

Abiding in the Shadow of the Almighty

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 8th of October 2000. The preacher is Phil Muleman.

His sermon is entitled Abiding in the Shadow of the Almighty and is based on Psalm 91. Amen. We'll leave your Bibles open at 477 as we look at this psalm.

Let me pray. Our Father, we thank you for your word. We pray tonight that we would have ears that would listen and hearts that would be changed to serve you more fully.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. The story is told of a young child who walks down to the beach. And as he goes, he spotted a matronly woman sitting under an umbrella, a beach umbrella on the sand.

And he went up to the woman and he asked the little boy, are you a Christian? She said, yes. Do you read your Bible every day?

[1 : 16] She nodded her head. Yes. Yes. Do you pray often? He asked next. And again she answered, yes. Then he asked his final question.

Will you mind my money while I have a swim? She held out her hand and he handed her a 50 cent coin. This child trusted this woman because she was a Christian.

Now it goes without saying that not all people who call themselves a Christian will be trustworthy. There is corruption, deceit, dishonesty and untrustworthiness.

Even abuse among those who claim, who put the title Christian next to their name. But there is a general principle that we as Christians should have.

And that is that we should have trust for one another. It is not because we label ourselves Christians. But because of whom we serve and what we have become in Christ Jesus.

[2 : 22] Now the psalmist in Psalm 91 recognises that I think. His trust is in God or is in Yahweh.

And his trust in God is unshakable. And we see in this psalm three ways that this is revealed. The first two seem to come from the psalmist's own experience.

Which he seems to be telling others about. So in verses 1 to 8 the psalmist indicates that God is a sure refuge for people who trust in him. And secondly the psalmist goes on to talk about God's gracious care in verses 9 to 13.

And then there is this third and remarkable thing that we see in verses 14 and 16. We see here God's own words. And those words are God's word of promise to his people.

In the last two verses of this psalm. And when God speaks it reiterates and strengthens all that has been said in verses 1 to 13.

[3 : 27] So that's the way we're going to look at it tonight. So to my first point. God is a sure refuge for those who will trust in him. And this psalm begins with some very powerful statements about who God is.

And it reminds us of who we are before him. Look at verses 1 and 2 of this psalm. It says, You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, My refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.

This God that we are hearing about here, it's been written about, is the God Most High. It is the God whom Abram, or better known to us as Abraham, as we've been looking at over the last few weeks, it is the God Most High who Abraham says in verse 14, is the maker of heaven and earth, and is the God Most High who has delivered your enemies into your hand.

If you look at Genesis 14. This is the God who can do anything that we're talking about here. This is the one true living God who promised descendants and a nation through that old man Abraham and his old wife Sarah.

That's the God we're talking about. And this God, he is the Almighty God. The Almighty God who fulfills his promises. And there is nothing this God cannot do.

[4 : 58] My God is so big. My God is so strong. There is nothing my God cannot do. It's a great psalm. Well, with such a might and such a presence, you would think that you would want to stay, you would want to avoid and stay away from this powerful, most high and almighty God, this God who can do anything.

You'd think you'd want to stay away from someone like that. I try to avoid people of power because I don't want them to expose my faults. I try to stay away from people who are smarter than me because I don't want to be seen as dumb in their presence.

It's a bit of a confession. I don't want to do things which are going to look weak and pathetic. So I try to run from situations like that. But notice what this psalm says here.

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.

God doesn't want us to remain distant from him. He doesn't want us to run from him and to try to create our own shallow refuge to suit ourselves. It doesn't work.

[6 : 22] But to those who trust in him as this psalmist does, they will see his all-loving nature as well as his all-knowing nature. And in him they will find shelter and a sure place of refuge.

Now God's refuge is the sense of his all-powerful presence grasped by faith, ultimately, as we see in the New Testament, in Jesus Christ. Now from the turmoil of life, the suffocating siege of a godless society, the Christian can always abide in the shadow of the Almighty God, who is the quiet refuge of which a godless world, which we look around us and see today, is unaware.

And as we attempt to grasp, if you like, the greatness of God and his all-powerful nature and abide in his shadow, as this psalm talks about here, it then allows us to be free to be the person that he has created us to be.

It allows me to be free to be Phil Muleman. It allows you to be free to be who you are. We don't need to fear those who are smarter than us, than any of us might hope to be.

Because living in the shelter of the Most High God and abiding in the shadow of the Almighty God is the most important and the smartest thing that anyone could ever hope to do.

[7 : 58] And those who do shelter under his shadow and so on have complete and utter safety. And some years ago, I took a yacht with some friends around the Whitsundays.

