

**Summer Psalms:
My Refuge and Fortress (Psalm 91)**

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on July 8, 2018

Introduction

- ❖ One of the challenges of being modern students of ancient Scripture is the cultural distance between us. The time and place in which these books were written is very different from what we experience today. If you're like me and you grew up in the States, you didn't grow up around castles and fortresses. Maybe if you're from Europe or Asia, it's different. But Americans aren't familiar with castles and city walls or strongholds and citadels. I think Cinderella's castle in the Magic Kingdom is pretty much all we have to go by.
 - **So when we read Psalm 91 and come across the imagery of a shelter, we tend to picture, in our minds, a storm shelter.** Something strong enough to keep out the elements but nothing too imposing. Or when we imagine a refuge, maybe we think of a log cabin out in the woods by a still lake. You go to a refuge for peace and quiet.
 - **But when the psalmist spoke of a shelter and a refuge, he was picturing a fortress.** And not just some colonial fort made of timber that enemies could easily burn down. No, we're talking about a mighty fortress, a massive castle of stone that stretches into the sky. Think Lord of the Rings. Picture Helm's Deep or Minas Tirith. Imposing structures that exude power and protection.

- ❖ **We need the right picture in our heads. Because without the right picture, it's hard to rightly interpret a psalm.** Psalms are songs that use poetic language, and that means a lot of imagery. So the psalmist has an image in his head when he penned this song. And if your image doesn't match up, then you're likely to miss some important nuances.
 - You might not grasp the severity of the danger that the psalmist is talking about. **You won't realize how powerful and imposing the LORD is in this scenario and the kind of protection he provides for those who flee to him for refuge.**

- ❖ Let me help you get the right picture. Picture a vast army of blood-thirsty enemies hot on your trail. You're all alone on horseback, traversing the countryside, going over hills and through valleys, riding like the wind, as fast as you can. You've never been more frightened in your life. They're gaining on you. They're about to catch you. It's almost over.
 - **But as you crest that last hill, you see sprawled out before you, in the valley, the capital city, the home of the Great King.** The city walls stretch high in the air, filled with towers and turrets, lined with a thousand soldiers each with bow drawn. The flag of the kingdom flies high and the gates are opened, ready for your return. That's the kind of danger you're in, and that's the kind of protection available in the LORD.

- ❖ And to be honest, that's only a meager sketch of the true danger and true protection being pictured here in Psalm 91. The reality is far greater. But it helps us get closer. When you say, with the psalmist, that the LORD is your shelter, your refuge, your hiding place (Ps. 32:7; 119:114) – **you're saying that when great danger arises, when trouble surrounds, when you feel utterly helpless and afraid, your instinct is to ride like the wind, towards the LORD, to find refuge in him.**

- ❖ Is that true for you? **Every creature has a refuge and hiding place.** Birds have thickets. Foxes have holes. When trouble rears its head, they know where to go. They go home.
 - So where do you go? Where do you run? Where is your home, your refuge? **Is it the LORD?** Look, if you're turning to other people and other things to feel safe and secure, then you're like a bird flying to a fox's hole for safety. You're like a fly turning to a spider's web for security. **Friends, you need to fly home, to run to wherever your Father dwells, to stand in his shadow, to be under his wings. That's where you'll find protection.**
- ❖ This psalm is all about that kind of protection. I want to show you three things: 1) We'll look at this psalm's staggering claim of divine protection. 2) We'll consider a very common misunderstanding about the claim of divine protection. 3) We'll talk about how this promise of divine protection is even possible and how it could apply to you.

A Claim of Divine Protection

- ❖ Let's begin by looking at the first couple of verses in this psalm and the claim of divine protection being made by the author. Now if you noticed, there's no header for this psalm telling us who wrote it. We don't know for sure who the psalmist is, but many think it's Moses because Psalm 90 right before is directly attributed to Moses. **But regardless of his identity, the psalmist is making a bold claim in vv1-2 that the LORD Almighty protects those who take refuge in him.**
 - And then in the middle verses, in vv3-8, he gives us a bunch of examples of how God protects those who hide in him. In vv9-13, he reaffirms the claim of divine protection mentioning how it sometimes comes through the ministry of angels. And lastly in vv14-16, it's as if the psalmist steps aside and the LORD speaks and addresses the reader with promises, with six "I will" promises.
- ❖ So that's a quick run-down of the psalm. Now let's look more carefully at vv1-2, "*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."*"
 - So the psalmist begins with imagery of dwelling in the shelter of the Most High God. Older translations call it his "secret place". **To hide in God's secret place is then described as being in his shadow.** And being in his shadow means you're in his presence. You must be standing right next to him. So imagine the LORD Almighty towering over you. He's standing between you and some fearsome enemy, some great trouble. And you know you are totally safe if you just hide in his shadow.
- ❖ **Or perhaps the shadow he's casting over you is related to the imagery of a mother bird with her wings spread out over her young.** That's the picture we're given in v4. Look there with me, "*He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge.*"
 - You're supposed to imagine a mother bird covering her babies with her wings. Whether it's shielding them from predators or from the scorching heat or torrential rain, she is doing what's necessary to protect them. That's what mothers do.

