

Under God's Wings
Text: Psalm 91:1-16
Series: The Psalms [#27]
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Theme: **God Provides Complete Security To Those Who Trust Him.**

Introduction

Security is important and often troublesome. Since 9/11 security from terrorist attacks has been in the spotlight. If you caught the news this week you are aware of the toner cartridge bombs sent from Yemen to Chicago-area synagogues that put investigators on three continents on high alert, that temporarily banned all air shipments from Yemen to the U.S., and saw fighter jets escort an Emirates Airline passenger plane to New York.¹

As important and troubling as this is, it is just one aspect of security. Last Monday a 7.7 magnitude earthquake triggered a tsunami which killed over 400 people in Indonesia, with approximately 163 still missing.² We are still focused on the devastating results of flooding in Pakistan, China, Burkina Faso and Ghana. Then there is the legal area of security of the person. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person and the right not to be deprived thereof except in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice.”³ These are a few of the many areas of security. In general terms, security can refer to safety, certainty, freedom from worry, protection and shelter.⁴

Psalm 91 is about security, security from and in God. This Psalm is a sparkling jewel of imagery, assurance and comfort. But its statements and images also raise some cloudy and troubling questions. The theme of the Psalm is stated in the opening verse,

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.”

This theme is pictured in verse 4,

“He [God] will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you may seek refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.”

There is security *under God's wings*. The unknown Psalm writer tells us that *God provides complete security to those who trust Him*. Let's explore that, beginning with ...

The Promise Of Security.

We see God's promise in the opening lines. There is the promise of dwelling in God's shelter. The first verse begins by describing the one “who dwells in the shelter of the Most High.” Think about a couple of the words here. The word *dwells* refers to sitting down, staying, settling down, to putting down roots. Psalm 1 opens, “How blessed is the man who

does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor *sit* [*settles down*] in the seat of scoffers!” Psalm 23 closes, “Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will *dwell* [*stay*] in the house of the LORD forever” (6). This promise is for those who have not just called out to, not just come to, but who have settled down and remain in God’s presence. It is for those who think and dream, who work and relax in deliberate dependance on God.

Then there is the word *shelter*. This term refers to a covering, a hiding place, even a secret covering. All of that points to being sheltered. In Psalm 31:20 King David wrote, “You *hide* them those who take refuge in God] in the *secret place* of Your presence from the conspiracies of man ...” *Hide* is the verb behind this word *shelter*. And the *secret place* is this word *shelter*. Settling down in His presence, relying on the Most High, the Sovereign God is a *shelter*, a hiding place, a place of security from danger.

And so David prayed in Psalm 61, “Let me *dwell* in Your tent forever; let me *take refuge* in the *shelter* of Your wings” (4). God gives the promise of security, security from dwelling in His *shelter*.

Then, filling out the picture, there is the promise of dwelling in God’s shadow. The one who dwells in Almighty God’s *shelter* will abide in His *shadow*. We have a number of figurative uses of *shadow*. Shadows can picture darkness and danger — not only literally as a storm approaches, but also figuratively in difficult, turbulent times. Then we talk about being or living in someone’s shadow. When working with someone who is well known, respected, bigger than life, some people feel they never get a chance to shine in the sun, to be seen for who they are.

This word *shadow* is frequently tied to the idea of protection in the Old Testament. In Psalm 17 David prayed “...Hide me in the shadow of Your wings” (8b). And in Psalm 57 he prayed, “Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me, for my soul takes refuge in You; and in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge until destruction passes by” (1).

In this Psalm the meaning is filled out with another picture. Verse 4, “He [God] will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you may seek refuge ...” *Pinions* refers to the outer edge or primary feathers of a bird’s wing. Just as birds sometimes protect their young under their wings, so God protects us as we dwell in His *shelter*. Realizing and counting on this, King David exclaimed in Psalm 36, “How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings” (7).

Jesus used this same imagery shortly before the cross. He told the people who were rejecting Him

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling” (Matthew 23:37).

