



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 9th July 2006
by Mark Ashton

10p

Psalm 91

The Shadow of the Almighty

Introduction

I must begin with an apology for last week's sermon. (If you were here this morning, you'll be aware that apologies from your preachers are in the air today). I do not think it was very good. By that I don't mean you probably did not enjoy hearing it, or did not benefit from it (although that may well be true as well), but that I taught Psalm 86 incompetently—misleadingly indeed, because I made no reference at all to Jesus Christ.

Did you notice? My son-in-law did; and he asked me afterwards, with the appropriate respect that a son-in-law should show to his father-in-law (but also perhaps slightly disingenuously), "Mark, when is it right to preach Christ from the Psalms?" To which the answer is, of course, "Always".

For the Christian believer, the Old Testament can never be taught properly without reference to Christ. We must always have this diagram in the back of our minds when we handle the Old Testament [Illustration 1]. The whole Bible is

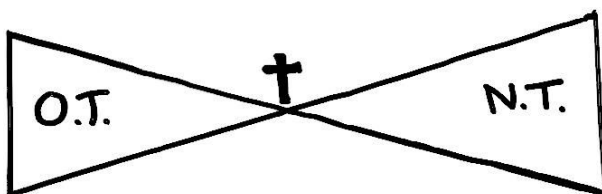


Illustration 1

about Jesus and we will never understand it without Him. We pass the Old Testament through Jesus to make sense of it today. (We are not Jews or Muslims, for whom, remember, the Old Testament is also sacred scripture; but we cannot possibly read it as they would). So I am sorry I failed you last week. I do apologise.

I always find it a struggle when we start a new

book of the Bible in our preaching. I struggle with how to handle the material, how to find its melodic line, how to relate it properly to Jesus Christ. And I have been struggling again this week. Not to relate Psalm 91 to Jesus—it has the unusual distinction of being the only passage of the Bible which the Bible tells us was quoted by the Devil; and he quoted it at, of all people, Jesus! as we heard in our first reading (Matthew 4:6).

No—my problem with this delightful poem, with its wonderful images of safety and security in the face of all manner of danger, is what does it mean?

1) The Problem of the Psalm

It begins with a lovely picture of what it is to be a believer: *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust"* (vv 1-2). It is to dwell in God, to make Him our fortress and refuge. What really matters about any person we may meet in life is never apparent from the surface of their lives. It lies deep under the surface, and it concerns where they find their refuge: Where do they go for shelter?

Notice from verses 9 and 10 that the believer lives in two places: *If you make the Most High your dwelling—even the LORD, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent* (vv 9-10). He lives in his tent (or in my case, The Round Church Vicarage, round the corner in Manor Street), and he lives in God. And it is what we are in secret, in the unseen dwelling place of the heart, that makes us what we really are.

But what then are we to make of these amazing promises, extended to such a person?—*Surely he*

will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. If you make the Most High your dwelling—even the LORD, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone (vv 3-12).

Don't they sound wonderful? Aren't they just the sort of texts you find on Christian posters of some contented-looking animal, or glorious sunrise, which your Christian friends stick on the back of their loo doors so that as you sit there on the loo you stare at this fat, smug cat without a care in the world, and read: *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty* (v 1) or *If you make the Most High your dwelling—even the LORD, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent* (vv 9-10)?

But how do we apply these verses (as we pass the anniversary of those London bombings) to a Christian killed or maimed in a terrorist outrage? Or drowned by an Indian Ocean tsunami? Or caught in the path of a category 5 hurricane? Because those things certainly happen to believers, don't they? Do you remember that sniper in 'Finding Private Ryan', quoting these and other verses to himself in the heat of combat? But a shell from a Panzer got him nonetheless.

And that is often what happens in life. So what does verse 7 mean then? *A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you* (v 7). Or verse 10: *then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent?* We have to read our Bibles with our eyes tight shut to the real world to make any immediate, physical sense of these promises. And the Bible should never be read that way. We are to read it with a squint, one eye on the text and one eye on the world, if we would make sense of what God is saying to us.

So, what did it mean to those who first heard it? Did they enjoy a degree of divine protection unknown to believers today? Or is it all just dramatic hyperbole—does the psalmist have a poetic license to exaggerate in order to achieve a comforting effect on the reader? I was talking last week about poetic imagery in the psalms, and is this just an example of that? All for effect?

Or...is this all about Jesus? The devil applied it to Him, and Jesus did not contradict Satan. So is that 'you' in verses 3-13 really Jesus, and, in that case, did He enjoy a unique and extraordinary protection from God? Well, as you remember, that was exactly how Satan tried to tempt Him to apply the psalm, and Jesus would have none of it.

If the devil tempted Jesus to misuse the promises of this psalm, I think it is quite likely he will try to get us to misapply them too. So we need to be on the alert.

