

Psalm 91

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[0 : 0 0] What are you afraid of? At this point, I would normally lay on the table a few possibilities in the expectation that one or other of the suggested options might resonate with you.

But rather than do that, I want you to ponder for a moment on that question. I don't want to suggest what the answer might be. In many ways, it's a very personal question. There are perhaps answers to that question that some of you might be very willing to share with others, and other answers that you might be very unwilling, and perhaps for good reason, to share with others. What are you afraid of? What keeps you awake at night? What phone call or conversation do you most dread?

What possible loss most disturbs or haunts you, even at the prospect of it becoming a reality?

Fear is not only very unpleasant, and that's a very mild word to use, but it's not only unpleasant. It can mold who we are and how we behave. It can, and often does, become our master.

Now, the manner and extent to which fear can master us will be a function of both the nature and intensity of our fear or fears. But make no mistake, fear can be and often is a powerful foe and a crippling enemy.

[1 : 5 2] Now, I imagine that for many of you this is not news, because you can look to your own life experience, perhaps even your current life circumstances, and recognize that this is so. Psalm 91 tackles the reality of fear in the life of the believer. The psalm is rich in delicious details, and we could profitably hone in on one of any number of truths that are memorably expressed in the psalm.

But as I already suggested, our approach this morning is a different one. We want to try and see the big picture and get a grasp of what the psalm in its entirety tells us about fear and how it can be conquered, or perhaps conquered isn't the right word, though it may be, but perhaps we could say how it could be tamed.

I think fear will ever be part of the human experience in this world, but there is a difference between fear taking mastery over us and fear being tamed in the light of what we find and discover, particularly in this psalm. So, that's what we're going to try and do this morning.

Do you hear voices? Now, that can be quite frightening. It can be frightening that I would even ask the question. Well, I hear voices, not little voices in my head. Oh, I suppose sometimes I do, but not very often. But what I do hear are voices in this psalm, and I hear three voices in the psalm. Certainly three voices that I want to identify for you, for us, this morning as we consider this matter of what the psalm has to teach us concerning fear. Three voices. I hear, I detect the voice of experience in this psalm, the voice of experience. But there is also very clearly pronounced the voice of God. But then thirdly, we find in this psalm the voice of the believer, the voice of experience, the voice of God, and the voice of the believer. And let me suggest what these voices are saying, what the main message or the big message that is being pronounced by these three voices. The voice of experience says, Be afraid. Be afraid. The voice of God says, Don't be afraid. And the voice of the believer says, I won't be afraid. Be afraid. Don't be afraid. I won't be afraid. Well, let's listen to these three voices. Let's consider this psalm in the measure that we're able and the time available in this way, hearing these three voices as they speak to us in and through the psalm. First of all, then, the voice of experience that shouts out to us, Be afraid. A message that rings out loud and clear throughout this psalm is that we live in a frightening world. We live in a frightening world. There is much to be afraid of. The psalm, as it opens, takes this as self-evident, commending God as a refuge and fortress. There would be no need for God as a refuge, no need for God as our fortress, if this were not a frightening world in which we live. So, the psalm begins taking it as a given that this is a frightening world. But then the psalm goes on very explicitly to describe a series of realities or circumstances that are well scary, very frightening for us as men and women in our weakness and vulnerability.

The voice of experience, the voice of reality, the voice of our day-to-day circumstances is an elegant one that can be summarized in these two words, be afraid. Afraid of what? Well, the scenarios painted by the psalmists that are a rich mixture of the literal and the metaphoric represent, it seems to me, every trouble common to man and every fear we can be confronted by or gripped by. You don't need to find your own particular trouble or fear described in the psalm. I began by asking you, what are you afraid of? I don't know what answer you gave to that question in your own mind.

[6 : 52] You know, in a kind of perverse way, we can be afraid to answer that question. We'd rather pretend that we're not afraid. So, even in answering the question or in being reluctant to answer the question, there might be an evidence of fear in our lives. But I don't know how you answered that question, or if you did answer that question. But even if you can't find in this psalm, as we've read it, your own particular fear, it doesn't seem to be in the list as we read through the psalm.