Yes, *God provides security, complete security to those who trust Him.* You can count on it. It is part of His faithfulness.

The Experience Of Security.

This Psalm gives some descriptions and pictures of that security. But before we rush on to that, we should note who this promise is given to, who can experience it. How do we experience God's complete security? We experience it through trusting Him. Remember that dwelling in God's shelter refers to settling down, staying there. It is when we do this that we abide in, we are under His protection. The writer gives his personal response to this in verse 2. "I will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust!'" Then in verse 9, as he speaks to others about experiencing God's security, he writes, "For you have made the LORD, my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place."

It is fairly easy and very good to run to God and trust Him in difficult times. King David did that in Psalm 25. "To You, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, *in You I trust*, do not let me be ashamed; do not let my enemies exult over me" (1-2). But spiritual danger is constantly around us whether we realize it or not. And so, to experience God's protection means continually trusting Him, continually living by faith.

There is a dramatic illustration of this in Exodus chapters 11 and 12. God is about to free Israel from slavery in Egypt. He has previously unleashed nine plagues of judgment on Egypt from turning the Nile River to blood to a dark darkness that lasted for three days. Now the final devastating judgment was at hand. God told Moses, who told the Pharaoh, that at midnight on the appointed day He would strike the land and all the first born of the people and livestock would be killed.

God told Israel to take an unblemished lamb, to watch it carefully and then on the appointed day to kill it, to take some of the blood and put it on the doorposts and lintel of their home and then eat the meat. God said,

"The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live;
and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague
will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt."
(12:13)

Have you ever wondered if some Israelites thought that Moses might be overstating the point and that God wouldn't really kill their first born if they didn't trust and obey Him on this point? We aren't told. But we know from what God said that any who did not trust Him by doing this, even if they really believed in God, would have not been protected, would not have been kept secure, would have seen their first born killed. The point in Psalm 91 and Exodus 11 and 12 is clear— *experiencing God's complete security comes through trusting Him.*

It is not rote, dry, dead obedience that God is looking for. He is looking for our love, our whole hearted love for Him. God declares in verse 14, "Because he has loved Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him securely on high, because he has known My name." This

word for love is rarely used in the Old Testament. Its focus is on having a desire, longing for, setting one's affection or love on another. God says, "Because you have had a longing to know me and have committed your affection to Me and My ways and not those of yourself or others, I will deliver you."

We remember that God has also said, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."⁵ This is important to God. Jesus reaffirmed that, saying "This is the great and foremost commandment."⁶ Jesus also said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."⁷ God wants, He demands our obedience, but not a rote, dry, dead obedience.

The saying that familiarity breeds contempt is traced back to Aesop's Fables 2,600 years ago. *The Fable of the Fox and the Lion* goes like this—

"When first the Fox saw the Lion he was terribly frightened, and ran away and hid himself in the wood. Next time however he came near the King of Beasts he stopped at a safe distance and watched him pass by. The third time they came near one another the Fox went straight up to the Lion and passed the time of day with him, asking him how his family were, and when he should have the pleasure of seeing him again; then turning his tail, he parted from the Lion without much ceremony." *Familiarity breeds contempt.*⁸

If not contempt, familiarity can breed indifference. The Bible tells us to be devoted to God's Word and prayer, and so we read the Bible and pray—perhaps not always as we should, but we do. The Bible tells us to meet together for worship, and so we do—perhaps not always as we should, but we do. Jesus told us to remember His death for us by taking part in Communion, and so we do—perhaps not always as we should, but we do. Familiarity can breed indifference. Indifference is only a step or two away from contempt. So we need to remember that while we maintain sound doctrine and dedicated service, we cannot afford to leave our "first love," our eagerness and devotion from the heart for God and His work.⁹

The Nature Of Security.

Before we get into some of the specifics of God's complete security, I want us to step back and take an overview, gain a perspective of it. There are some wonderful and challenging statements in this Psalm. God is our shelter, our refuge, He covers us with His almighty wings of protection. *That's wonderful!*

But then we are also told

- that we will not be afraid of terror, verses 5-7;
- that no evil will befall us, verse 10;
- that we will not stumble over a stone, verse 12;

- that we will tread on and trample the lion and the cobra, verse 13.