And I've just come back from there, and it was a good time. But the Whitsundays are known for their islands and for their beauty. But it can also have quite rough seas and strong winds as you try to sail around there.

And one day, I had this boat. We had a 30-foot boat. And we decided to sail to an island called Butterfly Bay to get some protection from the strong southeasterly winds that were blowing at the time.

And it was quite blustery, let me tell you. And we had to sail 12 or 14 miles to this destination. And as we sailed to this island, it was blowing this gale.

And the waves within the barrier reef, between the reef and the mainland, are short and steep. And that was what was happening. We were getting blown around.

[9 : 00] Waves were sort of crashing. It was a bit like a mini Sydney to Hobart, I guess. All of us were getting wet from the wind and the waves. And some on the boat were quite worried about it tipping over.

I wasn't because I'm a man. It was pretty hairy conditions. You laugh. But as soon as we got to the shelter and refuge of Butterfly Bay, which faced north, the wind and the waves stopped.

All around us was boiling sort of sea. And we got just round this headland and the wind stopped. And the waves stopped. It was clear.

There was clear blue water, coral underneath. And we looked into the bay. And there were all these boats sheltered in Butterfly Bay.

And when you come into the shelter and refuge of God, there will always be storms going on around you. But he will protect you from them.

[10 : 10] Just as we were protected from the storms and the winds as we got into Butterfly Bay. All you need to do is keep your trust in him. Just keep your trust in God. And that's what this psalmist is claiming here.

He is claiming the great blessing that he has indeed found security with his God. He's found it. And it's great joy and blessing.

Now there are many dangers of all types around him. Just as there are dangers of all types surrounding those who would seek to follow God. Knowing first hand though God's protection of himself, he then declares in verses 3 to 8, God's protection for those who trust in him no matter what path they may journey or travel.

Just keep your trust in God. Or just keep their trust in God. And the dangers from enemies are described here in these verses by language referring to, in verse 3, the bird catcher.

Look at what it says. It says, For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler, from the bird catcher. And likewise there is also the danger of what is termed deadly pestilence, deadly disease in verse 3 and so on.

[11 : 24] In such situations the protective care of God would be given. And believers would be given refuge and hidden, metaphorically speaking, under his wings.

They would be protected just as baby chicks are protected and kept warm under the wings of its mother. Now it's interesting to note that Jesus himself uses this sort of image in Luke chapter 13 and in Matthew's gospel.

As he talks about the protection he wants to give to those followers who would come to him. Protecting them from the enemies that surround them daily.

And why does God want to protect us like this? Those of us who are so undeserving of his grace and mercy, why does he want to do it? It is because God is a faithful God.

He is an almighty and everlasting God who created the heavens and earth and he is a faithful God. He is faithful to his covenant promises and he would serve like a shield to protect them, as verse 4 suggests.

[12 : 38] And then he goes on in verses 5 and 6 saying, you will not fear the terror of the night or the arrow that flies by day or the pestilence that stalks in the darkness or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

Now we who live in a middle class society, where there are good roads to travel along and police protection, only a phone call away and society generally is pretty well ordered.

Just look at the Olympics, for example, to see how astounding the order and safety that was provided there. We live in a pretty safe society.

For those of us in that sort of society, which are you and me here, we may find it hard to see the significance of God's protection and the psalmist's words in these verses. But for the original hearer who had to travel, and even for travellers in many parts of our world today who must proceed on roads where there is no civil order and no police protection, these would be words of great significance.

Where their journey has no guarantee of safe conduct, here we see that the God Almighty is the escort who makes safe passage possible. And as a result, all those who attack in verses, that we read about in verses 7 and 8, what happens to them?

[14 : 02] They're done in. Why? Because this escort, that is the God Most High, is powerful. And no intruder, no matter how powerful they may be, whether they be human or otherwise, will cause harm to God's own.

Now it's important to understand that these verses cannot mean that no child of God has ever been struck down in the treachery of darkness or swept to death by overwhelming pestilence or illness, such as cancer.

It happens, doesn't it? I have sadly seen committed Christians die from terrible illnesses. I've also known of one Christian acquaintance who has been murdered.

And we hear of many Christians being persecuted, tortured and killed in various places throughout the world. Paul talked about that in the notices at the beginning of the sermon.

What these verses are really saying is that although God does not always intervene miraculously to save people from physical death or treachery or treachery or whatever it may be, the person of faith whose life is rooted in the shadow of the almighty God will pass through physical death, realising that this life is but a fleeting moment and that eternity with God in heaven is theirs.

