

Under Divine Protection

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 0 0] Amen. Please keep that psalm open before you, and we'll pray for God's help as ever as we come to it.

Gracious Father, your word is precious to us, more precious than gold and sweeter than honey. Lord, we pray that now you would open our hearts and our eyes to see wonderful things in it and to receive it as the gift and the wonder it is, to take hold of your promises by faith and to see Christ, your Son, inscribed in your word for us to trust.

Lord, we pray in his name. Amen. Amen. Well, this is one of those psalms that just hearing it read or just reading through it ourselves gives us that sense of security and that feeling of peace, because in it we find, don't we, promise after promise after promise of protection.

It's comprehensive cover from traps, sickness, weapons, unnamed terrors. It's constant cover in the night, by day, in darkness, at noon, and it's certain cover.

No evil shall be allowed to befall you. It will not come near you. So, verse 5, in light of this, says the psalmist, you will not fear.

[1 : 3 9] You will not fear. Even reading these promises, it's hard, isn't it, even briefly to feel our fears being held at bay or anxieties being lifted, even for a moment.

But perhaps we don't fear. But perhaps we don't fear that completely. Or perhaps there's a voice in the back of your head, perhaps quite a loud voice tonight that says, that all sounds great.

And do you know what? Hearing that makes me feel really good. But is it true? To put it really bluntly, do Christians who get caught up in war not get shot?

Or we know, don't we, we know that being a Christian does not keep you from getting ill, even terminally ill, and dying.

So, friends, for this psalm to have its proper and full effect on us, to properly calm our fears and still our hearts, we need to know, don't we, what to say back to that voice in our heads.

[2 : 4 3] It can't just be a nice psalm for us to read, but we need these promises in our hands. We need to understand them so that we can cling to them, even when we don't feel safe, even when that voice is strong, that says, is this all true?

I don't think that's a new thing, a new tension, as if the psalmist didn't know, for example, that God's people do suffer. In fact, Donald helps us see last time, didn't he, that actually this section of the psalms, book four, is speaking right into that tension for God's people.

They have been through the ringer. By this time, their country was conquered, the temple destroyed, the people taken captive. For want of a better word, they had been steamrolled for the best part of 70 years by other kingdoms.

And it left them wondering where God's promises had gone. Where was his kingdom? But book four speaks into that doubt and confusion from the biggest possible perspective.

Psalm 90, last time, introduced us again to a God who is not bound by time, whose plans and purposes unfold over millennia, not days or weeks or even lifetimes.

[4 : 08] And Psalm 91 tonight introduces us to a God who is not vulnerable, who is not threatened, who does not know fear, but gives invincible protection to his people.

The book of Psalms says to us that these things are still true. Even when our lives are in chaos and we can't see through the darkness, even then, the Lord reigns.

The Lord reigns. And so tonight, we're going to spend our time understanding the protection that this psalm promises so that we don't need to be afraid of what might happen to us.

But before we get to the protection, the psalm says firstly, and importantly, that this protection is ours if the Lord is our dwelling place.

If you've got the church Bible open, you can see Psalms 90 and 91 on the same page spread. So as I read the first verse of Psalm 91, I want you just to keep your eyes on the first verse of Psalm 90.

[5 : 21] And what do you see? So if you just look at 90 verse 1, I'm going to read 91 verse 1. Ready? He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

Okay, do you see it? What do you see? He who dwells. He who dwells. So both psalms, they open, don't we, with the same idea that God is someone that we can live in.

Perhaps as you hear the word abide, I'm sure some of us will be thinking of Jesus' invitation in John 15, abide in me. Here is a God then who wants us to make him our forever home.

He calls us to reside, stay, live, abide in him. Moses says in Psalm 90, the Lord's been that dwelling place of his people in every generation.

But notice what the writer of Psalm 91 is saying that's a little bit different. Psalm 90 is stating a fact for God's people together through time and space.

[6 : 36] Psalm 91 is saying that this is true individually for those who find their home in the Lord today. So he's taking it from something that's kind of corporate to something that's personal from our dwelling place as the Church of Christ to, verse 2, my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.

In other words, friends, this is a truth about God that you have to own for yourself, that you need to grasp and take hold of by faith. Yes, he is the dwelling place of his people.

That is who he has always been from everlasting to everlasting. But that does not mean that you automatically dwell in him.

If I can put it this way, we are not born into Christ. Even if we are born into the Church, we need to be born again into Christ.