These words can raise confusing questions.

One of the key principles of interpreting the Bible as we should is to let Scripture interpret Scripture. We are to look at the broad scope of the Bible's teaching to help clarify the meaning of specific passages. This is critical to understanding *the complete security God gives to those who trust Him*.

We see the reality of danger, terror and death to people who trust God throughout the Bible. Here in the Psalms, in Psalm 3 King David desperately cried out to God, "O LORD, how my adversaries have increased! Many are rising up against me. Many are saying of my soul, 'There is no deliverance for him in God'" (1-2). In Psalm 55 he called out to God because the trouble his enemies brought on him led him into deep anguish, trembling, and overwhelming fear and horror of being killed (1-5).

Jesus told those who opposed Him that while they honored the prophets by building tombs to them, their fathers had killed some of those godly men of faith. Many of the prophets, while trusting God, suffered terrible things, including being killed.¹⁰ The apostle Paul faced all kinds of dangers including beatings and imprisonment, and was killed for the sake of Christ.¹¹ In Romans 8 Paul acknowledged that believers experience tribulation, distress, persecution, being without clothing, being stoned and killed for Christ's sake, but also said that those things could not separate the believer from Christ and that in them we overwhelmingly conquer (35-39). The great heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 included those who had great victories, who were resurrected, and also those who were destitute and put to death (32-40).

The Old and New Testaments teach us that bad things happen to God's trusting people. We must have this perspective to understand this Psalm.

As well, it is readily apparent that there is a great deal of imagery in this Psalm. It begins with declaring that God is a shelter, a fortress, that He delivers us from trappers' snares and covers us with His wings. Literal, plain sense interpretation takes imagery and figures of speech into account.

With these things in mind, let's survey some of the nature of God's complete security for those who trust Him. There is protection from sudden and deadly dangers. Verse 3, "For it is He [God] who delivers you from the snare of the trapper and from the deadly pestilence." This describes unseen, sudden and even deadly attacks. Joshua warned Israel as they were conquering and settling into the land that if they disobeyed God and intermingled with the ungodly people who were there, those people would be "a snare and a trap" to them, snatching them away from loving God and so also, from His protection.¹² The writer of Psalm 119 testified to experiencing sudden, unexpected attacks. In verse 110 he told God, "The wicked have laid a snare for me, yet I have not gone astray from Your precepts." King David praised God in Psalm 124 for His deliverance from such attacks, "Blessed be the LORD,

who has not given us to be torn by their teeth. Our soul has escaped as a bird out of the snare of the trapper; the snare is broken and we have escaped” (6-7).

I suspect it doesn't take much reflection for most of us to remember snares, traps of temptation, of attacks. When we are living in God's shelter, dwelling in the shadow, under the wings of His protection by loving and trusting Him, He will keep us secure, keep us from falling into sin, keep us secure for as long as He wants us here on earth. I can look back at times where dangerous snares appeared suddenly, unexpectedly, as I am sure you can. When I was walking closely with God, prepared by loving and obeying Him, the response was often easily, sometimes almost automatically what was right and pleased God. When I was not walking as closely, not as prepared as I could have been by loving and obeying Him, that's where the struggles and trying to respond in my own way came in.

Then, God's complete security also protects us from the terror of dangers. God says to the trusting believer, starting at verse 5,

“You will not be afraid of the terror by night, or of the arrow that flies by day; of the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or of the destruction that lays waste at noon. A thousand may fall at your side and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not approach you” (5-7).

We can see that danger and terror can be all around us day or night, at any time. But what about not being afraid of the terror? What about it not touching us? I recall David's testimony in Psalm 56. In verse 3 he told God,

“When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You. In God, whose word I praise, in God I have put my trust; I shall not be afraid. What can mere man do to me?” (3-4)

Again, in verse 11, “In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?” The prophet Habakkuk wrote,

“Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord GOD is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' feet, and makes me walk on my high places” (3:17-19).

