

The Safe Place

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Date: 06 September 2015

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, it's good to be back here and bringing God's Word. For those who weren't here last week, my name's Paul Barker.

I work in Asia, supported through CMS and Holy Trinity, and I have some brochures for CMS, my new prayer card, and so on on a table near the door, so please come and take one and some brochures after church and a couple of books that I've written and so on.

It would be good to catch up as well. Please turn to Psalm 91, page 593, and let me pray for us. Our gracious God and Father, we thank you for your Word to us and pray that we will not only understand it, but live under it in the security that you bring us through your Son, so that we may trust you and live for his glory.

Amen. A few weeks ago, I stubbed my toe. It's one of the dangers in Asia because it's hot and I wear sandals rather than shoes mostly.

[1 : 12] And I noticed after a couple of days that it got a little bit infected. And on those odd days where I did have to wear shoes, it was quite uncomfortable. The big toe rubbing against the shoe with a little bit of infection.

And then when I turned to this Psalm in preparation for this sermon a few weeks ago as well, I thought, God, you've really let me down. This Psalm says you will not dash your foot against a stone.

I think when we read this Psalm, one of the reactions we may have is this seems too good to be true. The promises here seem as though God's sort of got a bit carried away with himself, like politicians before an election making promises that seem too good to be true.

A friend of mine, a former student called Peter, not the Peter some of you met this week, but also from Myanmar, was visiting Malaysia at the end of June. He'd come because his brother is a UNHCR cardholder in Malaysia, in effect like a refugee, but has got cancer and is undergoing chemotherapy.

And Peter was bringing some money to help pay his medical bills. He had all the visa papers right, but was refused entry on arrival. And the immigration officials took his luggage.

[2 : 34] They took the thousand US dollars that he was bringing for his brother, his laptop, his ID card, everything except his phone. And they sent him back on the next flight to Yangon.

And when he asked why is this happening, they said, well, we don't want you to come. We don't like people from Myanmar. So go back. In a way, they were legally within their rights to send him back, but not to take all his stuff.

And you read this psalm and it says, no evil shall befall you. But the evil of greedy and corrupt government officials in various countries of Asia happens all the time.

Often Christians are the victims of that. This psalm seems too good to be true. No evil shall befall you. And then what about the Nepali friends whose buildings were damaged in the earthquake? What about the Myanmar friends whose houses were washed away in the floods just about five or six weeks ago? What about the Christians, a group of Christians from one church killed in the Asia crash from Surabaya to Singapore last January?

[3 : 39] Or the Christians whom I've met, some of whom have died in bomb attacks in Peshawar or other victims of terrorism in Pakistan? Where does this psalm fit for them?

It seems too good to be true. No evil shall befall you. No scourge shall come near your tent. Has God got carried away here?

And the same applies closer to home. Some of us new Christians who were killed in the bushfires in 2009. And we know that Christians are not immune from suffering or persecution, opposition, evil attacks or whatever it may be.

Can we really trust this psalm? The psalm begins with an opening general statement. It's in the third person. He who, or in this translation, whoever dwells in the shadow of the Most High. So it's just about the person. And verses 1 and 2 is like that sort of general statement of introduction. It mentions four names for God.

[4 : 46] The shelter of the Most High. Then in the next line, Almighty. Almighty. Both those words denote the idea of supremacy, sovereignty over everything.

The Most High. Nobody higher than God. And the word Almighty has got the added sense of power and strength. So God is sovereign over everything.

Mighty, powerful, strong. But at the same time, verse 2 uses two other names for God. One is Lord in capital letters, which always means a personal name of God.

Yahweh or Jehovah is how we often translate it in a sort of more direct way. That's a friendly name for God. It's a relational term for God.

It was a name given at the burning bush to Moses. It's a little bit like in Australia where we meet somebody for the first time. Oh, hello, Mr. Smith. Please call me Fred. As though, we have friends, you know.