- ❖ In the past week, the sun and rain have been brutal for us Houstonians. We're well aware of how the sun can sap your strength, and we know by now how rain can devastate and destroy. So we can appreciate the imagery. **We can appreciate this idea of finding our rest, our safety, under the shadow and shade of God's wings.**
 - You'll find this same image repeated in multiple psalms. Psalm 17:8, "*hide me in the shadow of your wings.*" Psalm 36:7, "*The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*" Psalm 57:1, "*for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by.*" Psalm 63:7, "*for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.*"
- ❖ You can try to find safety in the arms of another. You can look for refuge in your work, in your accomplishments, in yourself, in your own intellect and ingenuity. But it's like building a house on sand. It won't withstand the storm.
 - **Take refuge in the shadow of God's wings. Let him shade you.** Let him cover you and protect you like a mama bird. The LORD is like a mama bird.
- ❖ Yes, he is a fortress. He's a castle. **But do you see what the psalmist is doing when he speaks about the shadow of God's wings?** He's rounding out your view of God and drawing him nearer. Most of the biblical metaphors for God are masculine (like king or father), or he's compared to inanimate objects conveying strength and power (like a fortress, shield, or rock).
 - **So to keep us from a misunderstanding of God – imagining him to be as impersonal as a rock or to be stern and distant like many fathers tend to be – the psalmist wants us to picture God as a mama bird who draws near to you.** Who is tender towards you. Who will not hesitate to put her life on the line to protect her children. This is the LORD and that's how he shelters and protects.
- ❖ But he's not a shelter for all. If the baby bird refuses to stay under his mama's wings and wants to set off on his own and find his own shelter, then she'll let him go. **So this claim of divine protection is not a universal right. It's only a claim that can be legitimately made by those who have chosen to stay under his wings, to hide in God, to trust in him.**
 - Friend, you can read v2 and agree with it. You can acknowledge that the LORD is a refuge and fortress. But it means very little unless you can say, from your heart, that he's *my* refuge, *my* fortress, and *my* God in whom I trust. Have you made him *yours*?
- ❖ **If so, then tell me, would the words *dwell* or *abide* appropriately describe your relationship with God?** There's a big difference between turning to God every now and then when troubles arise versus abiding in him. There's a difference between looking to the Lord for help and actually making him your dwelling place.
 - **If you want to claim this divine protection, then don't just turn to God when things go bad. Turn your life over to God.** Give yourself to him. Put your trust in him and dwell there. Abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

A Misunderstanding of Divine Protection

- ❖ Now let's look at the middle section of this psalm in vv3-13, and we'll see some very bold statements that appear to exude a lot of confidence that God won't let any harm come to those who abide in him. And that leads us to certain misunderstandings over his divine protection. This is our second point. Let's talk about a common misunderstanding of divine protection, and hopefully I can shed some light.
- ❖ **These verses seems to be teaching that if you trust in God, no one is going to hurt you.** V3 says he'll deliver from the snare of the fowler (a hunter of birds). V5 says you won't fear the terrors of the night or any attacks (arrows) by day. God will protect you from evildoers.
 - **The psalmist also claims that you won't fall victim to pestilence and disease.** Vv3, 6, and 10 all make reference to pestilence or plague. "*A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.*" (v7) That is a staggering claim.
- ❖ Now if Moses wrote this, if this is a song of Moses, then he could just be alluding to the many ways God protected his people during the ten plagues and their exodus from Egypt. That would make sense.
 - **Moses would just be reminding the Israelites of how God shielded them from the many plagues that fell on the Egyptians.** They were living in the same land, but plague killed all the livestock of the Egyptians and spared the Israelites. While thunder and hail struck the Egyptians, while pitch-black darkness surrounded them, it was sunny and clear over the camp of Israel.
- ❖ **So these middle verses are definitely a fitting description of the Exodus. But we can't just explain them away as descriptions of the past.** The future tense marks these verses. He *will* deliver you. You *will* find refuge. You *will* not fear. It *will* not come near you. You *will* tread on the lion and the adder. So how should we understand this?
 - **At first glance, it appears to be saying that if you trust God and hide in him, nothing bad will happen to you.** Others may experience trouble and hardship, even disease and violence, but you'll be fine. You'll be protected. And on the flip side, if bad things are still happening to you, then it must be because you're not trusting in God enough. You're not hiding enough. You're not abiding enough. It's on you.
 - Is that how we should interpret these verses? **I think not, and there are two good reasons why that's a misunderstanding of divine protection.**
- ❖ **First, you have to remember that, in the Bible, the Psalms fit under the category of wisdom literature.** That means you'll often come across verses in the Psalms or in Proverbs or Ecclesiastes that might express a general truism – a wise saying that generally holds true. But if taken by itself, if treated as an immutable law of nature or promise of God, then that verse could be misinterpreted and misapplied to give promises it never intended to make.

