

iFear

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. Unemployment rates remain above 8%, and plants and factories continue to close. Although the stock markets are doing better, most of us will probably never recover what we've lost in investments, retirement, and real estate over the last four years. Diseases continue to show up that seem immune to our wonder drugs. Our most prosperous industries are those that make bullets, bombs, and missiles. And I don't know about you, but I never see a plane in the air without remembering 9/11. Feeling better yet?

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

Thankfully, there is. Please open your Bibles to Psalm 91. Psalm 91 must have been written in times such as ours—or maybe even worse. Psalm 91 encourages us when it talks about "*rest in the shadow of the Almighty*" (v. 1), about God's being our "*refuge and [our] fortress*" (v. 2), about God's promises being our "*shield and rampart,*" our "*armor and protection*" (v. 4). In these days of concern about Homeland Security it's nice to think about being rescued "*from [every] snare*" and being protected "*from the deadly pestilence*" (v. 3).

As we worry about resurgent Russia and intransigent Iran, it's reassuring to read that "*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*" (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 say, 'The LORD is my refuge,' and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent.*" And in verse 14 God says, "*I will rescue those who love me. I will protect those who trust in my name*" (NLT). 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 trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God*" (Psalm 20:7). Yet when I watch thousands of people lustily sing "I'm proud to be an American" at sporting events with fighter jets roaring overhead, I find myself wondering about the real nature of our boasting. It's awfully easy to put our practical, gut-level trust in GPS-guided bombs instead of God-guided prayer.

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

Fear is what we feel when we perceive something we value to be in danger. At the biological level, fear stimulates our "fight, flight or freeze" response to physical danger. We feel fear not only when our own lives face immediate danger such as a near-miss on the road,

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but also when we confront longer-term dangers such as the diagnosis of dread disease for ourselves or someone we love.

Of course, fear is a God-given emotion. It's not a bad thing in itself . . . unless it begins to control our lives. And as is true with most of the "*sin that so easily entangles*" 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 MacDonal'd'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: "*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?*" (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. So what does it mean when Psalm 91 says that God "*will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence*" (v. 3)? What does it mean when it says that "*A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you*" (v. 7)? What does it mean that God "*will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways*" (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, and then treatment is wonderfully successful. But sometimes that's not how it goes, either. Listen to these words from the "faith chapter" of Hebrews:

"*There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground*" (11:35-38).

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: *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also"* (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 short prophecy of Habakkuk takes us deeper into the meaning of God's promise.

Habakkuk's experience with God began much like ours frequently does: *"How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted"* (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, NLT). We do that, too. So what did God say? Listen to this:

Then the LORD replied: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay. . . . For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. . . . 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!" The Apostle Peter offered more help in his second letter:

"But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. . . . But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him" (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 *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. . . . For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal"* (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, NLT).

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:

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he make my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights” (3:17-19).

Now let’s try that opening paragraph again: Even though America is at war and unemployment rates remain above 8%; even though plants and factories continue to close, and budget deficits have reached inconceivable levels; even though the stock market continues to falter, and our investments will never recover their losses; even though terror stalks in darkness and at midday and we don’t feel as safe as we once did in stadiums, malls, 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 of our troubles . . . not “somehow,” but triumphantly!

Some of us remember the Arab oil embargo that threw our nation into crisis some forty 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 husband or your wife? 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.

Charlie Monk was a pastor in Bristol some years ago, and Charlie often repeated set of principles for life that is similar to what I’ve tried to say this morning. 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, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds 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!*

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Reader One: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (Proverbs 9:10).*

Reader Two: ***As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:13-14).***

Reader One: *The eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love (Psalm 33:18).*

Reader Two: ***Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil; your rod and your staff, they comfort me (Psalm 23:4).***

Reader One: *Whoever 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" (Psalm 91:1-2).*

Reader Two: ***God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea (Psalm 46:1-2).***

Reader One: *The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid (Psalm 27:1).*

Reader Two: ***"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am . . . the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, 'Do not fear; I will help you.'" . . . This is what the LORD says . . . "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine" (Isaiah 41:10a, 13; 43:1).***

Reader One: *What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . We are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Romans 8:31, 33, 35, 37).*

Reader Two: ***And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, [and] to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 10:12).***

Reader One: The Word of God for the People of God.

Reader Two: **Thanks be to God!**