And these promises of protection are for those who are in him. Now, the psalm speaks so beautifully, doesn't it, of that reality.

[7 : 54] There we stay in the shadow of the Almighty. Where he is, there we are. Verse 4 speaks of God as if he were a mother bird protecting her hatchlings, shielding us under his flight feathers, gathering us up under his wings.

His faithfulness, says the psalmist, is our armor. I discovered this week, a buckler is just another type of small shield. So we are double shielded, if you like, by his unchanging, unfailing love.

That's where you are tonight. If you can say to the Lord from your heart with the psalmist, verse 2, my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.

I wonder, friends, can you say that for yourself? Have you ever said that to the Lord Jesus? If you have and you can, brothers and sisters, then this is where you are found tonight.

You are in Christ. And we heard earlier that nothing in all creation can separate you from his love.

[9 : 15] Nothing can tear you from under the shadow of his wings. Not suffering, not circumstances, not sadness, not sin. You are safe and secure in him.

If you can't say tonight he is your God, he can be. He is a refuge and a fortress, a shelter, a shield for all who put their trust in him.

Abide in me, says Jesus. Abide in my love. For if the Lord is our dwelling place, then point two, we are under his protection.

Now this is where we start to have questions as Christians, isn't it? These promises are big and they are unqualified. Just look at verse 3.

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. Or verse 7. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

[10 : 16] Or perhaps strongest, verses 9 and 10. Because you've 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. Now verses like that raise all sorts of questions for us, don't they? Most immediately, if I get sick, does that mean that I'm not really a Christian?

Or my faith isn't strong enough? Or more generally, if I suffer in any way, does that mean that God must be angry with me? Or done with me? You, some of us, are going through such hard times, prolonged pain.

Some are not here because of illness or other difficulties. Those are not head questions, are they? They are heart questions. Those are questions that we ask when we can't get to sleep at night or through tears.

So let me say as clearly as I can that the answer to those questions is no, your suffering is not a punishment from God. It does not mean that you're not a real Christian.

[11 : 29] And now let's understand why that is from the psalm. Now the types of things the psalm speaks about being protected from are mainly coming under the power of an enemy and which happened pretty recently in the history of God's people or catching what it calls pestilence or plague which actually happened quite often early on in the history of God's people.

Both those things for them then were signs of God's anger. They're listed in the law as covenant curses. And indeed as we read the Old Testament books like Numbers were told about plagues that God sends when his people sin and thousands do die.

or we read Isaiah or the other prophets and we read about how repeatedly God gives his people over to their enemies for breaking his covenant for their disobedience.

So the psalmist does expect us to read these things as symptoms of a deeper threat which is God's judgment.

He even gives us a clue there in verse 8. You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. So the psalmist does expect his original readers to see these things as punishments which is why he can say so confidently that those who turn to the Lord won't experience those evils and those plagues because they are safe from God's wrath and punishments.

[13 : 05] So is that still true today? Well it is still true that if we're in Christ we are safe from God's wrath and punishment.

What's changed is that things like getting captured or getting sick aren't signs of his anger anymore. Well how is that? Paul says in Galatians 3 that when Christ died on the cross he took the curse for our disobedience on himself.

Paul even says that Christ became a curse for us. And Isaiah goes as far as to say that he took our illnesses and bore our diseases.

That is to say he drained the full weight of the curse into himself so that God punished all our sin through his suffering. So friends God does not send sickness suffering or war to punish our sins.

He has done that fully through the suffering sickness betrayal capture and death of the Lord Jesus. Jesus Christ sucked the curse out of those things for us like sucking poison out of our wounds.

[14 : 29] So suffering then is not a sign of God's anger anymore for Christians. Even death which we heard last time is a result of our fallen state isn't punishment anymore for those who are in Christ but instead what is it a welcome home for Christ took our curse on the cross so that we could receive his blessing.

