

“Dwelling in High Places”

Psalm 91

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When I finally get home following our picnic, I'll change my clothes and head for Chautauqua in southwestern NY where I serve on the board of an organization which provides low-cost housing for people wanting to attend. I first heard about Chautauqua—an historic religious, cultural and educational institution located along the shores of Lake Chautauqua—while pastoring almost 40 years ago and I knew AT ONCE that I had to go and see it for myself; I've been attending every year since. Well, this morning, I want to share with you about the very first time I visited and how I discovered a truth which has since served as a guide for my life and ministry all these years.

It all started one evening when I went to the local theater there which was then showing the movie “A Trip to Bountiful” starring Geraldine Page as the aging dowager, Mrs. Watts. After fifteen years living with her domineering son and daughter-in-law, she can no longer endure their suffocating attention; they think they are showing love by taking charge of her every moment and making every decision for her. On the other hand, this proud and once independent woman hates being treated as though she were a child or helpless invalid. To reclaim some of her freedom and dignity, she hatches a plan to escape from them and head back to the ramshackle house and simple lifestyle she had enjoyed as a child in Bountiful, Texas. If she could return just one last time and relive the memories of her youth, she would be at peace with herself. However, unbeknownst to her, not just the house but the ENTIRE COMMUNITY no longer exists.

One day, after her son and daughter-in-law leave for work, she packs her bag and with her Social Security check safely tucked away in her brassiere, she begins her trip back to Bountiful. While on the bus, she meets a young newlywed who is going home to be with her family- it's the aftermath of the Second World War and her soldier husband has just been shipped overseas. Missing him so much, she begins to cry, not knowing how long it will be before she'll see him again. Taking her hand, Mrs. Watts begins to softly sing some of her favorite hymns, calmly reassuring the young woman of God's love and care for both her and her husband. Then she starts to recite Psalm 91- a psalm which has afforded HER so much faith and strength over the years. It not only gave her the courage to escape her son and daughter-in-law but also the determination to return to the small, bucolic town of her youth: “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my Refuge and my Fortress: my God; in him will I trust.” It doesn't take long for the young bride's spirit to be recharged through the hope she is offered in that psalm. For Mrs. Watts and the young newlywed, the promise of God's care and protection affords them both the confidence to face their respective journeys with courage and with faith. When the movie ended, I immediately returned to my room to retrieve my Bible and begin scrutinizing Psalm 91 for the first time; like Mrs. Watts, I was smitten by it.

Throughout the rest of the week, I lived every waking moment with that Psalm- praying it, meditating on it, memorizing it as I went from one venue after another on the beautiful grounds of Chautauqua. I even began to view the lives of the people I met through the prism of Psalm 91. For instance, there was Mae, the cook in the house I was residing at- a person whose kindly veneer hid a great deal of pain she had suffered in her life. One evening she told me her story, how ten years previously--within the span of a single year--her husband died and her daughter-in-law and two grandchildren were killed in a terrible car accident. Then a few years after that, her other grandson and his girlfriend were killed when someone drove through a stop sign utterly demolishing the truck he was driving. I asked what it was that gave her and her family the strength they needed during those intense years of crisis and she could only attribute it to the consoling presence of God. Her husband and three grandchildren die within a few years of each other and her cry doesn't become "O wretched God that Thou art!" but "My Lord- my Refuge and my Fortress!" Hers was a testimony of great faith to me.

I met Ruth, our hostess for the week who couldn't do enough to make our week as comfortable as possible. One evening, she told me about her intelligent son--a former Cornell student and congressional aide in Washington, D.C. who over the previous decade had developed a drinking problem and now drifted from one menial job to another, trying to find himself. She also explained how her husband had almost died a few years before from a rare illness which forced him to sell his veterinary practice. However due to poor legal advice, he ended up selling it well below the fair market value and lost over \$50,000 on the sale. I asked HER what it was that had been her greatest source of hope and encouragement and she didn't hesitate to thank God for all his strength and love. You see, God had become her "dwelling place."

At a party I attended, I met Bill- a great hulk of a man who makes his living driving a moving van. When he found out that I was a minister, he couldn't wait to pull me aside to share his faith with me. His wife has polio and he has had to move her as often as he has moved other people's furniture. Nine years before, he was asked to help line up scripture lay readers at the Catholic Church he attends and that was the beginning of his love affair with the Bible and with God. His faith was about as wide and as deep as any minister's I had ever known. The joy and peace that radiated as he talked about what Jesus meant to him never left me. I asked him what was the BASIS of his profound faith and he told me that it was the knowledge that God was bigger and stronger than himself, and that by trusting God, He would help him take each step at a time. For Bill, God was his "strength, his shield and his buckler."

