

“FOR SPIRITUAL SUPPORT”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Belleville, IL
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(transcribed from audio file)

Our scripture reading this morning is Psalm 91.

*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.”
For he will deliver you from the snare of the hunter
and from the deadly pestilence;
he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and defense.
You will not fear the terror of the night
or the arrow that flies by day
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.
A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.
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.
For 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.
You will tread on the lion and the adder;
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.*

*Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble;
I will rescue them and honor them.
With long life I will satisfy them
and show them my salvation. NRSVue*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Well, this week I'm going to be dropping off my youngest at college. I have 4 children. This is my fourth time doing this. I'm certain that I've learned my lesson and I will not respond in the way I have for all the other 3, with painful tears and gut wrenching upsetness in my tummy as I drive away from a campus. Here's the thing, when it happened with the first one, I didn't know what to expect. I was dropping her off in Philadelphia. I drove my daughter out there and she's like, okay. You guys can go now. You can get the vibes. She's ready to run off with these new friends and it's really time for us to go.

So, you do the last little hug and then you do the turn away and you walk away. You don't look back over your shoulder, unless you're Rob and you do, but you shouldn't. As I was walking back to our van in the parking garage, I felt this anxiousness and I felt like sick to my stomach. Feeling kind of upset, but I couldn't name, what is this? I mean, she's got a great head on her shoulders. She's going to be fine. What is going on here?

When I sat in the van, turned the engine on, it suddenly occurred to me. I had a name for this feeling. I had a basket to put all of these symptoms into, and it would make sense. It was simply this – it's over. And that sounds over dramatic, but I remember thinking, it's over. This chapter of life where I'm dad of this little kid. You know, whatever lessons I had hoped to impart to them, I hope I got it by then, cause we're entering a new phase of life. Did I teach her everything she needed to know?

Now when we dropped the second one off at college I had this in my mind already. I wonder if it will feel the same? It did. I wonder if I'll get teared up again? I did. I wonder if I'll have that same exact thought? I did. On some level I just wanted them to be okay and that we did everything we could leading to that moment, but you don't know for certain, and you understand that the promises of Gods watching over you don't make you invulnerable to every mishap that comes along in life. You

know that. And yet you find yourself praying, Oh God, wherever I messed up, fill the gap. Oh God, I hope I taught them everything they need to know.

This Psalm 91 that we have is an expression of confidence that God will be there during difficult times, during stressful times, during times when we are worried or when we're overwhelmed. In many ways, Psalm 91 is like another version of Psalm 23. If you read Psalm 23 and then Psalm 91, you're going to hear the same kind of themes and understanding of trusting in God and what God provides in this world.

But sometimes when we, as modern Christians, hear these words, it can feel, well like it's maybe not real. Because you and I live in a world where things go wrong. Right? I mean I don't know about you but just cause I'm a Christian doesn't mean my life is perfect. Everything is great. Sometimes really horrible things happen.

So, when we hear a Psalm like this that says God will protect us, God will provide for us, we run the risk of simply dismissing it as kind of like a biblical Hallmark card. It sounds nice, but you can't live in a Hallmark card. But the truth is that this scripture has real truth for us to embrace and the writers of this lived in a world that was not perfect either and had conflicts and had messiness and had things to deal with. And yet they held on to these words and they've come to us thousands of years later.

Our first clue is, look at the beginning of this Psalm where it says, those who dwell with God; those who abide with God, who were in the shadow of the Most High. This opening statement sets up a kind of, if then clause to the entire Psalm which is to say, all that I'm about to tell you in this Psalm is predicated, is built off the idea that you have to be with God for these benefits of this covenant, relationship to be felt and to be experienced. It's not something where like God is on our beck and call to come in and save the day whenever we want.

"Hey, God, get this! I know we haven't talked in a while but I'm going to blame you if this doesn't go right, so fix it!"

Many times our prayer life can be captured by phrases like that. And so, when God doesn't hop to it and take care of things the way we want or we experience some of those hardships, then we just start throwing away God and throw away faith.

But whatever this Psalm is offering to us, the psalmist is saying, part of experiencing this is living a life where you dwell with God, where all that you do, your life is inter-twined with your faith. It's not a side hustle you've got going, your faith is an

integral part of your life. It's a filter through which you pass through the decisions, the attitudes, the responses, the life that you live and when you do that, then there is a different experience to life. That's the first point the psalmist is trying to make. This is what changes life, this covenant relationship we have with God and it's an active faith, not a passive faith where we sit back and God just showers down all the protection and all of the adjustments for us. So, that's the first part of it.

The second part of this is that the people of God knew that things didn't always go right. They had plenty of calamities upon them and what they understood was that the protection that is spoken of here is a protection of our real inner spiritual self. That this protection means you will never have a bad thing happen to you but that there is a part of you that cannot be broken when you have that relationship with God. There is a part of you that is nearly invulnerable in this world because you have that kind of relationship. This is poetic language. It's trying to find words to express the type of protection that we have, this protection of our spiritual selves and gives very real physical counts to it. At times we can get caught up on that. Well, it says it's going to protect me from all the harms and evils.

A lot of the Psalms use a poetic kind of hyperbolic language to try to draw you into like try to picture this amazing protection and care and love that God has for you. Let me paint these big pictures of what that would look like in very physical terms so that you understand what I am trying to tell you about what God has for you, spiritually in your life.

