

Sermons on Psalms:

Faith for a Dark Day (Ps 91)

- INTRODUCTION.
 - It was the worst attack in American history, and it burned into our brains a series of heartbreaking images that will stay with us forever—the Twin Towers falling, the Pentagon exploding, Flight 93 crashing into the ground, a firefighter carrying away a flag-draped victim, the twisted rubble of Ground Zero.
 - But, the dreadful events of that day have been repeated many times over—the bombing of trains in Madrid, the bombing of busses in London, the bombing of a nightclub in Bali.
 - If the world stands for another million years, brutality will continue to be a way of life for so many.
 - You see, the events of September 11, 2001 are not really unique in human history. Violence & brutality have been on this earth for millennia.
 - When Cain’s sacrifice was rejected by God, he called his brother Abel out into the field. We then read, “When they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him” (Gn 4:8).
 - Since the time of Abel’s murder, brutality has been seen hundreds of times over—whether that brutality be from the Assyrians, Attila the Hun, Hitler, or Osama bin Laden.
 - As we think of brutality, there is one question that haunts us to our core, “Where is God in all of this?”
 - Tonight, we could answer the question: “Where was God on 9/11?”
 - Yet, doing so would, in many ways, be an exercise in futility.
 - We saw the devastation of that day, but we saw it on our TVs.
 - We mourned that day, but we mourned for strangers, not our own families.
 - We suffered loss that day, but it was more the loss of an innocence than it was the loss of someone near and dear to our hearts.
 - None of us suffered personally because of 9/11, but we have all suffered our own 9/11s.

- We have all suffered loss so unimaginable, words could not express the anguish.
 - We have all mourned for those who meant more to us than life itself.
 - Each of us has suffered devastation in one form or another.
 - At those times, if we are perfectly honest, want to know the answer to one question: “Where is God in all of this?”
 - We can take comfort in the fact that we are not the first to suffer, nor are we the first to ask such gut-wrenching questions.
 - When Job lost everything, he questioned for days on end where God was.
 - Jesus himself, as he was dying at Golgotha, “cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mt 27:46).
 - In tonight’s text, the psalmist spends no time questioning where God is, but he firmly puts his trust in God. We wish to explore this passage tonight in order that we might have “Faith in a Dark Place.”
 - READ TEXT.
- THE NAMES OF GOD USED HERE TEACH US ABOUT “FAITH FOR A DARK DAY.”
 - God is first referred to as “the Most High” in v 1.
 - “Most High” refers to God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.
 - The idea is that God made this world & God reigns over this world.
 - Scripture repeatedly speaks of God’s reign over the affairs of men.
 - “The Most High rules the kingdom of men” (Dan 4:32).
 - The context is the refusal of Nebuchadnezzar to give glory to God for all that God had bestowed upon him.
 - Thus, the king was driven from civilization until he was prepared to acknowledge God’s sovereignty over kingdoms.
 - “I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns’” (Rv 19:6).
 - What a blessed thought!
 - When terrorists flew planes into buildings, God was still in control.
 - When this nation—or any nation—goes to war, God remains in control.
 - When people go to the polls on November 4 to elect a President, God remains in control.

- God is also referred to as the Almighty in v 1.
 - The Hebrew is literally “El Shaddai” & likely means “God of the mountain.”
 - The idea, of course, is one of strength or might. Our God has great might.
 - “Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God” (Ps 62:11).
 - “By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness, O God of our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas; the one who by his strength established the mountains, being girded with might” (Ps 65:5-6).
 - How great it is to know that our God is El Shaddai, the Almighty!
 - Terrorists can come & knock down buildings in a display of power, but my God has more power.
 - An illness can come & drain my body of all strength, but my God has all power.
 - There is likely a closely associated idea here & that is that our God is the God of the patriarchs.
 - God says to Moses, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them” (Ex 6:3).
 - God established his power among the patriarchs—he gave Abraham a child in his old age, he wrestled with Jacob, & he promised them all to make of them a great nation.
 - The God who shelters us is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God who fulfilled his promise & his power among them.
- He is also referred to as the LORD [Yahweh] in v 1.
 - God revealed himself to Moses as Yahweh.
 - As Moses prepares to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, he wonders what he should tell the people of Israel God’s name is.
 - God says to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you”” (Ex 3:14).
 - The idea in this name is that God is eternal.
 - The four living creatures around the throne praise God saying, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Rv 4:8).
 - What a blessed thought to know that God is eternal.
 - The Twin Towers stood for roughly 30 years before they were destroyed, but God has always been & he cannot be destroyed.
 - We might live on this earth no more than 65 years or so, but God does not die. He is eternal.
 - Because he is eternal, God can aid us at any point in our life, and he can aid us when this life is no more.
- The psalmist also references God as “my God” in v 2.