Even if that is the case, the message of the psalm still is a message that can be applied to your own particular circumstances, in your own fears, whatever they might be. Having said that, the psalmist does a pretty good job of identifying a multiplicity of troubles and dangers and the resulting fear that comes in their train. Let's just notice, and given the manner in which we're dealing with the psalm, this really has to be in a very fleeting way. Let's just notice some of these fears, some of these troubles that produce fear that the psalmist comments on. That is the fear of that which is unseen. There in verse 3, we begin, or the psalmist begins to identify all these different circumstances that can produce fear in our lives. Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare, the fowler's snare, a trap laid for the unwary a bird. Unseen troubles, those troubles, that crisis which can confront us unawares. We're unprepared for it. We turn around the corner in our lives, and there it is in front of us. We hadn't anticipated it being there. Unseen troubles, perhaps unseen enemies. And that includes the plots and conspiracies of those who would seek to do us harm. That's perhaps not your experience. I hope it is not. But if it is, of this the psalmist speaks when he speaks of the fowler's snare. Unseen troubles. But not only unseen troubles, irresistible troubles, or certainly troubles that would by any reasonable measure be described as irresistible. In verse 3, he speaks of the deadly pestilence, the deadly pestilence, that which we cannot in our own resources, however great we might think that they are, however wealthy we may be, however many great insurance policies we've taken out, and yet the deadly pestilence, the irresistible trouble that we do not have the resources to confront. Such is their power to harm and to destroy and to inculcate in us great fear, the unseen, the irresistible. And then that which is so common to so many of us, those mental torments.

In verse 5 we read, you will not fear the terror of night. I wonder what the psalmist means by that. I don't know for sure what he means by that, but might it not be that here he's speaking not of burglars invading your home in the middle of the night or some physical attack that you're subject to in darkness, but rather the terrors of night as we lie awake, persecuted by thoughts and by fears and by doubts that are ensnaring us. I wonder if this rings painfully true for some, that mental anguish that surfaces to haunt us in long, endless, sleepless nights, the terror of the night, troubles that can be, of course, also physical in nature, the arrow that flies by day. In verse 5, the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, the plague that destroys at midday, the languages of violence and disease, frightening realities that modernity and technology and advances of so many kinds have proved unable to eradicate. But then those fears that may in some ways be very mundane, not very dramatic, and yet powerful in their own way to harm us. In verse 10, we read, or reading from verse 9, if you make the most high your dwelling, even the Lord who is my refuge, then no harm will befall you.

No harm. And is this language of no harm not what we might call a catch-all that would include, it does more than that, but would include the most mundane of troubles that we might imagine we can handle, and yet we can be overpowered by? Is that not something that you've experienced, and it frustrates you? You don't understand why, and you're thinking, why is it that this matter that seems so small, that seems so trivial, why is it disturbing me so? You say, well, I could imagine feeling like this if it was something big. You may be here of somebody else who's going through a terrible time. You say, well, I can understand why they're struggling, but why am I struggling in the face of what seems so trivial, so mundane? And yet, that is often our experience, the mundane, the intimate, the fears that we have concerning that which is most intimate to us. There in that same verse that speaks of no harm befalling you. We then read, no disaster will come near your tent, focusing especially on the location of this disaster near your tent to that which is most intimate. And maybe those of us who are parents can particularly identify this and with this and say, well, yes, fears that we have concerning our children. And any harm that might befall them, be that physical or mental or spiritual, can so often be very powerful fears that we need to handle and deal with. Now, I should say that we will discover,

I hope we will as we continue, that as believers there are troubles that we are spared. I would suggest that in some of what the psalmist says here, not in all of what he says, but in some of what he says, he's describing troubles that we are spared from precisely because we are believers, troubles that correspond to the wicked and the wicked alone. But having recognized that, I think we can legitimately view the picture painted by the psalmist of a multiplicity of troubles and fears as representing the experience of us all. This is the human experience. It's a scary world out there, and sometimes it's a scary world in here, in our own hearts and in our own lives. And the voice of experience rudely invades our personal space and shouts loud and clear, be afraid. But thank God there is a second voice in this psalm, and it is the voice of the one we thank, the voice of God. And the voice of God speaks to us thus, don't be afraid. Verse 5 of the psalm begins, you will not fear the terror of night. And these words, you will not fear, certainly apply to what immediately follows, the terror of night, but clearly they apply not only to that one circumstance, but to those that follow, and indeed we could safely say those that have already been mentioned by the psalmist. You will not fear. In the face of, or perhaps more accurately, in the midst of all our troubles and fears, God speaks. And He speaks words of comfort and strength, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. But are they only words? Do they carry real weight?