[5 : 47] Let's call me Fred, not Mr. Smith. And it's as if God is saying to God's people, don't just call me Almighty. Yahweh is my name. We're friends.

We're in a covenant relationship. And then the second line of verse 2 says, my God. The basic word for God, but it's my God. Again, personal relationship.

So here, this statement is for people to know that God is both supreme and sovereign over everything, mighty and power, but at the same time in a relationship with people who come to him or dwell in the shelter that he provides.

There are four images of protection. Shelter, shadow, refuge, fortress. Like most poetry that sort of piles up the different images for us.

It's not that God literally is a shadow or shelter from the sun, but in a scorching Israel, this would be a pleasant, appealing, attractive idea.

[6 : 53] I live about seven miles. Sorry, not seven miles. Seven minutes from walk from the light rail, which is sort of up above where I live in Kuala Lumpur.

And I know at different times of day, I will walk on different sides of the road because of the shelter or the shadow. And if it's the middle of the day, I'll often walk in the middle of the road because the sky train's up here.

And if I walk sort of right on the plantation underneath, I'm in the shadow because it's so hot. And so the idea of a shelter or shadow is an attractive idea. The refuge and the fortress in verse two is a little bit more of a military protection that the enemy will come.

But God is our refuge, our fortress to protect us against the attacks of enemies or whatever it may be. Different images being used here of safety and security.

And of course, those images of safety and security depend on the fact that God is the most high, the almighty. That is, if God were not the most high almighty, then an offer of refuge or fortress would be very limited.

[8 : 07] Until you get a higher, more mightier enemy. But God being the most high, the almighty, these are strong images of safety and security.

Now that's the general statement. The person who dwells in the shelter of the most high will be safe. But the psalm, of course, is not making simply a general statement.

It begins like that. But the whole point of the psalm is to invite people to come to the Lord for refuge. So from verse three, the psalm moves more directly because now it says, surely he will save not that person.

Surely he will save you. And from now on, from verse three, at least to verse 13, we get the sense of you being addressed. So it's a bit more direct now.

And therefore a bit more of a stronger appeal to the reader to come to God for refuge. Again, there is a multitude of images of refuge, safety and security.

[9 : 14] They get a bit intertwined as well. One of them at the beginning of this section is the image of God being like a mother bird protecting the young.

So in verse three at the beginning, surely he will save you from the fowler's snare. And the beginning of verse four says he'll cover you with his feathers and under his wings, you'll find refuge.

It was many years before I knew what a fowler was, partly because the closest friends of my grandparents and thus also my father when he grew up, their surname was Fowler. So I always just didn't really think about the name. But of course, it's a bird catcher, somebody who will trap birds. And so here is the idea of God being the one who will save you from being snared or trapped like a little bird.

And God is like a big bird spreading wings and feathers over its young to protect them. But intertwined with that at the end of verse three, he will protect you or save you from deadly pestilence.

[10:23] And at the end of verse four, his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. Maybe we could even say shield and armor to protect. Here, the idea is not so much of a bird catcher as just a stronger sort of military enemy attack.

God will protect you. God will save you and deliver you from all of these things. And this is protection that is offered day and night.

In verse five, you'll not fear the terror of night. And the next line, or the arrow that flies by day. And verse six does it again for emphasis.

The pestilence, the stalks in the darkness, that's the night, nor the plague that destroys at midday. Well, we're used to this when we go to the pharmacy and you've got a cold or flu and you get those day and night type tablets to offer you protection day and night.

The ones that help you sleep and the ones that help you not to sleep and so on. Well, this is bigger than a flu or fever. This is a pestilence, an enemy. The arrow attack would only be at daytime.

[11:34] You don't shoot arrows at night when you can't see the target. And of course, the night has an added fear even from us living in a city where we know that we may not want to drive at night.

We don't want to walk down some dark lanes or roads at night. We're a little bit more anxious at night to lock up and be more secure. Same where I live in Kuala Lumpur.