- The word “God” here is a general term—it was used of the living God as well as idols made of wood & stone.
 - But, the psalmist refers to God as “his” God.
 - There is an intimacy in this terminology—there is a relationship.
 - It is quite akin as to referring to our spouse as “my wife” or “my husband” or our children as “our child.”
 - It’s not an affirmation of ownership as in “my house” or “my car,” but it demonstrates a unique relationship.
 - Because God is my God, he cares about me, he will help me, he will strengthen me in a dark day.
- GOD’S PROTECTION.
 - God provides broad protection here.
 - He provides bodily protection.
 - “He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from deadly pestilence” (v 3).
 - No one will be able to come and snatch by body like a fowler will a bird & no deadly pestilence will be able to kill me.
 - He also provides protection from terror.
 - “You will not fear the terror of the night” (v 5).
 - Terrorists seek to make us afraid; God will keep us from that fear.
 - He will protect us from unseen dangers.
 - “You will not fear the terror of the night” (v 5).
 - Why do kids often prefer a nightlight by which to sleep? Simply because they cannot see & that we cannot see makes us fearful.
 - God also provides individual protection.
 - “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you” (v 7).
 - God isn’t just going to protect so-and-so down the street, but God will protect me!
 - God additionally provides miraculous protection for his people.
 - “He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways” (91:11).
 - We typically think of this verse in relation to Jesus, for we know this passage from the account of Jesus’ temptation.
 - Yet, before anyone is tempted to apply this text only to Jesus, let me remind you that it was Satan who applied this text to Jesus!
 - We also know from the NT that angels serve us: “Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?” (Heb 1:14).

- I do not understand how angels minister to us today, but I do know that they do.
 - This text says some things contrary to common sense.
 - The text says that no deadly pestilence can kill me—I am sure the faithful who died during the Black Death might beg to differ.
 - The text also says that if 10,000 fell at my right hand, I would not suffer. Does that mean that if I had been in the lobby of the WTC when it imploded, I would not have died?
 - I'm sure my brethren who died on 9/11 might beg to differ.
 - From The Christian Chronicle, I know how two of my brethren specifically suffered:
 - One sister at a NYC congregation lost her husband.
 - A police sergeant who is a member of the Springfield Gardens church in Queens worked inside the WTC. It just happens that he was on sick leave on 9/11, but he lost his entire staff.
 - If this psalm is true, and God provides protection for his people, how come our brethren in NY suffered so intensely?
- WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT HOW TO APPLY THIS PSALM.
 - Anytime we honestly seek to know what the Bible teaches, the first thing we absolutely must know was how it applied to the first readers. How would the first readers have understood the text?
 - That's why, for example, when I talked about women wearing veils from 1 Corinthians 11 a few weeks ago, I spent a good deal of time talking about the significance of veils in first-century religion. We had to see how the Corinthians would have understood those instructions before we talked about modern application.
 - So, it is with this psalm. What can we learn about the original setting of this psalm to help us apply it?
 - We first need to understand that this is poetry.
 - As such the psalm uses poetical license & cannot be taken literally.
 - Some of you may not like the idea of poetic license in Scripture, but it's obviously there.
 - This psalm itself contains irrefutable poetic license: "He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge" (v 4).
 - Is God a bird that he would have pinions & wings? No, God is spirit, yet we understand what the psalmist is doing.
 - We also need to understand that this psalm was written with a specific situation in mind.
 - The situation from which this psalm has come has been lost to history.
 - Many have identified this psalm with either Moses or David, but that's conjecture.

