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Series: Summer in the Psalms

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Luke 13: 31-35

Psalm 91

Shelter

*God's pinions will cover you, and you shall find refuge under the wings of the Lord. – Psalm 91:4*



Photo by NatureDocumentaries.org

When you were a kid did you ever make a fort? Maybe you threw some blankets over a couple of living room chairs and crawled inside. You brought in a flashlight and some snacks, a stuffed animal or two. Inside your homemade cocoon you felt safe. Nothing could touch you. That fort was your sanctuary.

Remember falling asleep in the car? Your mom or dad would scoop you up and carry you into the house, pull off your shoes and tuck you into bed.

“When I was a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I became an adult, I put away childish things.”<sup>i</sup> Maybe one of the things you put away when you became a teen or an adult was that sense of security, the knowledge that you are protected, guarded and safe. Maybe you gave up the assurance that somebody else is in charge, you need not worry. Children NEED that kind of security. And you know what? Adults do too.

Remember that scene in *Jesus Christ Superstar*? Mary Magdalene sings to Jesus,

Try not to get worried; try not to turn on to  
Problems that upset you, oh  
Don't you know, everything's all right, yes  
Everything's fine. And we want you to sleep well tonight.  
Let the world turn without you tonight.<sup>ii</sup>

But who can do that? The reason children sleep the way they do is that they know that they are sleeping under someone else's wing, *if* their parents are able to take sufficient care of them. Children might be surprised (alarmed?) to discover that adults need to feel sheltered too. Some of us are frightened; some are in danger. Some of us have been betrayed. Some have had devastating news, disappointments, and losses. Some have discovered that everything is not alright. Some feel as though nothing is fine.

To all who need it, today's psalm is a word of hope and comfort. Listen:

*You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High,  
abide under the shadow of the Almighty.  
You shall say to the Lord, "You are my refuge and my stronghold,  
my God in whom I put my trust."  
God shall deliver you from the snare of the hunter  
and from the deadly pestilence.  
God's pinions will cover you,  
and you shall find refuge under the wings of the Lord,  
whose faithfulness shall be a shield and buckler.  
You shall not be afraid of any terror by night,  
nor of the arrow that flies by day;  
Of the plague that stalks in the darkness,  
nor of the sickness that lays waste at mid-day;  
A thousand shall fall at your side and ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it shall not come near you.  
Your eyes have only to behold to see the reward of the wicked.  
Because you have made the Lord your refuge,  
and the Most High your habitation,  
there shall no evil happen to you, neither shall any plague come near your dwelling.  
For God shall give the holy angels charge over you,  
to keep you in all your ways.  
They shall bear you in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone.  
You shall tread upon the lion and adder;  
you shall trample the young lion and the serpent under your feet.  
Because they are bound to me in love, therefore will I deliver them;  
I will protect them, because they know my name.  
They shall call upon me and I will answer them; I am with them in trouble;  
I will rescue them and bring them honor.  
With long life will I satisfy them, and show them my salvation.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It is one of the great themes of the Bible: God is our dwelling place, our shelter. "God will cover you with pinions" means you will find shelter and safety beneath God's wings. Now if you are like me you think of these as eagle's wings – particularly if you are from Philadelphia. Eagle's wings are the most protective I can imagine.

A while ago I had the opportunity to study with Dr. Kevin McGowen, a brilliant ornithologist from Cornell. I learned so many things from Kevin. For example, he told us that there are 10,000 species of birds, and all of them are connected, and all are important for the survival of everything, so be careful. We learned some ducks sleep with one eye open. When they nap in groups, the ducks on the perimeter of the group sleep with one eye open, keeping one side of their brains awake, so that those birds in the interior of the group can sleep more soundly. We learned that the Great Horned Owl has a wing span of nearly 5 feet. Not only that, but the owl

can turn her head 280 degrees. The Hyacinth Macaw can generate 3000 pounds of pressure per square inch with his beak. Now that's protection!

I asked Kevin about the gospel text that was read for us. Jesus said: "I have desired to gather you as a hen gathers her brood beneath her wings." What did he mean? Kevin laughed and said, "Yes, Jesus WAS calling himself a mother hen. And boy do they do that!" Chickens make 200 different sounds, many that they use to communicate. When there is any kind of danger – from weather, or a predator, the mother hen will summon her chicks who, on signal, come running to her for shelter. Humans, take a lesson from the birds. The psalmist says "God will cover you with pinions, and under God's wings you will find refuge." Young birds know this. Why is it that humans – young and old – bristle and say, "You can't make me!" and, "I don't need God!" when – really, all we have to do is trust and obey? Why do so many of us refuse God's protection and grace?



Stubborn pride I guess.

Psalm 91 is sometimes called "The Warrior's Psalm" and for good reason. The psalmist declares:

*You shall not fear the terror by night,  
nor of the arrow that flies by day;  
A thousand shall fall at your side  
and ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it shall not come near you.*

Some soldiers in the First World War used to recite this psalm every day. In the 19th century, pious Christians who used the prayer are said to have survived epidemics that killed thousands. Rabbis, preachers and priests read the psalm following 9/11 attacks.

But it was never intended to be a talisman. No, this is an affirmation of faith, a praise song, a hymn; it's a celebration of God's deliverance, which is real.

Some of you know that Jimmy Stewart, the Academy Award winning actor, was also a Presbyterian elder. Dave Carpenter, who is the current pastor of the church where Stewart served, said that when the star would serve on Communion Sundays, his fans would come and sit in his section.