There is a clue for us at the end of verse 8: *and see the punishment of the wicked*. What is actually being depicted for us in the vivid images of the Psalm is *the punishment of the wicked*: i.e. the final judgement. This is a picture in physical terms of Judgement Day—as sudden and unexpected as a trap, as dangerous as a deadly disease, as universal as the daylight, as certain as the night, as terrifying as warfare, as horrific as a plague. And in the face of all that—(God's certain judgement on those who ignore Him and live for themselves)—the believer is safe: *Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked* (vv 3-8).

2) The Promise of the Psalm:

(a) The punishment of the wicked dealt with

When the devil quoted verses 11 and 12 to Jesus in the wilderness, he ought to have read on: *For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion*

and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent (vv 11-13), because Jesus was the One Who trod the serpent under foot. He was the One foretold at the very beginning of the Bible, Who came to crush the serpent's head. The cross and the resurrection broke the devil's power over the human race.

So it is Jesus Whom God is addressing, first and foremost, in those final verses of the psalm—*"Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation"* (vv 14-16). That's a promise of the resurrection and the ascension. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah spoke of Jesus' death in these terms: *"though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied"* (Isaiah 53:10b-11a). *"With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation"* (Psalm 91:16).

The punishment of the wicked has been dealt with on our behalf by Christ. The pestilence, the arrows, the darkness—they were all born by Him on the cross. And so believers, (you and I if that is what we are) enter into the experience of this psalm through Jesus. Because He was faithful, even to death on a cross, so (verse 4) *His faithfulness can be our shield and rampart*. Because He bore, in our place, all the horrors of verses 3-8, God's judgement on sin, you and I do not need to. The punishment of the wicked has been dealt with. But does that mean that Psalm 91 has nothing at all to say about protection in the present? Well, I think it does, and I've called this

(b) God's purposes being fulfilled

We enter the psalm through Jesus; and Jesus was miraculously protected by God to fulfil God's purpose for Him. Not miraculous protection for Him to throw Himself from a spectacular height off the Jerusalem temple before the public gaze; but, when the people of Nazareth tried to throw Him over a cliff, He walked right through the middle of them and went on His way (Luke 4:29-30), because His time had not yet come. But it would come: *For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you*

will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent (vv 11-13).

John Wesley once said, when questioned about all the dangers he was facing as he preached his way across Britain and America in the eighteenth century revival, "I am immortal, until my work is done". Do you know that every one of us who is a believer here this evening can say that? "I am immortal, until my work is done". That is not a promise of longevity. (This may be the last sermon God means me to preach. A double-decker bus may get me in Hobson Street on my way home on my bike tonight).

No—it is not a divine promise of long and safe lives for us: it is a promise of purpose and meaning for our lives. When Jesus takes the punishment of the wicked for us, it is so that we may start to make the Most High our dwelling, begin to know the presence and purpose of God in our lives. The angels were to lift up Jesus in their hands (v 12) in order that He might tread upon the cobra and trample the serpent (v 13). (In fact, when you think about it, He was not preserved from suffering, but for suffering). God brings us under His shadow in order that we may serve Him.

So, perhaps the image at the beginning of the Psalm is not quite as static as it seems. Shadows do not move quickly, but they do move. You carefully find that shady corner of the car park when you park your car in the morning, only to return after lunch to find it in the full glare of the afternoon sun, and all the Kit Kats melted in the glove compartment. To stay in the shade you need to move. And so what we are to seek in our lives is not the static comfort and security of God's protection, but the meaning and purpose of God's will for us. Stay in the centre of His will, and we will be right in the centre of His security. Do we want to know God's protection on our lives? Then we must find His will for our lives, and do it.

Last week we saw that according to Psalm 86 the secret of personal wholeness and integrity lay outside ourselves in the will of God for us. This week we find that the key to protection, personal security and safety lies in just the same place: in the will of God for me. I need to seize that will, to seek it and to live it, if I would be safe. It's not the sort of safety the insurance companies talk to us about. In fact, the sort of security and comfort we want for ourselves may be exactly what Satan wants for us. He loves to get us to expect God to

cocoon us from hardship and pain and suffering, so that when they come our way we blame God and our faith goes out the window.

John Arrowsmith 1602-59, (seventeenth century Puritan, who started out at St Johns College, but, I'm glad to say, ended as Master of Trinity), wrote, 'God preserveth us, not as we do fruits that are to last but a year, in sugar; but as flesh (I think we would say 'meat') for a long voyage in salt: we must expect in this life much brine and pickle, because our heavenly Father preserveth us as those whom He resolveth to keep for ever, in and by dangers themselves'. We use different preservatives today, but the picture is clear—not sugar, but salt.

Psalm 91 is not about a secure life on earth. It will be a problem, if I read it that way. It is about eternal life with God, beginning now amidst many tribulations and trials until death brings an end to all pain and suffering and ushers us finally into His presence forever. In the meantime, "I am immortal, until my work is done", kept for God's purpose for me: ***He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty*** (91:1). If you want the shadow, get into the will, and you'll know the protection.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)