You want to be safe all the time in a place like that. So here is the offer of this security and safety day and night, all the time being offered by God.

He's wanting us to come to God for this security, for this refuge. But isn't he pushing it too much? Isn't he advertising something a little bit too much like the advertisements we get used to on television, I guess?

Isn't he overstating the promise? What's tempting to misread this psalm? It's tempting to misread it perhaps literally and think that when I stubbed my toe, God's let me down.

[12:43] Or maybe because my toe got stubbed, therefore I'm failing in some way. And that would be, I think, a misreading of what's going on here. Some have been tempted, and Christians over the centuries, to wear verses of this psalm as like a lucky charm.

Something on a necklace or a bracelet or something like that. So, so long as the verses are on me, I will be safe. The evil will be warded off. Well, that sort of superstition is a way that some have been tempted to read this psalm.

And we must be careful because I think in our world there is an enormous amount of superstition. And sometimes Christians fall into that. I fly a lot in one airline, Air Asia.

There is no row 13. 12, and then it's 14. I live in a high rise, but there is no fourth floor. 3, 3A, 5, 13, 13A, 15.

Because numbers with a 4 at the end for some Chinese is unlucky. They don't like it. A friend of mine in Malaysia, not a Christian, is very superstitious about all sorts of weird things.

[13:59] And sometimes we Christians can fall into this idea of superstition. Of thinking, well, so long as I've got these verses in me or on me, maybe evil will be warded away.

But that's a misreading of what this psalm is really about. Another temptation would be to manipulate this psalm. And that's certainly what the devil did.

And why I say it's tempting to misread this psalm. Because the devil took Jesus to the top of the temple and said to him, jump. Because God says in this psalm, in fact, God's angels will lift you up. So come on, trust God. Trust the psalm. Because Jesus understood that's a manipulation of this psalm. The Christians have sometimes failed in that as well. So there are Christians who've played, for example, with poisonous snakes to show that God keeps the promises of this psalm.

And not all of them have lived to tell the tale. So how do we read this psalm? Well, the next couple of verses that lie at the center of the psalm, I think open the, like the key that opens the

understanding of what precisely God is promising here.

[15:13] Verse 7 describes a situation where you are amongst a thousand or even ten thousand people. They're at your side, at your right hand. But they will fall.

But not you. It's as if you're part of a big army. And all around you, everybody else who looks the same as you, they all fall down. But you're safe.

And again, that doesn't quite look right in our experience. It seems as though this psalm is going beyond what is true. We know that of the thousands of soldiers who went to World War I, for example, a hundred years ago, Christians were victims just like the non-believers.

I mean, it would be extraordinary, wouldn't it, at the end of World War I, if the only soldiers who came home were the believers and the unbelievers were killed. But that didn't happen. And that's the picture, though, that this verse is suggesting.

But then it tells us what precisely is going on in verse 8. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

[16:20] That's the evil. That's the scourge, the pestilence. That's the attack that this psalm is promising safety from.

The punishment of the wicked. You might be in a crowd and they fall and you see their punishment. That's the picture image that's being portrayed.

We're not necessarily going to take it exactly literally. But what it's saying to us is this. It's not promising us safety from stubbing my toe, for example, or Malaysian immigration, or this or that or the other thing in our day-to-day life.

We know that we're subject to those sorts of things like anybody else. But what it is promising us is that we will not fall under the punishment by God of the wicked because we come to him for refuge. Not because we're morally perfect. Not because we're such good people. But because we come to him for refuge. We don't find refuge in ourselves.

[17:30] We don't find refuge in our own goodness or virtue or piety. We find refuge only in God. We come to him for refuge. We come to him for refuge. And he will protect us from that final day of judgment.

That's the promise. And in fact, that's a better promise than what sometimes we think this psalm is saying. Yes, it may not be saying that I will never stub my toe or some evil will not come against me in this life.

But better than that, this is promising me an eternal security and safety from the punishment of the wicked. That I will not be wicked in God's eyes if I come to God for refuge.

