

“Placing our Trust in God”

Psalms 91:1-16
July 25, 2010

Psalms 23
St. James UCC

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The 91st Psalm is one of the most impressive testimonies in the Bible that trusting in God gives us strength. To trust in God is to have a personal and intimate relationship with the very source of our life and being. When we trust in God, we build our lives upon a foundation that is firm and secure. From that personal relationship spring blessings and strength which flow to us. The more we place our trust in God, the more strength we will find in the face of danger and even despair.

The 91st Psalm talks about a whole variety of dangers that the Israelite people will be protected from - plagues, attacks, violence - even threats like lions and poisonous snakes. Many of these are not threats that we worry about on a daily basis, but these threats were all very real to the people of Israel.

If we read this Psalm literally, we come away with the impression that it is saying that God will protect us physically from all dangers, from all harm. Yet we know from our own experience that that is not what happens. Good Christians get in car accidents. Good Christians face cancer and other diseases. Good Christians face all of the other ailments and physical afflictions that are a part of life in our world today.

So, what is it that this Psalm is saying then? If God does not protect us from all physical harm - what is the promise that is made here?

In this Psalm the images that are used are images of physical danger, but they are used as metaphors in an attempt to talk with us about dangers that are far more serious - and just as real. You see, time after time we are reminded in the Bible that those things that happen to our bodies - both good and bad - are not the most important things in life. Our relationship with God, and, as part of that, the health of our soul is understood to be far more important than what happens to our bodies. The Bible very realistically understands that our bodies are only temporary. We use them for 60 or 80 or perhaps even a hundred years, but only for a while. It is our soul and our relationship with God that are eternal, and so what is happening in them is far more important in the context of eternity.

Another way of expressing this is found in the 23rd Psalm. That's a beautiful psalm, one which we often lean upon in difficult times. Remember with me those words that we said together just a few minutes ago. Part way through the Psalm it says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Think about those words. Nowhere in them do we hear a promise that says: "as a Christian you'll be spared all pain and suffering. Life will be easy and comfortable, and nothing will ever happen that you don't want." I can't find those words in there anywhere, even though sometimes we look for them awfully hard.

Remember again what the psalmist really says: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" - in other words, even when life is at its toughest, even when I'm facing something that I really don't want to have to face, even in the face of intense pain or suffering, even in the face of death, I will fear no evil. Notice that it doesn't say, "I will never fear death". It doesn't tell us not to be afraid or that difficult things will never happen to us. Nowhere in this Psalm does it promise that God will protect us from all pain, and that life will always be easy and comfortable.

What the psalmist does say clearly to each of us, is that we will not face those difficult and painful times alone. God's promise to each of us is that God will be there with us, walking with us, providing us the strength that we need, and calling us onward to new levels of faith and faithfulness, for God is there in good times and bad, easy and difficult, in joy and in sorrow - in all of our experiences of life, God is there with us.

The 91st Psalm uses physical metaphors to describe God's love and protection, because these are images that communicate clearly to us that God will be with us always. God cares about us intimately, knowing us through and through, knowing us better than we often know ourselves. God cares about us infinitely, for there is nothing in life or in death that can separate us from God's love.

God cares about us eternally - not just yesterday, today, and tomorrow, but with a love that spans more generations than we can even imagine. That's part of the perspective that God brings to our relationship, for we're concerned with the here and now. We're often concerned with what we want today and what might happen in the next few minutes or hours. God is concerned with eternity, and what is really best for us - not just in the short run, not just in our lives here on earth - lives which are lived in the short run as God looks at things. After all, in the face of eternity, what is a hundred years? It's not even the blink of an eye. God is concerned about what is best for us in the long run, for God's love is a love that comes to us eternally.

Back in 1983 Henri Nouwen wrote this about Thanksgiving. "Thanksgiving Day! There is probably no day I liked so much in the United States as this day. I can remember clearly all the Thanksgiving Days I celebrated in the last ten years. It was

always a day of being together with friends, and truly a day for saying thanks. In many ways, it struck me as a more spiritual or religious day than Christmas; no gifts, few commercial preparations, just a coming together to express gratitude for life and all the blessings we have received.

“Today I miss being in the United States, as do many people here at the language institute (in Bolivia). I could feel it at the dinner table and also in the mood during breaks between classes.

“Still, what is important is to be grateful today and to give thanks. I am more and more convinced that gratitude is one of the most sublime of human emotions. It is an emotion that reaches out far beyond our own self to God, to all of creation, to the people who gave us life, love, and care. It is an emotion in which we experience our dependencies as a gift and realize that in the celebration of our dependencies we become most aware of who we truly are: a small but precious part of creation and, above all, of the human family. On this day we can say: It is good “just” to be human and it is in our common humanity that we can recognize God’s love.”

God loves us and protects us - not promising that all accidents or ailments will be kept away, not promising that these bodies of ours will be protected from all danger and become immortal. For God is far less concerned about our bodies than about our souls. God's promise is to walk with us, to be with us through all that we experience in life. God promises that our joys will be greater and our burdens lighter, because we do not walk alone. God is and will always be there in good times and bad, easy and difficult, in times that are painful and those that are pain free - God is there with us always.

In God's presence we find the greatest of all experiences in life - that of knowing that God cares. We do live in a responsive universe. God is a prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God. God cares about us. God walks with us. God offers us guidance and renewal and always hope, for when we know, when we really know that God is with us, then nothing is hopeless, and we live with a faith that is strong and straight-forward, like the psalmist who sang, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou are with me”. God is with us always, so let us walk through this day without fear.

Amen.