Now you will still get sick and stub your toe you might one day be captured in a time of war or find yourself coming under another person's power that is used to wicked ends perhaps in a place of work or at home you might get bullied at school you might go through periods of not being able to sleep at night or having an anxiety that you just can't put your finger on but let me say as clearly as I can that those things are not a sign that God has left you or that you have sinned in some way that's brought this on you or that God is angry with you suffering does not mean that you must not be a Christian or that your faith is not strong enough now why those things do come is a different question and we can chat about that afterwards if you want to find someone to talk to you but we can say that those things don't come upon us as some kind of personal failing if you are in

Christ you are protected from God's anger and judgment that is what he protects us from so then how are we supposed to take these promises as our own as Christians today what does it look like then for us to have God's protection in our life well I think these promises are fulfilled in three different ways or in three different time scales we'll look at one by one we could think of it like the three C's of God's kingdom the commencement continuation and consummation or if it's a little bit easier to remember or to take notes three kind of periods the beginning middle and end of this age some of these things we see a most true then of Christ himself at the beginning or the commencement of God's kingdom a good question to ask when we read a psalm is where do

I see Christ in these words and in this psalm it's actually fairly obvious that verses 11 and 12 will sound familiar to lots of us I imagine wherever you heard this before!

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 and now he quotes those words and in what context it is isn't it the devil and it is in the context of Jesus being tempted or tested the devil takes him to the highest point on the temple and says 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'll bear you up lest you strike your foot against a stone!

[18 : 09] so friends straight away we cannot say as we read this psalm well that's well and good for you Lord but you don't know what I'm going through right you've never been where I am we just can't say that can we being told to throw yourself off the top of a building to prove how much you trust God is a cruel and unusual test isn't it that's after 40 days in which Jesus had with the devil there will be all kinds of terrible suffering in a room like this and it is not to diminish any of it for each of us but it is fair to say isn't it that none of us have suffered like Christ inwardly or outwardly and yet what was the outcome of his faith Jesus put his trust in

God's word he answers back from the Bible and we're told then the devil left him and behold angels came and were ministering to him so did God keep his promise to send his angels yes did God keep his promise to guard him in all his ways yes did God protect his son from harm and deliver him from evil yes and yet brothers and sisters did Jesus really suffer was the devil really at work can he really sympathize with us in our weaknesses!

yes yes and yes the Bible is never naive or childish about God's promises in this life or what faith does for us even for Jesus who was perfectly one with the father God's promise of protection did not mean that he would not suffer rather it is through that suffering that God's promises of protection are born out in Jesus life because he made his father his dwelling place and his refuge he was guarded through a lifetime of opposition and hostility both human and spiritual the darkness could not truly touch him up until it could when he took the cup of God's wrath and drained it and then for the first time in his life he was left defenseless and unprotected stripped beaten mocked judged crucified he gave up the protection that was rightfully his in

God so that we who are far from God could have that protection through trusting in him and God's promise was fulfilled even through Jesus death and resurrection verse 13 the serpent you will trample underfoot see who gets the last laugh in Psalm 91 the serpent or the one who makes God his dwelling place who gets the last laugh in the gospels the one who tried to turn God's word against Christ or the one who came to fulfill God's word seeing Christ's life death and resurrection we begin to see then how God keeps these promises of protection for the one who trusts!

in him so then what does that mean for us in Christ well this is the middle of the story or the continuation of the kingdom right what does that reality look like for us as Christians now we were looking at a very similar question in life groups this week weren't we the of you who were there I hope you picked up that that's quite a unique or unusual thing for God to say And certainly Paul's normal experience was to be attacked, wasn't it?

[22 : 33] And to be harmed. And friends, we shouldn't kid ourselves that that isn't normal for Christians globally or historically. None of us have promised categorically that no one will harm us for our faith or that we won't suffer in any way.

And so what do these promises mean for us today then? Well, we've already said it's worth saying again, though, isn't it? We can't say it enough. That we are protected forever from the worst thing that could ever happen to us, which the psalmist says these things are just symptoms of.

We are saved in Christ from God's anger and punishment. We will never face that in him. But that also means that if you're a Christian, you go through life with a guarantee that whatever suffering comes, it will not get the last word.

It cannot crush you. It cannot overcome you. It cannot finally kill you because you are held eternally in the everlasting arms of almighty God.

Even if the darkness does its worst and takes your life, the very worst that it can do to you is send you home to be with the Lord, which is better by far.

[23 : 58] We won't understand everything that happens to us in this life. But we believe his promise that even this, even what you're going through now cannot separate you from his love in Christ.

Even on your worst day, the Bible says you are more than a conqueror through him who has loved you. And so, therefore, brothers and sisters, we don't need to be afraid of the bad things that happen to us.

Under the shadow of the Lord's wings, verse 5, you will not fear. Now, we know, don't we, that doesn't happen to us overnight. We do fear.

But we can get there. See, the more we understand God's protection and grasp his promises, and the more we see these promises at work in our own and others' lives, the less we will fear.