He was also a war hero. When the United States entered World War II in 1941, Stewart enlisted in the Army Air Corps and prepared to go overseas. His father, Alex, a veteran himself, choked up when he tried to bid his son farewell, so he wrote a note for Jimmy to read in route. After being shipped out, Jimmy read the words his father had been unable to say aloud:

"My dear Jim-boy,

Soon after you read this letter, you will be on your way to the worst sort of danger. Jim, I'm banking on the enclosed copy of the 91st Psalm. The thing that takes the place of fear and

worry is the promise of these words. I am staking my faith in these words. I feel sure that God will lead you through this mad experience. I can say no more. I only continue to pray. ... God bless you and keep you. I love you more than I can tell you. Dad.”

Maybe you know the rest of the story. Jimmy Stewart returned home a hero, having flown 20 missions. During the height of battle, Stewart said he learned to lean on the promise of Psalm 91, which speaks of God as a refuge and fortress.<sup>iii</sup>

St. Antony, the third-century Egyptian founder of monasticism, used the psalm to scatter enemies of the faith. It is also cherished in modern-day Africa where it is used for exorcism and spiritual protection. Nigerian scholar, David T. Adamo notes, the Bible offers many promises of protection, “but in Psalm 91 all the promises seem to be brought together in one collection, and [form] a covenant.”<sup>iv</sup>

This psalm, these verses are authentic, an outpouring of God’s word, but they are not a good luck charm. Believers suffer alongside everyone else, the psalmist knew that, and so do we. That is what it means to be vulnerable, to be like God. Just because I quote this psalm doesn’t mean I can go out and jaywalk across Ritchie Highway at rush hour. This psalm doesn’t mean that you can smoke three packs a day and expect them to do you no harm. Faith in the sheltering wings of Jesus doesn’t remove the danger of deadly things.

Sometimes we fool ourselves that way, or somebody fools us.

Remember, the devil can quote scripture. It is this very psalm that Satan tried to use to manipulate Jesus at his temptation in the wilderness. “Go ahead,” the devil told him, “throw yourself down off this tower, for it is written, *God shall give the holy angels charge over you ... [to] bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.*”<sup>v</sup> That is what it says here. Those exact words. But Jesus could not be so easily fooled. This psalm is not about putting the Lord, your God to the test.

Jesus couldn’t be fooled, but we can, and we often are. Satan knows the Bible and loves to quote it to create chaos. So what’s a believer to do? Well, for one thing, don’t believe everyone who can quote the Bible to you. History is full of cults and villains who have done that for evil purposes. Instead of believing everyone who throws a scripture verse at you, read the Bible for yourself. Study it with others over a long time. Don’t pull passages out of context; read it all. Pray for understanding. Trust God and obey, and the parts of the Bible you do understand, and in time, the one message of scripture will come through loud and clear.

Jesus called the devil’s bluff. He said (and now I’m paraphrasing) God’s wings of protection are real, but certain restrictions apply... you cannot act like a fool and expect God to bail you out. God may do that – most of us have a story like that – but you can’t count on it.<sup>vi</sup> So don’t!

Neil Plantinga, the former president of Calvin Seminary said: “If the children of God were always saved from floods like Noah and his family; if every time somebody pointed a gun at a Christian, the gun [magically] turned to salami; if we really had a money-back guarantee against hatred, disease...terrorists, then of course we wouldn’t have to worry about church growth. Our

churches would fill with people attracted to faith for its benefit plan. These are people who want an insurance agent, not a church.”<sup>vii</sup>

What would happen to faith if following Jesus did give you an exemption from all poverty, accidents, illness and harm? If faith came with instant rewards, what kind of faith would it be? No faith at all, right? The fact that God offers us shelter in all these circumstances doesn't mean that trouble goes away, it means that God is in there with us, through everything. This psalm says that trouble will not harm us, listen:

*Because they are bound to me in love, therefore will I deliver them;  
I will protect them, because they know my name.  
They shall call upon me and I will answer them; I am with them in trouble.*

But let's be honest. There are many people who don't find shelter under God's wings. It's there, but they are kept from experiencing it by circumstances, or because the system is just rigged against them. Some are facing diseases without access to medical care. Some lack clean water; some have no homes. Some kids don't have loving parents to carry them up the stairs to bed. Some are abused, neglected and even trafficked. Some have good homes but make bad choices. And God has set the church down in the midst of this broken and fearful world to BE the shelter of God – for those in trouble. Do you hear that? Those aren't just metaphorical eagle's wings the psalmist is talking about, they're ours. These are the arms of Jesus' Body on earth, the Church.

Some of you have experienced this – as Stephen Ministers or deacons, on a mission trip, or at Winter Relief, or in any one of the dozens of ministries of Woods Church.



Jesus Christ IS our shelter. I hope that we will always be like the fledglings that scuttle underneath his wings. He is our safe place. We are his body on earth, the church. Let us pray:

Sheltering God, we believe that your word is true, but this is not simple knowledge; it is our conviction, a deeply-rooted assurance given us by the Holy Spirit through the gospel.

Help us to embrace your truth today, God. May it penetrate our minds and take root in our souls. In the sanctuary of your grace made real for us by Jesus Christ, we place our lives in your hands, fully and absolutely in your perfect care, forever. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:11

<sup>ii</sup> Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Weber "Everything's Alright" from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, 1970

<sup>iii</sup> Victor Parachin, "God's 911," *Christian Reader*, Sept/Oct 2000, 67-68

<sup>iv</sup> David T. Adamo by Philip Jenkins "Psalm 91 in every time and place" *Christian Century*, January 9, 2018

<sup>v</sup> Matthew 4:6

<sup>vi</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, from a sermon "Wings of God" posted on the Calvin Institute Christian Worship website retrieved 6/9/18

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid