

“Living in Frightening Times”

Psalm 91; Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-3, 18-20, 3:16-19 ¹

As we sit here this morning, America is at war. Energy prices and unemployment rates are setting new records. Plants and factories continue to close. GM, Chrysler, and Ford are threatened with bankruptcy. Budget deficits have reached inconceivable levels. The stock market continues to nose dive, and our retirement funds are evaporating with each passing day. Increasing numbers of us are unable to pay for our mortgages, our utilities, or even for food. Diseases are showing up that seem immune to our wonder drugs. Terror stalks in darkness and at midday. We no longer feel safe in stadiums, racetracks, airplanes or airports. Our most prosperous industries are those that make bullets, bombs, and missiles. Feeling better yet?

Though you and I have spent almost every waking minute of our lives trying to conquer these feelings, in such days as these we're painfully and frighteningly aware of our finitude and our vulnerability. And in such times as these we gather in worship to ask, *“Is there any word from the Lord”* (Jeremiah 37:17)?

Thankfully, there is. Please open your Bibles again to Psalm 91. Psalm 91 must have been written in times such as these—or worse. Psalm 91 encourages us when it talks about *“rest in the shadow of the Almighty”* (v. 1), about God's being our *“refuge, our place of safety”* (v. 2), about God's promises being our *“armor and protection”* (v. 4). In these days of concern about Homeland Security it's nice to think about being rescued *“from every trap”* and being protected *“from the fatal plague”* (v. 4).

As we buy plastic sheeting and duct tape to make our cluttered old bomb shelters safe from resurgent Russia and intransigent Iran, it's reassuring to read *“Do not be afraid of the terrors of the night, nor fear the dangers of the day, nor dread the plague that stalks in darkness, nor the disaster that strikes at midday”* (vv. 5-6).

It's important to note, though, that this inspired poem promises God's shelter, rest, refuge, and protection only if we meet certain conditions. Verse one talks about *“living in the shelter of the Most High,”* while verse two talks about *“trusting God.”* Verse 9 makes these conditions even more clear when it says *“IF you make the Lord your refuge, IF you make the Most High your shelter, [THEN] no evil will conquer you; no plague will come near your dwelling.”* And in verse 14 God says, *“I will rescue those who love me. I will protect those who trust in my name.”* That all sounds nice, but what does it mean?

What does it mean to make God our refuge and shelter, to really trust God? What does that look like in real life? Well, what such trust looks like for you may be a little different from what it looks like for me, but the Bible does identify some common themes about trusting God.

On the national level, for example, trusting God means more than putting “In God We Trust” on our money. The psalmist wrote, *“Some nations boast of their armies and weapons, but we boast in the Lord our God”* (Psalm 20:7). But when I watch hundreds of thousands of people lustily sing “I'm proud to be an American” at BMS with fighter jets roaring overhead, I find myself wondering about the nature of our boasting. It's awfully easy to put our gut-level trust in GPS-guided bombs instead of God-guided prayer.

On a personal level, trusting God has a lot to do with worry, and worry has a lot to do with fear. We don't think about fear very much, because thinking about fear causes us to feel it, and we don't like to feel fear.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on November 23, 2008.

Fear is what we feel when we perceive something we value to be in danger. At the biological level, fear stimulates our “fight or flight” response to physical danger. We feel fear not only when our own lives face immediate danger such as a near-miss on the road, but also when we confront longer-term dangers such as the diagnosis of dread disease for ourselves or someone we love.

Fear, of course, is a God-given emotion. It’s not a bad thing . . . unless it begins to control our lives. As is true with most of the “*sins that so easily beset us*” (Hebrews 12:1), fear doesn’t usually control our lives at the level of obvious terror. Terror has an objective referent with which we can effectively grapple. That’s too easy.

No, the fear that undermines our lives and that is evidence of our trusting something besides God for our security usually takes the more subtle form of anxiety or worry. Worry has only a vague referent. It’s hard to get a grip on worry. Worry usually works more or less like this:

“My son seems a little slow taking his first steps. That means he’ll probably have a hard time playing with the other children when he goes to preschool. That means he won’t have many friends in elementary school, and he’ll be a wall flower in high school. School will be such a bad experience for him that he’ll certainly never go to college. That means he’ll be stuck working for MacDonald’s all his life, which means that he won’t ever make enough money to live on his own. That means that he’ll have to live with us, because no young woman is going to want to marry a guy like that. His living with us will be such a strain that our marriage will be damaged, and our retirement—if we ever get to retire—will be a disaster.”

Have you ever experienced a train of thought like that? A similar scenario can be developed about just about anything you can imagine. Worry is bad stuff.

Jesus didn’t mince words about worry. You remember what he said: “*So I tell you, don’t worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food, drink, and clothes. Doesn’t life consist of more than food and clothing? Look at the birds. They don’t need to plant or harvest or put food in barns because your heavenly Father feeds them. And you are far more valuable to him than they are. Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? Of course not*” (Matthew 6:25-27).

Like Jesus, Psalm 91 begins by telling us to recheck our priorities. Life isn’t about stuff. Life isn’t about retirement. Life isn’t about what school our kids go to. Life is about God. It’s only about God. And our finite lives in space and time are just the preface to our eternal lives beyond space and time with God.

Once we understand that life is about God—when we understand this at the core of our hearts and wills, not just with simple and superficial agreement—then we can understand the rest of Psalm 91. But so long as we’re time-bound, we’re prisoners of fear, not servants of trust.