Now, there's lots of ways to do this. One way to practice when you find yourself becoming afraid is to take a paper and a pen or your phone. All right, I know that's so kind of last century, isn't it?

[25 : 08] Find something to write on, okay? And just write out, put into words what it is, what's the worst thing that could happen, right?

What is it that you're afraid of? What's the worst case scenario? And that might not sound very helpful to think of. And actually, if it makes you, you know, even more worried, maybe stop and just pray.

But the purpose of doing it is that once you've put your fear into words, you should be able to look at it, read it back, and say, even if that happens, the Lord will keep me safe through it.

I have God Almighty's faithful and eternal protection, even in the face of my very worst fear. Then read Psalm 91 and pray that you would know God's presence and protection in the face of what you fear.

Because we know, don't we, even if that happened to you, even if that happened, God would still be this God and his word would still be true. We believe God and his promises are bigger, don't we, than us and our suffering.

[26 : 21] To practice doing that, over time, we would learn to put fear in its proper place and not let it take over our heart and overwhelm us. Which I think is actually the point of this psalm, that if the Lord is our dwelling place, we don't need to fear anymore.

We don't need to be afraid. And finally, these promises will be ultimately true for us at Christ's return, at the consummation of his kingdom, at the end of this age.

Now, we've had to handle these promises with care tonight, haven't we? But as we close, we need to know that a day is coming when all of the ifs and all of the buts can fall away and all of this will be fully filled.

When the serpent crusher comes again to finish off the serpent once and for all. When violence and sickness and threats and fear will be finished for God's people.

When the last stains of the curse are finally and fully washed off this earth. A promised day is coming, brothers and sisters, when for those who have made the Lord your dwelling place, no evil will be allowed to befall you.

[27 : 41] No plague come near your tent. That is a day to look forward to, isn't it? And it's a day that's already true for those who have gone before us.

John writes in Revelation chapter 7, Brothers and sisters, there they are, safe, in the presence of God Almighty.

That will be us all forever when he comes again, if we are abiding in him by faith, now sheltered, kept safe forever and ever and ever.

Now, if that is our presence, trusting in Jesus, what a future we have ahead of us. And if that is our future, what a difference it makes to us now in the present.

Or what a difference it should make. Perhaps you are a very heavenly-minded person and you spend hours of the week just looking forward to God's promise of a world without fear and sickness and death.

[29 : 00] But I imagine for most of us, that future reality feels a very long way off. And perhaps we just don't spend that much time thinking about it.

But we could do worse, couldn't we, than to fix our hope firmly upon that day. Perhaps as well as writing out our fears, praying through them, we could take a minute or two, couldn't we, to read this psalm again, read some verses perhaps of Revelation, and simply thank God for the blessings that we will one day have when Christ comes again to free us finally from getting sick, from being hurt, from being threatened, from dying.

Because we know wherever we are in the story now, we know the ending, don't we? And it is more safe and more certain than we could ever possibly imagine.

So friends, if you haven't already, will you say to the Lord, tonight, my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust, and learn what it is not to be afraid, because you have made him your dwelling place.

Let's take a moment just in silence to bring ourselves before the Lord, perhaps to pray that for yourself and your heart, and then I'll lead us in prayer.

[30 : 30] Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank you that you are the faithful God who is with us in times of trouble. We thank you, Lord Jesus, that you never leave us nor forsake us.

We thank you that you do hear us when we cry to you, you come to our aid, that you are the protector and the defender of your people in this age and the age to come.

Father, we pray that you would grant us the eyes to see that help and protection at work in our lives, Lord, even when we struggle. Father, teach us, we pray, when we suffer, to look for your hand at work.

[32 : 29] Father, we pray for friends, brothers and sisters here tonight who are going through a very hard time. Lord, that you would lift their eyes and their hearts to see your shield, the refuge that surrounds them, the fortress, Lord, that you are for them.

Lord, help us together as a church family to learn to rest the whole weight of our life upon you, to seek our all in ye, to find our safety and peace in ye.

Father, we pray that you would set our hope firmly on the day to come when truly we will not get ill, we will not get hurt, we will not fear. Lord, we long for that day and we pray for it.

Come, Lord Jesus. And until then, Father, we pray, set our faith firmly in him. Help us to abide in him and to trust him, Lord, each day with whatever you send us.

For, Lord, you are our refuge, you are our fortress, you are our God, and we trust in you. Amen.