

Searched by the Psalms Series at Brentwood

February 21, 2009

Rest and Refuge in the Lord

**Ps 91:1-2, 9-16 & Luke 4:1-13
(Hymns – 699, 66, 371, 21[to #9])**

This Psalm celebrates the way God protects us
and the benefits that flow from that protection.

We live, it affirms, in the shelter and shadow
of the Most High and Almighty God,
the God in whom we can trust.

This is protection from all evil and scourges.
We are born up by the heavenly powers
in the face of such dangers.
God will answer our pleas for help,
be with us in trouble,
rescue us and honour us.
We will see the salvation of God
and be satisfied by it.

That's a pretty powerful promise.

This Psalm is a remarkable statement
of what God does for us.
Not might do,
not will do,
but does
for those who love Him.

The question that arose for me this week, however,
is how do we take up this remarkable promise?
How do we access this protection?
How do we gain the satisfaction
that comes from the God's sheltering salvation in Jesus Christ?

The most fundamental answer,
the one that lies at the centre of the witness of this Psalm,
is that we love God.

That is what we do together week after week.
We gather to worship and learn as an expression of our love,
singing hymns of praise,
saying prayers of acknowledgement and gratitude,
listening for the witness to God's Word in the Scriptures read and interpreted,
thinking through how best to respond this week
to the amazing grace we have encountered afresh.

This act of worship and learning
grounds us and centres us
in our love for God,
a love that arises from our satisfaction
for the salvation we experience in relationship with Jesus Christ.

The way we experience that satisfaction
is through flourishing as human beings.
There have been many interpreters of the Christian tradition
who have defined human beings primarily as 'sinners.'
Given the events we normally see on our TV screens,
hear about on our radios, and see on our computers,
I can understand that belief.
But I do not think it is true to Scripture.

I think what we find in the Scriptures
is a different picture of human beings.
We were created by God to be companions with God.
We were given a high degree of responsibility
for being stewards of the creation,
ambassadors and agents of God in the workings of the world.
With the freedom given to us by God,
we developed sinful attitudes and behaviours
which had bad consequences.
But God never gave up on his original intent
of making human beings his friends and co-workers
in this marvelous project called Earth.

He called the people of Israel
to a special place and role
in this project.
They were to be his people,
learn of his power, passions, and purpose.
They were to live the flourishing lives
he intended for all creation
and be a model for others.

In God's covenant with them,
the agreement that established a mutual accountability,
God promised to be with them and they promised to be for God.

Living lives that were for God meant living in
love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
generosity, faithfulness, gentleness,
and self-discipline,
living in these wonderful gifts of God's Spirit
summarized so well in Paul's letter to the Galatians.
This is what it means to flourish.

These are the goals towards which we grow
if we are to enjoy fully the satisfactions of salvation.

When we do not live with these attitudes
and engage in behaviours that violate these values,
we sin.

We act in ways that deny our true essence,
that deny the people God created us to be.
That essence, or soul, is not destroyed.
God created us to be his faithful people.
That purpose and promise are indestructible.

We are free to – and prone to - ignore them, dismiss them, distort them.

When we do,
the other list of attitudes and behaviours
found in Galatians comes into play:
we engage in fornication, impurity,
licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities,
strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels,
dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness,
carousing and things like these.

All of these attitudes and behaviours violate the covenant of love with God.

They distort and dismiss and damage it.
They cut people off from each other
and from God.

This is serious stuff.

Acting like this poisons the life and work of any community.

By coming to earth and to humanity afresh in Jesus Christ,
God revealed again his original intent in creation.

By taking flesh in Jesus of Nazareth,
being full of the grace and truth that still resides
deep within the souls of human beings,
God made his final statement and took his final act
for the sake of his original purpose.

This is the true humanity that successfully resisted
the devil in the wilderness,
that stood up for God's original intention
in the midst of great temptation.

In Jesus, God says we are not sinners at the core of our beings,
but forgiven friends of God
who sin far too often.

In Jesus Christ, God's promised salvation and protection is seen afresh,
in a dramatic, unique way.
A fresh start is offered to humanity.
A new humanity is initiated in Jesus Christ
through his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

God promises again, in a new covenant, to be always there
to be a loving God to whom we can always come home.
God is always ready to welcome us back into
the refreshing shade and protection
of his outstretched wings,
like an eagle welcomes and protects his young
until they are ready again to fly.

We started these reflections on the meaning of Psalm 91
with some questions.
How we take up God's remarkable promise of shelter?
How do we access this protection?
How do we gain the satisfaction
that comes from the God's sheltering salvation in Jesus Christ?

In answering those questions,
we're been taken through a retrospective
of God's intention in creating and dealing with
that special group of creatures called human beings.

The key to taking up and accessing
God's protecting salvation,
as I see it,
is that final behaviour
listed in the gifts of the Spirit in Galatians.
It is self-discipline.

That means, quite simply, that we learn to care for ourselves
the way God cares for us.

It means that we learn to see ourselves
as the forgiven friends of God,
not sinners who deserve to be punished.

It means that we learn to pay attention
to the best qualities of human beings
that lie deep within our souls,
at the very core of our beings,
rather than get distracted and misled
by attempts to find salvation
anywhere other than in its true source,
God in Jesus Christ present in the power of the Spirit.

The refuge that God provides
is a place and space
where we can encounter this God afresh,
where we can hear and feel again
the satisfying rush of this God's love
surrounding and upholding us
in all those situations that test our respect for ourselves and others.

The satisfaction of salvation
comes when we live the gifts of the Spirit
and flourish in the faith.

May these words and the insights they provoke
be acceptable and applicable, O Lord,
our strength and our redeemer.

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