I then began to think of the church I then pastored in northwestern Pennsylvania and made a long list of the deep concerns they had been burdened with. Among these were sorrow over the loss of a loved one, fear about one's health, anxiety due to finances or the poor job market, children who had grown estranged from their parents, family members having to be placed in nursing homes- the list went on and on. I had to ask myself that with so MANY needs, what could I possibly say to them that could ease those fears and replace those worries with hope and peace and a new-found courage. You see, what can make ministry so frustrating is the overwhelming sense of powerlessness, of inadequacy one feels when talking to families who struggle with crushing problems whether it's unemployment or alcoholism or the death of a loved one. It can sound so hollow and so glib to say in such moments, "Jesus loves you; just

place your trust in God” as such utterances seems small consolation for problems so deep and intractable. But then you meet a Mae or a Ruth or a Bill who reminds you just how true that prescription IS- of how simple trust in God and Christ’s love are actually MORE than able to sustain one amidst life’s steepest trials and sharpest pains. It is the only reality and hope that truly matters to them.

Friends, this is indeed an extraordinary Psalm we have before us this morning. It’s been suggested that it was addressed to the nation of Israel during a crisis in her history. Psalm 90, it is said, is the plea of Israel for deliverance while it was in Babylonian exile, and Psalm 92, Israel’s thanksgiving from having been delivered from her oppressors and restored to her homeland. Psalm 91, our scripture lesson for this morning, comes between these two psalms and is the assurance that Israel will be safe amid all the calamities which will befall her. The first two verses state the theme of this psalm- that God is an absolute refuge to those who trust him. Then verses 3-13 are the words of the psalmist proclaiming the providential care of God in great detail. He thinks of every possible situation or scenario in which someone might find him or herself in trouble and in need of help, and then shows how God will respond by preserving that person from becoming overwhelmed. God will snatch you away from any traps laid for you, from natural disasters, from plagues, from terrors by night as well as the enemy by day, in war as well as in peace; God will send his angels to guard over you and you shall have the courage to withstand anything that might come your way.

But then, in verses 14-16, we have a NEW speaker. No longer is it the psalmist declaring God’s promises to his audience or the preacher making bold statements to his congregation- it is now God HIMSELF who reaffirms those promises: “Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation.” This is the most BASIC promise in all of scripture- that God is a refuge to whosoever calls upon him and it forms the cornerstone of our relationship with God. We love God because we know that God never turns a deaf ear to our prayers but always remains present to respond to our pleas. God wants us to know with complete assurance that we CAN trust him and he has to tell us so HIMSELF.

If these promises in vv. 3-13 were simply the words of the psalmist reassuring God’s people, your response might be, “Yeah, but that was well over 2500 years ago, Dave. Where is God in 2023 when I need him NOW?” And if these were merely the words of the preacher--my own--to reassure you this morning, your reaction might be, “So what else is new, Dave. The same well-worn promise you throw out week-after-week. But where was God when my little son died or I found my marriage broken up or when I had my heart attack. Talk is cheap, Dave. Words, especially from a trained speaker such as yourself, are easy to come by!”

But these are not merely the words of the psalmist nor are they simply my own but promises uttered from out of the mouth of Jehovah HIMSELF. It’s as though God is saying, “All right, my faithful psalmist, you can take a seat as you’ve been diligent in declaring my word to my people, Israel; and you too, preacher, you’ve been dedicated as well in reminding the

congregation of my promises to THEM- but both you two can sit down now. It's time for ME to take to the pulpit and remind my children myself, from out of my OWN lips."

Friends, God can't make the case any stronger or clearer- that by trusting in his presence, his enduring commitment, and his love, you will discover--just as Mrs. Watts did--that he will become your refuge, your fortress, your deliverer. He will lift you beyond all harm; he will be with you in times of great trouble; he will rescue you and bring you honor; he will satisfy you with long life and make your salvation full- and you have his very own words here in writing to base your trust upon. And even if your faith is depleted; even if you can't say like the psalmist, "My refuge and my fortress: My God; in him will I trust," if you but confess your weakness before him, that is ALL the faith God requires from you and he will do the rest.