- ❖ When v10 says “*no evil shall be allowed to befall you*” – is that intended to be an immutable promise of God for those who trust in him as their refuge? You might be tempted to think that. That God won’t allow bad things to happen to his children.
 - **But that’s when you need to turn to another book in the same category of wisdom literature to get a more balanced view.** If you’ve ever read the book of Job, you know it’s about a righteous man who experiences a host of disasters. A lot of evil is allowed to befall him. **All the things Psalm 91 seems to say won’t happen to you if you trust God – happened to Job.**

- ❖ Now all that takes place in the first two chapters of Job. **In the remaining forty chapters, Job is in dialogue with three “friends” who keep telling him that God won’t allow bad things to happen to those who trust him, who turn to him for refuge.** “So Job, you must be doing something wrong. Repent of your sins, brother. You’re not being faithful in some way, somehow.”
 - But then in the very last chapter, the LORD speaks up and rebukes the three friends for speaking falsely. He says that in chapter 42:7, “*My anger burns against you . . . for you have not spoken of me what is right.*” So this is one good reason why we shouldn’t read Psalm 91 as saying bad things won’t happen if you trust God, and if they do happen, it’s because you didn’t trust God enough. **That’s how Job’s friends would’ve read Psalm 91, and the LORD himself says they’re wrong.**

- ❖ But there’s a second reason why we shouldn’t read this psalm that way. **Not only because it’s how Job’s friends would’ve read it, but because it’s how Satan reads it.** If vv11-12 sounded familiar to you, it’s because you’ve heard Satan quote those verses to Jesus during those 40 days he was fasting in the wilderness.
 - In Matthew 4, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tested and tempted by the devil. The devil tries to derail Jesus’s mission, to get him off track, off the path of obedience. In his second temptation, the devil even uses Scripture against Jesus. And this time, he doesn’t misquote Scripture. He memorized it and rehearsed it word-for-word. The devil doesn’t misquote but he certainly misapplies.
 - Matthew 4:5-6 says, “*5Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple 6and 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.’”*”

- ❖ He’s saying to Jesus, “Look, the Bible says bad things won’t happen to those who trust God. So if you really trust God and if he really loves you, then you can jump off the temple and his angels will catch you. He won’t let you get hurt. He won’t allow evil to befall you.”
 - Do you see Satan’s strategy here? **He wanted Jesus and he wants you to read Psalm 91 as a blanket promise from God that he won’t allow anything bad to happen to you.** Why?

- ❖ **Because he knows when trials and tribulations do come, you'll be disillusioned or devastated.** Disillusioned in God because he doesn't seem to keep his promises. Or devastated in your faith, blaming yourself for not having enough of it, for not trusting God enough. He'll have you exactly where he wants you – no longer taking refuge in the LORD. No longer in the shadow of his wings. You'll be out in the open. You'll be easy picking.
 - That's why we shouldn't read Psalm 91 this way. Don't misunderstand divine protection. Making the LORD your refuge and fortress does not guarantee a pass from all harm. **God never gives a blanket promise to rescue the faithful from all trouble. But he does promise to be with the faithful in their trouble.**
 - Look at v15. This is now the LORD speaking, "*When he [the one who takes refuge in the LORD] calls to me, I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him.*" Rescue is promised, but clearly it doesn't mean all trouble will be avoided.