And so the psalm goes on. Now he says in verse 9, Not meaning today or tomorrow, but forever, basically.

And so no disaster will come near your tent for he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. And they'll lift you up in their hands so that you'll not strike your foot against a stone.

[18:52] It doesn't mean that we can jump off the top of the temple and we'll be safe because angels will stop us falling to the ground. But it means that if you come to God for refuge today, then he will guard you through to that final day of his judgment on this world.

When Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. If you come to God for refuge, if you make the most high your dwelling, not that you earn it, it's not our accomplishment, but it's rather our trust and our faith in an invitation of God to us.

A better promise than reading this, if you understand literally, and thinking I'm not going to stub my toe today. This is what the psalm is about.

And what it means, therefore, is that the attacks of the evil one, as he seeks to thwart us arriving safely in the kingdom of heaven beyond that final day of judgment, they will come to nothing.

The evil one cannot make us fall. He may attack us, but we will be safe in God. And so in verse 13, it says, you'll tread on the lion and the cobra, you'll trample the great lion and the serpent.

[20:15] Again, this is poetry. It's using images. It's not necessarily speaking literally. It's not an invitation to go and play with cobras, which seems to me a particularly foolish sort of thing to do.

Maybe also there's an allusion here to the idea of the Satan tempting the man and the woman in the garden of Eden, being a serpent or a snake. That is the temptations of the evil one to try and draw us away from God, to try and grab us and wrestle us away from God.

They will fail because God is the most high and he's offering us our refuge, our security and our safety. That we are safe in him.

Doesn't mean there is no attack, but we are safe. We are safe in God. And that's because God is the most high.

That's because God is the almighty. And Satan, though powerful, evil, though powerful, is no more powerful than God.

[21 : 23] God provides real safety through that final judgment day and thus for eternity. The psalm ends with a climax.

Having made a general statement, the person who, and then drawing it to you, you, you, the last three verses, it's as if now God himself speaks.

So far, it's about God, the most high, come to the Lord or God. But in the last three verses, it's God himself speaking. Because that person loves me.

Now, this translation puts in, says the Lord, but literally, that's, and that's who's speaking. But simply, because he loves me, God says, I will rescue him.

So now God is speaking. It adds a climax to this psalm in a way, a reassurance that this really is God's word. But notice the descriptions of the person who is safe.

[22 : 25] He loves me, in verse 14 at the beginning. He acknowledges my name at the end of verse 14. He will call on me, the beginning of verse 15.

The person who loves me, at the beginning of verse 14, it's an odd word for love. It's a strong word though. It's the idea of clinging or cleaving.

So back in Genesis, the man will leave his father and mother and cleave or cling to his wife. Same word is used here. It's a bit like the child who's with their parents or mother or father and for whatever reason of fear, they grab hold.

That's the sort of idea of clinging or cleaving in love to God. A strong commitment, basically. The person who acknowledges my name.

This is not an invitation to somebody to say, God, if you're there, is there a God? Well, I hope you hear my voice. That's not what it's about. It's about calling or acknowledging a God who is known, a God with whom there is already a relationship.

[23 : 31] And my name suggests that because it's my name, Yahweh Jehovah, in the Old Testament. And he will call on me.

Again, not just a general call, oh, help, but calling to a God who is trusted. A call by someone doing the trusting. And God's response.

In fact, there are eight things that God will do here, not separate things. I think they're all much the same thing, using different words and images to bring this to a great and resounding climax and confidence in what God is promising.

He will rescue in verse 14. He will protect in verse 14. In verse 15, he will answer. He'll be with him, deliver, honor.

And in verse 16, will satisfy and show his salvation. In a way, all of those things overlap in their understanding and meaning.

[24 : 33] Notice that in verse 15, it says, I'll be with the person in trouble. It's not saying there'll be no trouble. But I'll be with you. And that's what's sufficient.

That's a wonderful statement of God at the end. Compounding thing after thing that God will do.