But God's protection needs qualifying. To dwell in the secret place of the Most High and to abide under the shadow of the Almighty does not mean that those who live in fellowship with God are immune from trouble and adversity. The majority of this psalm actually consists of instance after instance of one threat or calamity after another which we, his children, have to contend with. This is because anguish and tribulation are an integral part of the human condition and they fall upon both the righteous and unrighteous alike. But the lesson to be learned is that whatever troubles overtake us, whatever pains we may be experiencing--even when we find ourselves in the throes of DEATH ITSELF--by simply looking to God in faith, he will provide us with a hope and a confidence that can never be shaken or robbed from us- EVEN AFTER WE'VE TAKEN OUR FINAL BREATH IN THIS WORLD!

General Charles Gordon, one of Britain's greatest commanders from the 19th century as well as a devout Christian, spent many years away from home and often in the midst of great battles. He wrote to his family from Gravesend in 1869, "The 91st Psalm is a mountain of strength to all believers." And thirteen years later--from Mauritius--he would write, "I dwell more or less (I wish it were more) under the shadow of the Almighty." Then on March 11th, 1884, the general penned in a letter to his sister: "Remember, our Lord did not promise success or peace in this life. He promised tribulation, so if things do not go well after the flesh, he still is faithful. He will do all in love and mercy to me. My part is to submit to his will, however dark it may be." For General Gordon, to dwell under the shadow of the Almighty never implied he would never falter or see death; it never guaranteed success in every military campaign. On the CONTRARY, within a few months of that letter to his sister, he was killed in the Battle of Khartoum. Rather, though he may be physically maimed, broken or killed, nothing would ever be able to shake his unfailing trust and confidence in his Lord; though the enemy may destroy his body, it could never kill his soul, his spirit.

The lesson here for us is that we are not to look to God to exempt us from all the trial and tribulation, nor to have him magically make them all disappear from our lives- God is neither a genie nor some kind of insurance policy guaranteeing us protection against all problems, pain and heartache and if we DO, we will surely be disappointed. The ONLY promise God EVER gives us is that when trials and tribulation DO arise--AND THEY WILL--we will never have to go through them ALONE; he promises to walk beside us and never leave our side. His commitment to not only ACCOMPANY us but through his Holy Spirit, to INHABIT us by

making our heart his home; couple this with the assurance of his everlasting and unconditional love for us and we will be MORE than equipped to handle whatever comes our way. Thus, to “dwell in the secret place of the Most High” and to “abide under the shadow of the Almighty” means that we can trust God’s Word and take confidence in the knowledge that his love and power and presence will carry us through each and every difficulty- we have his WORD on that. We can take courage in knowing that as we march through this life, abiding confidently with God, we are MORE than sufficient for whatever it might hand us.

But one last point. I am convinced that as he lay dying on that cross, Jesus looked to this psalm--Psalm 91-- MORE than any other piece of scripture. He not only knew it by heart, but I have no doubt he lived, breathed, slept, and ate with its promise of deliverance and salvation for those who trust in God- from the very beginning of his ministry until his dying gasp. Jesus came to die and to give his life as a ransom for many, but he could not have gone to that cross without the hope and assurance this particular Psalm provides. He could never have endured the persecution and rejection during his 3 ½ years of ministry; the humiliation of a mock trial; of being scourged and spat upon and ultimately crucified naked between two thieves- if he couldn’t remind himself, moment-by-moment, of God’s own pledge, made in his own words: “Because he has set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he has known my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation.” Jesus believed those words and because he trusted the one who SPOKE them, he could stake his very life upon them. Without the assurance that God was his refuge and his fortress, even while hanging from that bloody cross, he could never have uttered those final words, “It is finished. Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

This Psalm thus means all the difference to us- whether we will live a life of fear, of sorrow, of pity for the many trials that are thrust upon us, or whether we will face them calmly, confidently, and courageously. Psalm 91 assures us that in spite of the cross WE must bear- whether the cross of ill health, the loss of a loved one, broken aspirations, a spouse who doesn’t communicate with you, a child who never lives up to her potential, a parent with Parkinson’s or Alzheimers Disease- that DESPITE such burdens, to dwell in the secret place of the Most High and to abide under the shadow of the Almighty is to have God as our REFUGE and our FORTRESS. The Maes and Ruths and Bills of this world were not special cases- they are US; their pain is no different than our own. But their strength and their hope had come from the knowledge that there went one before THEM whose cross was far greater than their OWN- Jesus Christ, God’s Son. They knew that if HE could trust this Psalm and in it the words of his Father; if HE could trust its message of deliverance and salvation for all those who call upon him and rest confidently in his care--even to the point of giving up his own life--then how can THEY not trust it THEMSELVES. So, the God who raised Jesus up, and saved his soul from hell, will he not also do the same for US? Psalm 91 INDEED assures us that he will! Amen and amen.