- ❖ **Did the LORD rescue Joseph from trouble and prevent evil from befalling him?** No, but he was with Joseph in that pit, in Pharaoh's dungeon. What was meant for evil against him by evildoers, was meant by God for good (Gen. 50:20).
 - **Did the LORD rescue Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace?** No, but we're told that he was with them in the furnace. When Nebuchadnezzar peered inside the furnace, he saw not just three men but four figures walking in the midst of the fire unharmed (Dan. 3:25). God was with them.
 - **Did the LORD rescue the Apostle Paul from Caesar's sword?** No, but he never abandoned him. Paul says in 2 Timothy 4:17 that though everyone else deserted him, "*the Lord stood by me and strengthened me.*"

- ❖ That's the protection you'll find in God. Not a promise to escape from all trouble, but a promise that God will be with you *in* all trouble. **Not a guarantee to avoid all evil and harm, but a guarantee that all things (including evil and harm) work together for good, for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose** (Rom. 8:28).
 - I know the statements being made in this psalm sound very bold and confident. But **Psalm 91 is not a boast of victory. It's an expression of faith.** It's not a claim of invincibility. It's a claim of trust in a sovereign LORD who will not let a hair on your head perish apart from his good plans and purposes.
 - **So if he does allow evil to befall you – like he did with Job – you can trust God knows what he's doing.** Perhaps he's shaping you into the kind of person who can better handle trouble and help others who find themselves in similar trouble.

- ❖ Think of Job. **He comes out on the other end of his trials with experiential knowledge.** He now knows that you won't find shelter and refuge in wealth or possessions (they're fleeting). You won't find it in friends (they can lead you astray). You won't find it in family, in a wife and kids (they can let you down or be taken away).

- ❖ **Job now knows that the LORD Almighty is the only refuge and fortress that cannot be shaken.** God is the one dwelling place where you can truly be safe. *Because of his suffering*, Job is better equipped than most to handle the worst this world can throw at you, and he's better equipped to help the foremost sufferer who is struggling in his or her troubles.

A Promise to Divinely Protect

- ❖ God knows what he's doing. You can trust him in your troubles. **The psalm ends with the LORD himself speaking to us making six "I will" promises.** This is our third point and the last thing I want you to see in this text – God's promise to divinely protect.
 - Let me read vv14-16 again and see if you can count all six. *"¹⁴Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. ¹⁵When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. ¹⁶With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation."*
- ❖ This is an amazing divine promise to divinely protect those who hide in him. If you hold fast to God in love, if you call on his name, he'll answer. He'll deliver you and protect you. He'll be with you in trouble. He'll rescue you. He'll satisfy you and show you his salvation.
 - But again, if you interpret that to mean you're invincible – that nothing bad will ever (or should ever) happen to you because you trust God – then you've clearly not reading it right. **Because we know that the only man who perfectly did hold fast to God and who perfectly did trust in him, found himself in a garden calling out to God for the cup to pass over him – but received no answer.** He was not delivered. He was not protected. He wasn't rescued from his cross.
- ❖ But do you see? **It's because Jesus stepped out of the shadow and safety of his Father's wings and faced danger and death for us – that's what secured all of God's promises to divinely protect his children.** Because of what Jesus did, now no one can snatch us from the Father's hands. He will never leave us nor forsake us. We can rest in him, safe and secure.
- ❖ **There's this one moment in the Gospels where Jesus actually compares himself to a mama bird.** It's in Matthew 23. It's in the context of judgment and woe against the leaders of Jerusalem who have rejected God and his Messiah. And do you remember what he says?
 - He says, *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"* (Matt. 23:37)
- ❖ This is Jesus adopting the same metaphor we find in Psalm 91. He is God Incarnate. He is God with us *in trouble*. And don't overlook the fact that the trouble is our own doing. **Because of our sinfulness, we have brought God's judgment and woe upon ourselves.** And if you're not willing to hide under Jesus's wings, if you stand out in the open and trust in yourself, then you can be sure that all of God's strength, all of his might, all of his sovereign power will be used to judge you and condemn you.

- ❖ We get scared of what man can do to us, but Jesus says, in Luke 12, not to fear man who might be able to kill you but after that has nothing else he can do to you. No, if you're going to fear, he says, fear God, "*who after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!*" (Lk. 12:5)
 - Friends, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31). **I know we need protection from many things, but most of all, we need protection from the righteous judgment of God.**

- ❖ But the good news of the gospel is that this God you should fear is the same God who sent, in love, his Son to gather us together under the shadow of his wings. **Like that mama bird, Christ put his life on the line to protect us.** He absorbed the scorching heat of the wrath reserved for us. He took a beating from the storm of sin's judgment meant for us.
 - **And now if you find shelter in his wings, then all of God's strength, all of his might, all of his sovereign power will now be used to protect you.** To keep you eternally safe and secure.
 - So if bad things happen to you now, you know it's not because God is against you. You know he's working those things for your good. If you're standing behind God, if you're in his shadow, then you know he's on your side. He's there to protect you. Keep trusting him, and stay under his wings.