- Even though that's conjecture, let's use that to understand the idea of chronological context.
 - If Moses wrote this psalm, perhaps it was written for Joshua so that he could have confidence as he crossed the Jordan—for him, ten thousand would fall at his right hand, but no evil would befall him; he would not die by pestilence; or by terror.
 - If David wrote it, perhaps it was a promise to Solomon that he would have this divine protection in a literal sense.
 - While we do not know the identity of the person, it's certainly plausible that these promises applied to a specific person in a generally literal sense.
 - Thus, there would be a very narrow application of the specifics of this passage just like the command for Timothy to bring Paul's cloak that he left with Carpus (2 Tm 4:13). We cannot fulfill that command any more than we can seize the literal promises in this passage.
- What should we do with this passage then?
 - We can & should learn the promise of divine protection.
 - God still provides protection for his people: Paul says to Timothy: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed" (2 Tm 4:18).
 - I'm confident that the Lord will protect us today from every evil just as he did Paul!
 - But, the truth of the matter is that a promise of protection will not keep us from dying in some great calamity.
 - We know that from experience. How many good brethren suffered directly as a result of 9/11? How many good brethren have we personally known who have left this world?
 - While we get that idea from experience, we also need to grasp it from Scripture. The Scriptures speak of God's protection while they also speak of death.
 - Speaking to his disciples about the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus says, "You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish" (Lk 20:17-18). But, immediately before this statement, Jesus says at Lk 20:16: "You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death."
 - We know Rm 8:28 by heart: "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."
 - Does that mean everything in our lives is good? Absolutely not!

- In that same context, Paul says, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” (Rm 8:35). Just because “all things work together for good” does not mean we won’t face famine or nakedness or sword!
- Now that we know that this psalm has a specific context & that’s God’s protection doesn’t rule out disaster, how should we understand this passage?
 - God protects us from disaster because God allows disaster.
 - When Satan attacked Job, he had to have permission from God to do so.
 - Satan was only allowed to take away Job’s property & his children because God allowed him to do so.
 - When that did not succeed at getting Job to curse God & die, we read that Satan again went before God. God says to Satan, “Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life” (Job 2:6).
 - Job did not die from that illness. Why? Because God said, “Satan, you cannot do that!”
 - Thus, if I had been in the lobby of the WTC when those structures collapsed, God would have allowed it. I do not know why he might allow certain people to die & certain others not to die, but I’m confident that any disaster that befalls me, God has permitted it. My confidence, therefore, is that God remains on his throne!
 - If I had been on the top floor of the WTC on 9/11, my body would surely be no more (it’s possible nothing would have been found to bury), but I would not have died.
 - Yes, Tammy would be a widow & my children would be fatherless, because my body could not have survived, but God would have miraculously saved me.
 - Here is my point—and this should be a great source of comfort: Regardless of what happens in this life, I shall not die!
 - My body can die (unless Jesus comes first, it will), my body can be shot with a bullet, my body can be racked by illness—but Justin Imel CANNOT die!
 - This is not just semantics: We must understand that our true existence is housed inside this flesh & is not this flesh.
 - We know that regardless of what happens to the bodies we inhabit, we shall not die.
 - “Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Mt 10:28).

- Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn 11:25-26).
- We previously mentioned 2 Tim 4:18.
 - Quite purposefully, I did not read the entire passage. In its entirety, we read: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom.”
 - Paul writes these words perhaps only a few days before a sword severed his head. God would not protect Paul from every evil deed by keeping that sword away from his head, but by saving his soul.
 - Therein lies our hope & our security.
 - Shortly after 9/11, President Bush & Congress founded the Department of Homeland Security.
 - While that Department has foiled several terrorist attacks, they are not the best protectors available: The Department of Homeland Security can protect our bodies, but God can protect our souls!
 - Are you his child tonight? Do you have that protection of your soul?