So what does it mean when Psalm 91 says that God “*will rescue you from every trap and protect you from the fatal plague*” (v. 3)? What does it mean when it says that “*Though a thousand fall at your side, though ten thousand are dying around you, these evils will not touch you*” (v. 7)? What does it mean that God “*orders his angels to protect you wherever you go*” (v. 11)?

Well, sometimes some of those things do happen in the way that we imagine and hope for. We go off to war and come home safely. We’re in a bad accident, and aren’t badly hurt. We receive an awful diagnosis, then treatment is wonderfully successful. But sometimes that’s not how it goes, either. Listen to these words from the “faith chapter” of Hebrews:

“But others trusted God and were tortured, preferring to die rather than turn from God and be free. They placed their hope in the resurrection to a better life. Some were mocked, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in dungeons. Some died by stoning, and some were sawed in half; others were killed with the sword” (11:35-37).

What about those folks? The Bible says that those folks trusted God, just like Psalm 91 says to do, but the protection they got is not what we’d normally want or expect, was it? Jesus addressed this problem when He said: *“When the world hates you, remember that it hated me before it hated you. . . . Do you remember what I told you? ‘A servant is not greater than the master.’ Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you” (John 15:18-20).*

The protection God promises to those who trust him, the protection that frees us from worry and from fear, is actually quite different from what we expect. The prophet Habakkuk takes us deeper into the meaning of God’s promise.

Habakkuk’s experience with God began much like ours frequently does: *“How long, O Lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen! ‘Violence!’ I cry, but you do not come to save. . . . Wherever I look, I see destruction and violence. . . . The law has become paralyzed and useless, and there is no justice given in the courts” (1:1-4).* Although those words were written 2,500 years ago, they sound pretty current, don’t they?

And then Habakkuk said, *“I will climb up into my watchtower and wait to see what the Lord will say to me and how he will answer my complaint” (2:1).* We do that, too. So what did God say? Listen to this:

“Then the Lord said to me . . . these things I plan won’t happen right away. Slowly, steadily, surely, the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. If it seems slow, wait patiently, for it will surely take place. . . . For the time will come when all the earth will be filled, as the waters fill the sea, with an awareness of the glory of the Lord. . . . The Lord is in his holy Temple. Let all the earth be silent before him” (2:2-3, 14, 20).

God told Habakkuk, “I know what I’m doing. I will indeed keep my promises when the time is right, and it will be worth the wait! As long as you are time-bound, you can neither see nor understand these things, but I am beyond time. I am the Lord!” Peter offered more help in the New Testament:

“But you must not forget, dear friends, that a day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord isn’t really being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent. . . . We are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world where everyone is right with God. And so, dear friends, while you are waiting for these things to happen, make every effort to live a pure and blameless life. And be at peace with God” (2 Peter 3:8-9, 13-14).

The protection God offers us in these frightening times is a protection that focuses on the Main Story of eternity, not on its preface, which is our life on earth. Paul wrote that *“what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will give us later. . . . For our present troubles are quite small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us an immeasurably great glory that will last forever! So we don’t look at the troubles we can see right now; rather, we look forward to what we have not yet seen. For the troubles we see will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever” (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18).* As Jesus told his disciples, *“When everything is ready, I will come and get you” (John 14:3).*

At the end of his vision, Habakkuk finally understood this, and he penned a statement of trust in God that is among the greatest ever written:

“Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vine; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation. The Sovereign Lord is my strength! He will make me as surefooted as a deer and bring me safely over the mountains [to my eternal home]” (3:17-19).

Now let’s try that again: Even though America is at war and energy prices and unemployment rates are setting new records; even though plants and factories continue to close, and budget deficits have reached inconceivable levels; even though the stock market continues to nose dive, and our retirement funds are evaporating with each passing day; even though terror stalks in darkness and at midday and we no longer feel safe in stadiums, racetracks, airplanes or airports, yet we will rejoice in the Lord! We will be joyful in the God of our salvation. The Sovereign Lord is our strength! He will make us as surefooted as a deer and bring us safely over the mountains . . . not “somehow,” but triumphantly!

Some of us remember the Arab oil embargo that threw our nation into crisis some thirty-five years ago. I listened to Bill and Gloria Gaither quite a bit in those days, and in one concert, Bill asked, “Well, what are you going to do if this energy crisis continues? Are you still going to love your kids? Are you still going to go to church? What’s really important, anyway? Keep your eyes on the goal.” I’ve remembered those questions many times over the years when things were tough. They’ve helped me refocus my priorities when circumstances in my life were discouraging and out of my control.

Eric Hicks told me several years ago about some similar principles Charlie Monk talked about when he was Pastor at Euclid Avenue. As you know, Charlie Crossed Over several years ago, but his principles live on. Charlie’s principles are elegantly simple and to the point, and I think of them often. Here they are: “Love people. Do the right thing. Keep going.”

I like that: “*Love people. Do the right thing. Keep going.*” Love people, because you love God, and God loves them. People are never our enemies. Satan is our enemy. Do the right thing, because you’ve been released from fear through trusting God, and space and time consequences have found their proper perspective in your life. Keep going, because you trust God to keep His promises and to bring you safely past the preface into the Main Story.

The Bible says, “*Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for what he has done. If you do this, you will experience God’s peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 4:6-7).

Ruth Caye Jones put it this way in 1944, as World War II raged on:

*In times like these you need a Savior,
In times like these you need an anchor.
Be very sure, be very sure,
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!*

*This Rock is Jesus, yes, he’s the One:
The Rock is Jesus, the only One!
Be very sure, be very sure,
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!*