

## THE PROMISE OF PROTECTION

Text: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

LHUMC 2/17/13

Lenten Series (Psalms) #1

### I. Introduction

- A. One of the many things I love about the Psalms is that in every one of them, somewhere you will find a verse or a section that you can really relate to.
  - 1. It may not speak to that exact moment in your life that you read it, but somewhere there will be something that you read where you will feel like saying to the Psalmist “I know exactly what you are talking about!”
  - 2. So as we share a number of Psalms over the next few weeks, be listening for those moments. Those moments when that prayer hits you where you live, or hits you where you have lived at some point in your life.
- B. For example: For me, in today’s Psalm that we just heard, it’s that moment when it talks about hurting your foot on a stone. Actually the more literal meaning there is “stubbing your toe”.
  - 1. I can relate to that, because whether I’m on a hiking trail across some stones or just walking around at home, I am constantly stubbing my toes.
    - a) I don’t know what it is, if my feet are bigger than I think they are, or I just don’t pay attention to where I am going, I do it all the time.
    - b) Just ask my family—I am constantly hopping around the house howling in pain. Bedposts, endtables, kitchen chairs, they all get me.
    - c) And you know how painful that is? My eyes water just thinking about it.
- C. So amidst all the talk in Psalm 91 about lions and snakes waiting for us on life’s path, it’s that line about stubbing your toe that gets my attention.
- D. And I’m trying to remember if I’ve ever prayed that God would protect me from stubbing my toes anymore—probably not, which gets me thinking that the Psalmist may be, in his talk about toe-stubbing may be using it as an image to represent anything pains us as we walk the path of life.

- E. And that's the other thing about the Psalms that you pretty quickly discover—that you can always read them at different levels.
  - a) There is the literal imagery that the writers use—which can be breathtakingly beautiful or dangerous or comforting depending on what is going on or what kind of prayer it is.
  - b) And then there is almost always a deeper level at work.
  - c) So a part of our work in interpreting these prayers of the people over the next few weeks will also be those times when we will need to peel away that surface layer to get to the really good stuff that lies beneath.
  - d) Because understanding those deeper images can be what empowers us not just to pray more honestly, but to gain a deeper relationship with God. And goals are why we are embarking this journey through the Psalms.
- II. So with all of that in mind—let's start the journey. And as we do, I realize that some may be familiar to you, some perhaps not. Today, Psalm 91.
  - A. Over the years, Psalm 91 has gained a deserved reputation as one of the Psalms that people have turned to when they are need of protection from whatever it is that life has thrown at them. And this goes way back.
    - 1. And so historians tell us that in the Middle Ages, it was not unusual for common folk to have an amulet that they would wear round their necks with Psalm 91:1 inscribed on it: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, in the care of the God of Heaven will abide.” If you know anything about the Middle Ages, you know how tough that common people had it, so it makes sense that they were in need of protection on a fairly constant basis.
    - 2. And during the Civil War, a little book of soldiers' war experiences was published in which dying soldiers were mentioned having quoted Psalm 91.
  - B. For us, even in times when most of us have it easier than either of those cases most of the time, most of us could also say that even now, there are times when the pain is as real as when we stub our toes, or it seems as if those lions and snakes that the Psalmist mentions (whatever or whoever they are for us) are just waiting for us to make a misstep so they can gobble us up. And so there are times when we too could do no better than to pray the prayer of Psalm 91—praying to our God of refuge, God our place of safety, God in whom we can trust.

C. And as a prayer for protection, Psalm 91 has lots to tell about ourselves, about God, about our relationship with God, and about life itself. Here are some thoughts as I have studied and prayed the Psalm over the years.

1. First and foremost, understand that Psalm 91 does not promise even the most faithful person an absence of trouble in their life.
  - a) The Psalmist is implying here that just because we are followers of God doesn't mean we are wearing some magic amulet around our necks as a kind of "get out suffering free" card.
  - b) And so just as when I walk around the house, "stubbing our toes" is pretty much inevitable as we go through life.
  - c) And so these stones symbolize the inevitability of different kinds of stones, big and small, that litter the pathways of our lives, just waiting for us to stub our toes on them.
  - d) And if the other images work better for you, to expect that we might never be confronted by a few "lions and snakes" as we live every day, is pretty naïve.
  - e) Note that the Psalm never says, "Because I am faithful, nothing bad will ever happen to me."
  - f) Instead, it seems to me that it is a prayer of someone who knows what it's like to hurt their foot on a stone because they've been there.
  - g) And so this Psalm has been called by more than one commentator "one of the most realistic Psalms of all." In other words, it's not a Psalm of denial, but a Psalm of reality—reminding us of the reality that we will all have times in our lives when we need to pray to God for protection from whatever it is that is giving us pain.
2. All of which leads to the second major reality in this Psalm, and that is that when it comes to asking for protection from God, we have some responsibilities in it as well.
  - a) The first responsibility we have is contingent on our relationship with God.
    - 1) The Psalmist makes the assumption here that he or she has not just a familiarity with God, but a deep relationship with God that precedes him or her going to God to ask for protection.