I'm a very particular person about language and words. Here's a pet peeve of mine. I hate gratuitous superlatives. What I mean by that is when people say, "Oh, this is the best pizza I've ever had in my life. It's the best in the world." Is it? Is it? I don't think so.

Or, I had someone say, "Oh, this is my best friend." I'm your best friend? We hardly hang out and you call me a best friend. This is awkward all of a sudden. They say, "Oh, is this your best friend?" I'm like, "No!" Because you only get one. That's why they call it best. So, you can't just throw around those superlatives. If you're gonna have a best friend, have a **best** friend. If you're gonna have the **best** pizza you ever had, it's **the best** pizza. There can't be multiples, then it's not the best anymore.

So, when that kind of Christian mindset reads Psalms like this, it's like protect me from everything. But to understand, and I've had to grow up a little bit in my life. I've had to understand that when someone says, this is my best friend, what they

mean is, this is a really, really good friend. This person is top tier. This person and I have deep connection. I'm not really trying to tell you this is **the** best. So, see I'm maturing. I'm getting better.

In the same way the psalmist is giving us these hyperboles describing this incredible physical protection so that you and I can get it through our skulls what this spiritual protection might be for us.

In Psalm 23 we literally are not walking through valleys, we are literally not being led to water bodies. Okay? In the same way, this protection is meant to give us a picture so that we understand what it is trying to tell us spiritually.

One of the other things the psalmist is trying to say to us is that this abiding in God and having this kind of relationship, one of the ways it does protect us is that it gives us the very best path to live in. Because in our lives of faith we come to our own motivations, our own idea of what the good life is. How much attention to put into this whole God thing and how much do we just kinda make it a side thing we do every once in a while.

What the psalmist is trying to say is that if you want the very best life, the one that is going to be in the end of time the very best life for you, it's the one in which you have this type of relationship with God. It's the one in which you are making that a filter that you run your life through; the one which you do truly abide in your faith and giving it that full attention.

Our spiritual health gets ignored so much. It's kind of like your physical health in that not until you have a problem that you start doing something about it. Or with our mental health, we just hope the default works until something happens and then we start doing things on purpose. Then our spiritual health can fall into that same type of, I'll just do a couple of things once in a while, faith related and hope it just kinda works its way out. Our spiritual health needs that type of attention too. And when we do that, the very best life we can have is waiting for us.

And the psalmist is trying to affirm that while it won't get rid of all the bad stuff in your life, it's not going to lead to a better path if you try to navigate through other motivations. These are the affirmations that the psalmist is trying to give to us, that this type of protection is a spiritual protection which is sent into our lives, but it depends upon us putting in the active work of our faith to abide in God and to dwell in that shadow of the Lord.

I watched this video recently online of these two people in a car and I don't know where it was, but there was a lot of rain and a lot of flooding. There was this tunnel and they were driving into the tunnel where the water was deeper and deeper because it went down and came back up again. They're passing cars that have already been stopped because there was too much water. The water was halfway on the cars sitting next to them as they are driving into this, and they are videoing the whole thing. I thought that was interesting. But anyway, the passenger was videoing the whole thing, and you can hear the driver going "Oh God help me! Oh God help me! Help me get through. Oh God help me get through. Oh God! Oh God!" And I mean this is a prayer that went for the entire video.

"O God help me. Help me get through. Oh God! Oh God, help me get through". And they are just going deeper and deeper into the water. It gets to the point where the water is splashing up over the hood of the car. As the water rises and they are trying to navigate around floating objects coming at them as well as cars that have completely stalled out in this tunnel filled with water.

"Oh God help me! Oh God help me!" All I'm thinking is maybe God's telling you to stop. Maybe instead of praying out loud so much, maybe just stop and listen for a second. You might hear a word of the Lord going, "I think you better stop. I think reverse sounds like a good gear right now." But she just kept going.

"Oh, God help me! Help me! Help me, God. Oh, help me!" And I found myself, halfway through the video, there was a dark side of me that wanted that car to get stalled and they'd get stuck. I'm just going to admit that to you right now because I thought, somebody's gotta learn a lesson here. You know what I'd do to one of my kids if they did that?

"Oh God, help me! Help me!" And then they get past the halfway point, and they are actually going back up again and the water is starting to go down. "God help me. Help me. Just let me get through."

But then there was this good part of me. I want you to know there is a good part of me. There is this good part of me that was like, I think she's gonna make it and I was kinda rooting for her and kinda not. But kinda. And then she made it through, and I thought to myself, that's us. That's us! We are continually just driving where we want to drive and going down the paths that we want to go and we're just saying to God, "God I know this is a crazy path but help me. Help me God. Help me. Help me get through this."

There are a lot of times in our lives where we're not dwelling with God and the hardships that come to us is because we are just so busy on our own priorities that we're not even considering what God might be saying to us. There's enough calamity that we can't control, but what the psalmist reminds us, is that in a life where we abide with God and seek Gods guidance there will be less of those. It will be better, physically and spiritually. We just have to decide if it's worth it. In the years that you have to live, is it worth it to dwell in the presence of God? Is it worth it to abide in your faith, or is faith something that you can just put off to the side and tap into whenever you find yourself in deep water?

Imagine how good life could be if we just dwelled in the presence of God.

To God be the glory.

Halleluiah and Amen.