[15 : 35] Is there substance to these words of God? Words can and often do prove empty and promises shallow. And we might think that, well, we're not going to imagine that that is so of the words of God.

But maybe we shouldn't just imagine that we wouldn't fear that that might be the case. And maybe can illustrate how words can prove shallow in a perhaps quite trivial way. I don't know if you've seen, any of you have seen the film Witness. It's like a 30 years old film. Harrison Ford is the main actor in it. It came to my mind simply because it was on TV on Friday night. And it's about, maybe as I explain what it's about, some of you will say, ah, yes, I remember seeing that. A wee Amish boy called Samuel is witness to a murder at a railway station in Philadelphia. And Harrison Ford plays the policeman charged with protecting the wee boy and his mother from those intent on silencing the witness, hence the name of the film, witness. Now, as the plot unfolds and dark forces in high places are identified as those behind the murder, wee Samuel, the wee boy who had seen the crime, wee Samuel's mother challenges

Harrison Ford about his previous assurance that they were safe and secure under his protection. And the challenge goes along these lines roughly. You said we had nothing to be afraid of.

You promised. You said we had nothing to be afraid of. And Ford's reply is nothing if not candid. I was wrong. I was wrong. The words that he had offered, well-meaning words at the time that he offered them, he was sure that they were so. You don't need to be afraid. I will look after you. I will keep you safe. And when everything unravels, he has to recognize, I was wrong. You see, it really does matter if the words, don't be afraid, or the truth that comes through in the psalm from God, don't be afraid. It really matters if these words are words of substance or just well-meaning but groundless.

And what about God's voice? What about God's words directed to his people, don't be afraid? Well, as we consider this psalm, we can certainly conclude that they are grounded, grounded in who God is and grounded in how God cares for his people. Grounded, first of all, in who God is and where to begin. Well, we can begin, not a bad place, at the beginning of the psalm.

[18 : 33] Indeed, that's where we'll end as we think about who God is and how this serves as a foundation for being confident that his words are trustworthy. How does the psalm begin? Well, it begins, I think, significantly by speaking of God and doing so by using different names of God or for God. And as we see the different names that the psalmist uses, I think we can detect something that the psalmist is doing in reminding us of who this God is who would come to us and would say to us, you need not be afraid. Don't be afraid. Who is this God? He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High. The Most High.

Whatever your trouble is, God is higher. However great your fear, God is bigger. He is the Most High. A name that says much, but speaks especially of God's authority. He has the authority to assure you that you need not be afraid. He is the Most High. But then the psalmist goes on and speaks of how we are to rest in the shadow of the Almighty. The Almighty, well, the clue is in the name. He is the Almighty. He is all-powerful. There is no enemy too strong, no cause too lost, no fear.

There is no enemy too. But how else does the psalmist speak of God? I will say of the Lord. He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, the Lord, my God. And these names and the manner in which the psalmist uses that personal pronoun speak of God's commitment to His people. He is a loyal, promise-keeping God. He is the Lord, the same God who revealed Himself to Moses as the Lord, as Yahweh, as the great I Am, who in the same breath said to Moses, I am with you. I am with you.

This God is your covenant, promise-keeping God. His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

This God doesn't do walking away, even in the most frightening of circumstances that we must face. In a nutshell, the psalmist introduces us to a God who is both able and willing, a God who is both powerful, a fortress, and tender, a mothering bird under whose wings we can find protection.

[21 : 20] And so, as believers, we must cling to this truth and never let it go. Your God is able and willing, and because He is, don't be afraid. We can trust the words of God because of who He is, but also because of the manner in which He cares for His people. And I think there are three aspects of this care for His people that I want to highlight. We're thinking about the voice of God, don't be afraid. We're wondering, well, can we trust these words? And I'm suggesting, yes, we can because of who God is, but also because of the manner in which He cares for His people. And three aspects of this.

God cares for His people in distinction from those who are not His own. The promise of protection that we find in this psalm is not a blanket promise to all without exception. I think verses 7 and 8 seem very particularly to speak of something that I hinted at a moment ago, troubles that we are spared from as believers. So many that we're not spared from, but these are troubles that we are spared from.

