

Psalms of Wisdom

Psalm 91

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I

When I was a small boy, our family lived in a small town in the oil patch of southeastern New Mexico. While our little town didn't have any skyscrapers or modern high-rise buildings, it did have an enormous oil refinery, and the pipes and lights of the refinery could be seen from dozens of miles away. Not only was the refinery an impressive sight for our small little town, it was an integral part of our community, and many of the parents of my friends worked there.

One afternoon, a thunderstorm blew through town, and a bolt of lightning struck one of the refinery towers, which started a fire. The refinery crew and the town fire department responded quickly, but the fire was growing, and they needed more help. Fire trucks from towns dozens of miles away came racing in from every direction. Meanwhile, a sinister rope of thick black smoke hung over the whole town.

At first, all of this seemed very exciting to my young eyes. But then I saw the expression on my parents' faces, and on the faces of the other grownups who made up my little community. I had never known all the grownups in my life to look so anxious all at the same time.

And that was the moment I became aware that despite all of our best efforts, despite all of our technological innovations and feats of engineering, the world can be a very dangerous place.

Fortunately, the fire was brought under control, and despite the great danger, no one was injured, and life returned to normal. But to this day, I can still see the expressions on the faces of the grownups, and I can still remember the chill it sent up my spine.

II

At some point in our lives, we all have that experience of coming to the realization that that the world, as beautiful as it can be, is also a very dangerous place. At some point in our lives, we become aware that as advanced as we may be, as cautious as we may be, this life comes with a certain level of risk. For some of us, that realization comes like a lighting bolt from a summer storm. For others, maybe it happens more

gradually, but to be human is to know that life is fragile and often uncertain and can change on a dime.

As people of faith, we make some theological claims about who God is, about who we are, and about what we have to do with each other. We claim that God is sovereign and mighty, slow to anger and abiding in steadfast love, showing mercy to the thousandth generation to those who love God.

So then how do we square that idea, that God is powerful and loving, with the reality that life is uncertain and often full of danger and risk? These are the kinds of questions that draw our attention to Psalm 91.

III

This summer, we've been preaching our way through the Book of Psalms, which as we've said all along, isn't a book at all in the classical sense, but rather an anthology, a collection of 150 poems and prayers and hymns that were gathered over a long period of time in biblical history. Just like in any anthology or collection, there are different genres and moods represented in the work. Some psalms are expressions of deep lament, like Psalm 88, which we explored last week. Some psalms are expressions of deep gratitude, like Psalm 100, which we will explore next week. But the Psalm before us today, Psalm 91, is a wisdom psalm.

My father used to work in the oil and gas industry, and when you work around combustible petrochemicals, there is obviously a great deal of risk. And so consequently, the safety manuals that give instructions about how to appropriately and safely operate oil and gas equipment are rather extensive. I remember Dad once telling me that the safety manuals were written in blood.

When I looked at him quizzically, he explained that of course they weren't literally written in blood, but that much of the material found within the manuals was a direct result of some prior accident or mishap. The safety manuals represented the collected wisdom that the industry had learned over a long period of time and at great cost in terms of human suffering, and that wisdom was preserved and handed onto future generations in the safety manuals.

In some sense, that's what biblical wisdom literature is. It's collected wisdom from our forbearers, preserved and passed down to us in hopes that we might avoid some of the painful and costly mistakes made by previous generations. And Psalm 91 is classified as a wisdom psalm. So with that background in mind, let's listen for a Word from God from Psalm 91.

1 You who live in the shelter of the Most High,

- who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
2 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,
or the arrow that flies by day,
6 or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or 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 punishment of the wicked.*
- 9 Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,
10 no evil shall befall you,
no scourge 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,*

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

*13 You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.*

14 Those who love me, I will deliver;

I will protect those who know my name.

15 When they call to me, I will answer them;

I will be with them in trouble,

I will rescue them and honor them.