[15 : 34] And just as we can trust God to look after those who are his children, we can trust that God will deal justly with those who have ignored his ways.

So to my second point, in verses 9 through to 13, we read of God's gracious care for his people. Look at verses 9 and 10.

Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.

Anyone who can truly say, the Lord is my refuge, has found a place of safety. And they can rest in the thought that nothing, nothing happens outside.

God knows all the circumstances of his people and directs them for their good. Often we can't see that because we don't have the mind of God, do we?

[16 : 45] But again, we have to trust that God is in control and knows what is going on. Part of the human dilemma is that we try to control everything and make things happen the way we want them to happen and when we want them to happen, thinking that my way is the right way and only my way.

We assume in those situations the mind of God. And that's where we fail. And that's where things go wrong. And that's why there is so much fighting and there is so much chaos in our world.

Just look at the Middle East situation at the moment. People running around trying to play God rather than trusting God, the Most High, who is the creator of heaven and earth, of all that is.

They don't put their trust in that God who has control over everything. But look at the protection and safe passage we can expect as God's people when we do walk in his shadow.

Look at verses 11 to 13. He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

[18 : 08] You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. Protection for God's follower here is guaranteed by a host of heavenly bodyguards, angels who are armed and who will fend off every threat including sharp stones on the path and snakes and lions that lie in wait to devour.

this isn't just some bodyguard that protects you on the odd occasion. This here is full time protection because as God's people, as his people, we, it seems, are given royal protection.

We are well and truly cared for. We are safe under his guard. And without this type of protection and escort, we are doomed to trouble and ultimately to death.

We may still be exposed as we journey along the path of life. There's no doubt about that. Temptations and troubles of all sorts will come our way. But if we seek to follow God's ways, standing in his shadow, no harm can come our way.

Now the psalmist has assured his readers and his listeners of God's protection here in these first few verses. And it truly is inspiring stuff. As you read this psalm over and over, you see God's protection and the witness of it, I guess.

[19 : 46] And in a sense, it motivates us to put more trust in God. They're good words. But there is an amazing turn of events in the remaining verses of this psalm.

And in these concluding verses, we see my third point, that we see God's own word of promise, which is given on top and above the psalmist's own words.

In other words, what we're seeing here is direct speech from God in the form of a decree of assurance, which seems to respond to the trust of verses 1 through to 13.

It seems to be the faith of the speaker in verses 1 to 13 that evokes this response of assurance from God. One writer says of these verses, Yahweh responds because the speaker has yearned passionately for Yahweh.

Yahweh is faithful and responsive to those who rely on him and indeed love him. Look at the commitment that we see from God here in verses 14 to 16.

[20 : 59] And remember, this is God speaking in these two verses. Words in the first person that says, I will deliver, I will protect, I will answer, I will be with them, I will rescue them and by implication I will honour them, I will satisfy them and again by implication I will show them my salvation.

God almighty, God the most high is offering us protection here. What words of assurance are they? We, like the psalmist, are called to trust God.

We are called to put all our hope, all of our trust and assurance in him. And when we do, God is resolved to answer.

You see, he protects and fulfils his promises to us. And this isn't necessarily seen in our daily living. although it is true that God both preserves life and provides daily spiritual and physical food.

But he is resolved to answer with the assurance to all his followers, guaranteeing eternal life for all who seek to put their trust in him. What's the proof of that guarantee?

[22 : 32] The proof of that guarantee is sealed with Jesus' own blood, poured out for his people on the cross about 2,000 years ago. Because there at that cross he paid the price for sin, he paid the price for evil and for human wickedness.

God's salvation is revealed entirely in Jesus Christ. Trusting in him guarantees us that he will protect, he will look after us, put his wings over us so to speak.

As the psalmist points out in Psalm 91. That little boy that I told you about at the beginning trusted the Christian lady on the beach with his money while he swam.

Small thing, something to laugh at. But I want to ask, is your trust in God, is that trust everything you've got?

Have you got your whole selves committed to serving God? Do your lives trust totally in God? Do you put your work, do you put that trust in God?

[23 : 51] Do you entrust your family to God? Do you entrust your future decisions and so on to the will of God as you journey through this life?

Let me read to you verses 5 and 6 of that first hymn we sung, Safe in the Shadow of the Lord, which is really a reflection on Psalm 91.

Strong in the everlasting name and in my Father's care, I trust in him, I trust in him who hears and answers prayer. Safe in the shadow of the Lord, possessed by love divine, I trust in him, I trust in him and meet his love with mine.

Amen.