- 2) Does that mean that those who are new to the faith or struggling in their relationship with God are exempt from God's gift of refuge?
  - 3) I would say no, although I would say that if we have that kind of deep relationship with God, we will be much more likely to turn to Him when we are in need of help in getting through something, when we have somehow stubbed our toe on a stone.
  - 4) In my experience, it is those who have that kind of relationship with God who understand that we can't always solve our own problems, that we can't always turn to all the ways the world offers us to solve our problems.
  - 5) Because they are tuned into God's presence in their lives, they understand that God can and does offer a promise of protection that goes well beyond what we can expect from our own efforts or even the efforts of those around us.
  - 6) They understand that what the world usually offers us is temporary shelter, whereas God's promise is eternal shelter.
  - 7) Someone once called it the difference between riding out a hurricane in a pup tent versus an underground, cement-reinforced shelter.
  - 8) The pup tent may look okay when it's just starting to rain a little bit, but once the winds are really howling, it just doesn't offer the protection that we need for the long haul.
- b) The other responsibility implied in Psalm 91 is that we need to be listening.
- 1) Another thing I love about this psalm is that it very clearly is a conversation between the Psalmist and God.
  - 2) It begins with the writer thanking God for all of the times he or she has experienced God's protection, as well as an enthusiastic sharing of this good news with others who might be reading and listening.
  - 3) And then it ends with God's response, as God clearly states his promise of protection not just to the Psalmist, but to all people.
  - 4) So in this prayer, as well as others we will be reading, we get the idea that so often our prayers need to involve some listening on our part as well as speaking.
  - 5) So often we miss God's response to our prayers as a part of our prayers because we just aren't listening very well.

- 6) And remember—that response may not come as a bolt of lightning or a voice from the heavens—remember last week when God spoke to the three disciples on the mountaintop, “Listen to him!” It may not always be that spectacular and obvious.
  - 7) It may be more like what Elijah experienced on his mountaintop back in the Old Testament, when God answered him in a “still, small voice”.
  - 8) And at that point, how well we are listening for God is critical.
3. And then the final important thing that we can learn from Psalm 91 is the nature of God’s promise in those last few verses when God speaks.
- a) And again, what is critical is partly what God doesn’t say.
    - 1) He doesn’t say “I’ll move those stones out of the way so you’ll have a clear path the rest of the way.”
    - 2) He doesn’t say “I’ll take care of those snakes and lions for you so they won’t make your life miserable anymore.”
    - 3) What he does promise is in v. 15: “I will be with you in times of trouble.”
    - 4) And at first glance, it seems so unspectacular. “I will be with you in times of trouble.” That’s it?
    - 5) But the truth is, that simple promise is enough.
    - 6) In the end, that is God’s eternal promise of protection to each of us. God will be with us in our times of trouble.
    - 7) And as the song says, who could ask for anything more?
    - 8) And so if we learn anything from this Psalm, it might simply be that when we pray to God for protection, our prayer can be as simple as “God, please be with me in this time of trouble.”
    - 9) And the witness of Psalm 91 is that at some point, in some way, if we are faithful and patient and listening and watching, that prayer will be answered.

### III. Conclusion

- A. A few years ago a book was written by Elisabeth Elliot with the title taken from Psalm 91:1—*In the Shadow of the Almighty*. It was the story of her husband, Jim Elliot, who was a missionary to a group of native South Americans who eventually turned on him and killed him

at the age of 29. The book describes how he never expected to escape suffering just because he was answering God's call on his life. And it also describes how Elisabeth has been able to deal with that kind of loss.

1. One reviewer summed up the message contained in this story of this remarkable husband and wife this way: "It takes great faith to believe in a God who rescues you from every danger. It takes even more faith to believe in a God who goes through the fires of life with you." (Tod Mundo, [www.progressivetheology.org](http://www.progressivetheology.org), Feb. 25, 2007)
2. And that is also the message of Psalm 91.
3. Particularly for us, in an era where there so many other places to turn that offer false and fleeting protection, it takes great faith to believe in a God who is always there with us, offering His protection simply in His presence with us through whatever comes our way.
4. So when our faith is shaken, when we struggle to remember God's promise of that kind of ongoing and eternal protection, we give thanks for the prayer of Psalm 91 and more than that, for God's answer to that prayer.
5. In that answer comes our thanks to God for the promise of protection.