This is an advertisement for God, basically. To come to God for security, for refuge, for safety, for shelter.

And these promises, we know to be even more certain, even more guaranteed, through the Lord Jesus Christ.

For those who love me, those who love Jesus, those who acknowledge his name, Jesus' name, those who call on him, call on Jesus.

And it's through Jesus that we have the guarantee, not just of long life in verse 16, but ultimately of eternal life.

[25 : 40] It's in Jesus that we know that we are rescued and saved and delivered by his work on the cross for us. It's in Jesus that we know that Satan is disempowered and death has lost its sting.

We know that it's in Jesus we find refuge. Well, safety, protection, security, they are big issues in Australia and in slightly different ways around our world.

We see it in those poignant, heartbreaking pictures of recent days and indeed for many years. You think in Australia of all the advertisements for products that appeal to the idea of safety and security or protection.

From toothpaste to paint. The paint that will protect your house the most. The toothpaste that offers total protection.

I wondered actually if I should sue Colgate. When I stubbed my toe, I wasn't totally protected. But then I realized I hadn't put Colgate on my toe.

[27 : 00] Total protection. We see it, of course, in the advertisements for superannuation and insurance. Protect yourself, protect your family for the future, for the retirement, for old age.

We see it for the advertisements that are trying to help us protect our health and guard it for the future. We see it in the advertisements to do with money, wealth, investment, that we are to protect ourselves for the future.

And the danger of all of this, the danger of this strong theme in our society is that it is drawing us away from where our ultimate protection and security is found.

In Jesus Christ. In God. For no wealth, no insurance policy, no superannuation, no toothpaste or paint is going to protect you on that final day when God's judgment will be against the wicked.

In two weeks and a day, I'll return to Pakistan for my sixth visit in six years. And some people say, even in Malaysia, they say, why do you go to Pakistan?

[28 : 15] It's so unsafe. But this song reminds me that our brothers and sisters who trust in God for refuge in Pakistan are no less safe than we here who trust in God for refuge either.

Physically, yes, there's a world of difference. Christians die in Pakistan simply for their faith. And I've known a couple over the last few years who are no longer on this earth.

But ultimately, and bigger than mere physical safety, we're as safe in Pakistan as we are in Australia if God is our refuge.

So often this idea of being caught up in the world's idea of refuge and security limits, I think, our willingness to serve, our willingness to be involved in the mission of the gospel in our world.

Oh no, I think I want to stay in a safe place like Melbourne, for example, the most liveable city in the world. But our real refuge and our sure shelter are not found in Melbourne but are found in Jesus Christ.

[29 : 29] Earlier this year, Elizabeth Elliot died. She was one of the great Christians of the past century, I should think. And many of you know her story, how in the 1950s with her young husband, Jim and baby, they were missionaries to Ecuador and after a short time only, her husband was killed by the very people they were seeking to win for Christ.

But she went back and those Alka Indians were converted. It's a wonderful story of the grace of God. God. And she's a remarkable lady in her own missionary service, her mercy and forgiveness, her testimony and her training of others.

And as many of you will know, she wrote her story about her husband's death and the mission to those Alka Indians under the title taken from this very psalm, The Shadow of the Almighty.

For Elizabeth Elliot knew that though her husband was killed tragically young and she was bereaved and their child left without a father, she knew that he was safe.

She is safe. The child is safe under the shadow of the Almighty because this psalm is promising something actually bigger and better than just physical safety day by day on earth.

[31 : 03] Jim Elliot was safe in death because Jesus was his refuge. And this psalm invites us to the same God, Most High Almighty, the same God in a covenant relationship with us through his son Jesus to come to him for refuge.

Let's pray. Our great and sovereign God, we do indeed thank you for the refuge, safety, security and protection we have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

One for us on the cross. Help us to come to you for refuge always. and we thank you for this sure and certain promise of safety for eternity because of your son Jesus Christ.

Amen.