A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near to you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. There it would seem, the psalmist is speaking very particularly of desperate trouble of which the wicked are victims, the very judgment of God upon them. And so, God's care for His people is in distinction to those who are not His own. The psalm says that many will and do fall. But in this circumstance, God's people are presented simply as passive observers, protected from this trouble. Perhaps more practically for us, we can say this, that God cares for us in the midst of our troubles and fears. There are troubles that are common to all, including God's people. Indeed, there are troubles that are peculiar to God's people, especially in the passage that we read in Romans. There were so many references to those troubles, that violence, that persecution that was peculiar to God's people precisely because we are God's people.

How does God deliver us from these troubles that we are subject to? And one real difficulty in grappling with this psalm is that the language that it uses and the picture that it paints can appear to be so contrary to our actual experience. It appears, and I stress the word appear, it appears to paint a picture of believers untouched by trouble, immune from distress, miraculously and marvelously delivered from every ill and plight. And of course, the great problem is that that is not our actual experience.

And in the light of the overall testimony of Scripture, we have no reason to expect that to be our actual experience. But even in this psalm, even in the seeming triumphalism of the psalm, there is a recognition of that reality that we are not immune from trouble, for God promises to be with us in our trouble. In verse 15 we read, He will call upon me. God is speaking here in this part of the psalm. He, the believer, will call upon me, and I will answer him. I will be with him in trouble.

[24 : 51] Yes, it goes on to say, I will deliver him. But if we focus on this aspect of God's promise, I will be with my people. I will be with him. I will be with her in trouble. In trouble, in the midst of the troubles that we do face and experience. And how does God do that? How is God with us in trouble? Let me suggest two ways in which He does that. First of all, He does it by the manner in which He accompanies and strengthens us. He is with us. God is with us. He is with each one of us as His beloved sons and daughters, known by name and love from eternity. But He has most powerfully demonstrated to be with us and for us in His coming to share in our humanity. In Jesus, we have the ultimate demonstration of God with us in the very depth of our human experience and beyond.

He understands because He has been there and beyond. And so, the manner in which He cares for us in the midst of our troubles is as He accompanies and strengthens us, but also as He orders our troubles, those things that could produce crippling fear, He orders them for our good.

We read the passage in Romans chapter 8, and especially in verse 28, that seems to, in a way, in different language, seem to echo the comprehensive nature of the promises of this psalm, but that can cast greater light on the mystery of trouble and pain ordered by God for our good.

See, in verse 28, we read, And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him. And He goes on. But notice how we only need to go down a few verses, and Paul presents some of these all things through which God works for our good. Notice just verse 35, Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? These are many of the things that the psalmist speaks of in Psalm 91.

And what does Paul say? He says, these are all the experience of the believer. We experience all of these things. We're not immune from them. We're not delivered from them, temporally, in the here and now.

[27 : 23] But in all of these things God is with us, and in all of these things we are more than conquerors, as He accompanies us, and as He orders these things for our good.

The 19th century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon commented on this aspect of God's care in the midst of trouble, in commenting on the psalm that we're looking at. And he speaks as follows, It is impossible that any ill should happen to the man who is beloved by the Lord.

If we left it there, we'd say, well, that's a strange thing to say. Ill to him is no ill, but only good in a mysterious form. Losses enrich him. Sickness is his medicine.

Reproach is his honor. Death is his gain. And how easy it would be to say these things in a superficial and trite way. And yet, while we would hope that we would not do so in that manner, yet we can say these things.

God cares for us in distinction from others. God cares for us in the midst of our troubles. But then, thirdly, God cares for us by granting ultimate deliverance from all trouble and fear.

[28 : 41] God promises in this psalm to show us His salvation there in verse 16. And this salvation has as its ultimate goal our eternal deliverance.

I was reading a letter just this week that I received from Adam. Adam has visited us a couple of times here in Bonacord. He's involved in ministry to those who are persecuted for their faith in Central Asia.

And in that letter, he shares the testimony of a man that he met just very recently who had just been released from prison. The man told Adam how he and six others had been sentenced to death.

And on the eve of their execution, a cleric came to where they were being held to lead the men in evening prayer. Now, the believer, the one who was sharing this testimony with Adam, declined.