16 With long life I will satisfy them,

and show them my salvation.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

At first glance, it sounds like those who believe and trust in God are exempt from all the dangers and pitfalls of life, as if God grants those who trust and believe in him some sort of superhero-like invincibility or an irrevocable get-out-of-danger-and-trouble-free card.

In fact, that's precisely the argument that Satan tried to use with Jesus at the end of Jesus' forty days of temptation in the wilderness. Satan took Jesus up to the very highest point of the Temple and dared Jesus to jump, and quoted Jesus this very Psalm, chapter and verse.

But Jesus said, in Ryan's revised translation of Matthew's gospel, "Don't be ridiculous, Satan, that's not how any of this works. Don't play games with the Lord God."

And even the briefest of glimpses at the whole biblical story and the history of the church tells us that picking up our crosses and following Christ in the world sometimes leads disciples into *more* danger and trouble, especially when following the will of Christ puts us at odds with the fallen powers and principalities of this world.

IV

So what is the wisdom found in Psalm 91?

My friend, it's simply this. Your ultimate security, your ultimate destiny, your ultimate goodness, cannot be found anywhere other than the God revealed to us in Scripture, the God made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is a season of great fear and upheaval and uncertainty in our world. Every person I know has the same look my parents and the grownups in my town had that day that the refinery caught fire. Everyone I know is concerned about their security, health, and well-being of their families, their communities, their nation, and themselves.

And when we're frightened, we tend to look for things that promise to make us more secure, to make us feel better about the future. Or we tend to look for things to distract us, to make us numb to all the fear and anxiety that is all around us. Some of those coping mechanisms are relatively harmless. Some, however, can become dangerous and destructive themselves.

But here is the wisdom of Psalm 91, my friend. Life comes with inherent risks, but your ultimate security, and the ultimate security of everyone you know and love, is not guaranteed by any elected official or candidate running for office.

The wisdom of Psalm 91 is that your ultimate security, and the ultimate security of everyone you know and love, is not guaranteed by your accumulated assets.

The wisdom of Psalm 91 is that your ultimate security, and the ultimate security of everyone you know and love, is not guaranteed by your own abilities or power, or the abilities and power of any human organization.

Candidates and elected officials come and go. Net worth rises and falls. Your own abilities and power and the power of human institutions is limited and finite. Putting your ultimate trust and hope in things that are limited and finite is folly.

The wisdom of Psalm 91, my friend, is that your ultimate security rests in the one true God, the God made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

That's where your ultimate security is to be found, my friend, even as a deadly pestilence called COVID-19 rages all around us. That's where your ultimate security is to be found, even as an election draws near and poisonous arrows fly through the airwaves and fill our social media feeds. That's where your ultimate security is to be found, even as the fabric of our union strains and frays under the stress of systemic racism and justice delayed and denied.

My friend, you are loved beyond all imagination, not because of anything you have done or not done, not because of anything you have said or not said, not because you've received the sacraments or said the sinner's prayer or because you spit in the wind and turned around three times. You are loved beyond all imagination because you

belong to God, and there is nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation that can separate you from the love of God poured out for you in Christ Jesus our Lord.

My friend, you are loved beyond all imagination, not because of who you are, not because of where you come from, not because of anything that has to do with your own power and skill and ability. You are loved and cherished and your ultimate future is secure because of what God has done for you in Jesus Christ.

V

And so as we go out into this world that is so very frightening in these days, as we wrestle with vital decisions that just a few months ago we took for granted, as we learn to be the church in ways we've never previously imagined, let us go remembering who and whose we are.

Let us go remembering that being disciples of Christ does not exempt us from risk, nor does it always deliver us from good trouble. So let us be good stewards of our bodies – let us eat right and exercise and wear our seatbelts. Let us take heed of the advice of experts and be wise and prudent students of science and discerning consumers of information.

And let us go proclaiming that our ultimate security is not dependent on what happens on November 3, or on whether or when a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available, or on the strength and ability of any human organization. Our ultimate security comes from the Most High God, who promises, “When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.