it promise that nothing bad will happen to those who trust in the Lord? Now, I think most of you realize bad stuff does happen to people who trust in the Lord but what do we do with these promises? How are we supposed to understand them? Well, look, look, look, we can see on the overhead, look at this: Psalm 44:22. In the Old Testament, the Psalmist said this, "Yet for your sake," God for your sake, "we are killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." In other words, "We, your people, we, your people, are often killed for being your people. We, your people, are often killed because we have identified with you. We are your people. We are kind of like sheep that are just led to the slaughter."

Now listen, in the New Testament Paul reaches back and quotes Psalm 44:22 but notice what he says. "As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long, we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.'" Paul actually says, "It's not we might be killed. It's possible but unlikely. No, we are being killed." Compare that now, lay that beside Psalm 91. Then take Hebrews 11, notice this, this is speaking of the people of faith, "What more shall we say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets--who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire," look at this, "escaped the edge of the sword." People of faith, they really, really, really, really, really believed God, they trusted God, they were people of faith and they escaped the edge of the sword but just two verses later, notice this, "Others," in other words, other people of faith, other people who trusted God, "suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two," look, "they were killed with the sword." Are you hearing what this is saying? There are some who trusted God and they escaped. There were some who trusted God and they were killed with the sword.

Then notice this passage in Luke's Gospel, Jesus speaking to his disciples, "You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends and some of you they

will put to death." Two verses later, look what he said, "But not a hair of your head will perish." Oh, I hope you're going, "Hm, what in the world? What in the world does that mean?" You're going to die. You're going to die but not a hair of your head will perish. Well, we'll come back to that in just a second.

But would you also look at our text in Psalm 91 and there is a line in this chapter that if you miss it, you know, you're just going to get all messed up, but if you get it, it will help balance this chapter out. Look at Psalm 91:15, "When he calls to me, I will answer him," look at the next phrase, "I will be with him in trouble." Sometimes we miss that forest for the trees of verses 9 and 10, "no evil will come," and we go, "Wait a minute, that's a great promise but... No bad is going to happen, it's this great promise but how do we....?" Well, verse 15, "I will be with him in trouble." In other words, Psalm 91 is not saying we're going to have a trouble-free life because we trust in God, right?

So how are we to understand this passage? I think we can look at human experience; we can look at how Satan misapplies it; and thirdly, we can look at Scripture and compare Scripture; but finally, it really comes down to this: what comfort are we to receive from Psalm 91? In other words, if it doesn't promise us that those who trust in the Lord nothing bad will happen to them, if it doesn't promise that, then what is it promising? Psalm 91 means two things about the suffering of God's people. Two things, listen: one is that God often amazingly delivers his saints physically when others around them are falling. Again, we look to the Scriptures and what do we see? Shadrach, Mischach and Abednego, what happened? God delivers them. Daniel in the lions' den, what happens? God keeps him safe, rescues him. Peter, Peter is in prison and an angel comes and unlocks the door and lets him out. Psalm 91 means that God often amazingly delivers his saints physically when others around them are falling but it also teaches that God often allows for his children to suffer but forbids that the suffering hurts them in the end.

Look at Luke 21 again and we'll try to tie this together. What does all this mean? When Jesus tells his disciples, "Your parents, your brothers, your relatives, your friends, some of them are going to deliver you up and you're going to be put to death," let me translate that verse for you. It simply means this: really bad things can happen to followers of Jesus. Really bad things can happen to followers of Jesus, and by the way, while we're stuck in America, while we've got our heads stuck in media, we've got our heads stuck in the moral revolution, we've got our heads stuck in everything, around the world God's people are dying for the sake of Christ. So this is true: some of them will be put to death but Jesus has the audacity to say, "Not a hair of your head will perish." What in the world is that all about? And I think if you're thinking with me, if you're tracking with me and you're thinking, "Wait a minute. Okay, Psalm 91 is not promising that nothing bad will happen to those who trust the Lord, in other words, people can trust the Lord and still die, still be sick, but Jesus says not a hair of your head will perish" you're beginning to think, "Hm, I bet, I bet that there's something greater than this life. There is something bigger than my life right now."

What does Jesus mean when "not a hair of your head will perish"? Well, let me give you the words of Charles Spurgeon. Charles Spurgeon was the 19th century Billy Graham, you

might say. Here's what he said. He's describing the meaning of Psalm 91. Here's what he said. Listen closely, "It is impossible that any ill should happen to the man or woman who is beloved of the Lord." Now at first, that sentence sounds like he's saying, "Nothing bad is going to happen to you," but let me read the sentence again and then let me continue, "It is impossible that any ill should happen to the man or woman who is beloved of the Lord. The most crushing calamities can only shorten his journey and hasten him to his reward. Ill to him is not ill but only good in a mysterious form. Losses enrich him, sickness is his medicine, reproach is his honor, death is his gain. No evil in the strict sense of the word can happen to him, for everything is overruled for good. Happy is he who is in such a case. He is secure where others are in peril, he lives where others die."

What is that saying? Let me try to simplify it with this. Beloved, as we abide in the shadow of the Almighty, as we worship God, as we know God through Jesus Christ, his Son, we will suffer. We will suffer. We will face various trials but as we suffer, if we hold onto God, in doing so we are actually gaining our life. If in your suffering as you trust God, you are holding onto God, you are clinging to him, in doing so you are gaining your life. Jim Elliot said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep." You can't keep your stuff. You can't keep your job. You can't keep your loved ones. If you try to keep those things that can be stripped away from you in a moment, you'll fall. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "Don't build your house, your life, upon the things of this world." The storms will come. The fall will be great. Only the person who builds their life upon the Rock, which is to hear Jesus' words and do them.

What is Psalm 91 saying? It is saying this: the you that is you that will last forever, God will keep safe. The you that will last forever, the you that's going to outlast all the evil of this world, the you that's going to outlast all the craziness of the moral revolution that's going nuts, the you that's going to outlast all the martyrdom, all of ISIS, all of the stuff that seems to get down in us and cause us to be afraid, the you that's going to outlast all of it, God will keep safe. That is what Jesus means when he says not a hair of your head is going to perish. The you that's you, the you that's going to last forever, the you that's been redeemed, the you that's built on the Rock, is going to outlast it all and God will keep you safe.

Let me close with the words that we began with today. The Psalmist said, "Nevertheless, I am continually with you." How can we say that? How can we say, "God, I'm continually with you"? It's because he said, "I'll never leave you. I'll never forsake you. I'll be with you even until the end. Nevertheless, I am continually with you. You hold my right hand." When you go this week, when you go this week back to your job, back to your stuff, and back to maybe your troubles, right back into it, you go right back into it, know this: he is holding your right hand. He will not let you go. "You guide me with your counsel," listen, "and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail," yes, put that down, they will, they will. Our flesh and our heart will fail, "but," listen, "God is the strength of my heart, the Rock of my heart, and my portion forever." The you that will last forever, God will keep safe.

Let's pray.