And the other men explained to the cleric that the reason he was declining is that he was a Christian. Now, the cleric mockingly challenged him. Ask Jesus to deliver you.

[29 : 56] On the dawn of the next day, he was to be executed. And so, he faces this taunt, this mocking taunt. Ask Jesus to deliver you. You're a Christian. Listen, to which the man replied, he already has.

He already has. I may die tomorrow. I may be executed tomorrow. That's the plan. But even if I am, when you ask that I would cry to Jesus to deliver me, I can say this.

He already has. Now, in the event, as I would hope is evident, he was delivered from physical execution. Though not from a further twenty years in prison.

But the truth of those words that he used in response to the one who would taunt him, remind us of our ultimate deliverance that cannot be frustrated or snatched from us even by death itself.

He already has delivered us. Is that your testimony? And he has God in the person of his own Son, Jesus Christ, God's appointed Redeemer and Deliverer.

[31 : 05] Has he delivered you? Has he delivered you from your sin and your guilt? Has he delivered you from God's just condemnation on you because of your sin and guilt?

Have you put your trust in God's deliverer? Is he your deliverer? Can you testify? He already has delivered me.

So, the voice of God speaks in this psalm, don't be afraid. A voice whose authority is grounded in who God is and how God cares for his people. But there is, very briefly, a third voice.

The voice of the believer. And what the voice of the believer pronounces are these words, I won't be afraid. God speaks to us, don't be afraid.

But we are not passive. In order for us to enjoy and experience freedom from fear, we have a part to play. On this, the psalm is nothing if not eloquent and indeed repetitive.

[32 : 10] Being a Christian in and of itself does not guarantee that we will experience freedom from fear. That is something we need to do to avail ourselves of this blessing.

The psalmist himself is that believing voice that we must learn from and emulate. We've already commented on this as we spoke to the children.

In verse 2, the psalmist declares, I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.

You see, the reality of verse 1, or the reality described in verse 1, that he who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty, must be followed and accompanied by the personal conviction and testimony of verse 2.

Yes, verse 1 is true. It's objectively true. It's eternally true. But it's necessary in our own life experience for it to be accompanied by our own testimony, by our own conviction, that it is true for us, that it's true for me.

[33 : 27] I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust. What verse 1 affirms is always true.

But it is only experienced by the believer who can say, my God in whom I trust. You need to trust in God. The end of the psalm, where it is God's voice speaking, reinforces this so clearly, reinforces this onus or responsibility incumbent on us.

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 honor Him. With long life, I will satisfy Him and show Him my salvation. So many promises, so many blessings, but they are directed to those whom God says, those who love me, those who acknowledge my name, those who call upon me, those who trust in me.

Such will experience my protection. Such will experience my help in the midst of trouble and deliverance from crippling fear.

[34 : 43] As we do trust in God, as we are able with the psalmist to say, my God in whom I trust, then there will be two intertwined outcomes of such trust.

The experience of God's protection. Indeed, if we limit ourselves to verse 1, is there not a sense in which verse 1 isn't simply saying two things that are true in different ways, as we often find in a psalm, but rather there's an order of events.

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, he who puts his trust in the Most High, he will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. The one follows from the other.

And so as we trust in God, so we experience God's protection. But intertwined with that, and perhaps not so evident in the psalm, but in the light of what we noted in Romans chapter 8, the one who trusts in God also is given and granted in a measure and understanding of God's purposes.

When we are in trouble, our trust in God will enable us to understand and rest in the confidence that God has a purpose, even and especially when we cannot fathom what that purpose is.

[36 : 02] There's no promise that we'll understand what God's purpose is. There's no promise that we will understand in what way God will work all these things together for good. No such promise. What is incumbent upon us is to trust that it is so, even when it is far from clear how that could possibly be so.

These two outcomes, if we can call them that, of our trust in God, the experience of God's protection, the understanding of God's purpose, will deliver in the midst of the fiercest trial a felt sense of freedom from fear, fear that is, if not conquered, certainly tamed.

And so the voice of God lovingly urges you and me, don't be afraid. But you need to respond with your own, perhaps tentative, but sincere, I won't be afraid.

For my God, in whom I trust, He is my refuge and my fortress. Let us pray.