Why could Habakkuk and David say that? Why could this Psalm writer be confident that people who trust in God will not be afraid of terror, that it will not touch them? Yes, they were dwelling with and in God and His shelter, the shadow of His protection. Turn back to Psalm 31 for another part of this. Starting at verse 14, “But as for me, I trust in You, O LORD, I say, ‘You are my God.’ *My times are in Your hand*; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and from those who persecute me” (14-15).

You see, when we walk with God as we should, when we know our times are in His hands, when we know His plans for us are for good, we will also know that no evil can touch us, nothing can stop us or take us from this life as long as God has more for us here on earth. *God provides complete security to those who trust Him.*

Finally, God's complete security provides protection from evil thwarting His plans and care for us.

- God, in His sovereign and good plans will preserve His loving and faithful people for His purposes (5-7).
- God, in His sovereign and good plans will not allow evil to come near, to destroy them (10).
- God, in His sovereign and good plans will guard us, even using His angels to make sure that nothing will thwart His purposes and plans for us (11-13).
- God, in His sovereign and good plans will protect us so that neither the cobra or lion, tribulation or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword will separate us from His love and care for the entirety of the time He has appointed for us on earth (13; cf. Romans 8).
- God, based on who He is and His sovereign and good plans, His faithfulness, tells us, verse 15, "He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With a long life I will satisfy him and let him see My salvation." (15-16)

Our times are in His hands and His complete security provides protection from evil thwarting His plans and care for us. I believe and know this with all my heart from God's Word and in my own experience.

One song that describes some of this truth of our lives, of the temptations and trials, of God's care says,

"He [God] never promised that the cross would not get heavy and the hill would not be hard to climb. He never offered our victories without fighting, but He said help would always come in time. Just remember when you're standing in the valley of decision and the adversary says give in, just hold on, our Lord will show up, and He will take you through the fire again."¹³

Yes, and in the words of the apostle Paul again, "in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us."¹⁴

Conclusion.

God provides complete security to those who trust Him. I don't understand it all and it doesn't always look like, develop and work out as I expect. But that doesn't change this wonderful anchor-of-life truth.

As we go to God individually in the next quiet moments, if you want God's complete security but have never actually trusted yourself to Him, come to Him now through Christ. If you know Christ is your Savior, but have not been dwelling in His shelter and His shadow of protection because you have become distracted, discouraged or indifferent, or have wanted to do things your way for now, or have been throwing up a litany of excuses for not trusting and loving God as you should, square that with Him, and let Him cover you with His pinions, give you refuge under His wings.

¹ "Investigators Hunt for Mail Bombers in Yemen, Al Qaeda Suspected." *Foxnews.com* <<http://www.foxnews.com/us/2010/10/30/investigators-hunt-mail-bombers-yemen-447299564/>>. 30 October 2010. Accessed 30 October 2010.

² "Tsunami survivors found in Indonesia; weather hampers aid (Roundup)." *monstersandcritics.com*. <http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/asiapacific/news/article_1595263.php/Tsunami-survivors-found-in-Indonesia-weather-hampers-aid-Roundup>. 30 October 2010. Accessed 30 October 2010.

³ "Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms," *Part I of the Constitution Act, 1982, Article 7, Life, Liberty and Security of Person*. <[http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/charter/1.html# anchorbo-ga:l_I-gb:s_1](http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/charter/1.html#anchorbo-ga:l_I-gb:s_1)>. Accessed 28 October 2010.

⁴ "Security." Defs. 1-4. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1974*. Print edition.

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:5.

⁶ Matthew 22:36-38.

⁷ John 14:15.

⁸ Aesop. *The Fable Of The Fox And The Lion*. Public Domain.

⁹ Revelation 2:1-5; cf. Ephesians 1:15-16.

¹⁰ Luke 11:47.

¹¹ cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23-28.

¹² Joshua 23:12-13.

¹³ Gerald Crabb. *Through The Fire*. © 1999 MPCA Lehsem Songs.

¹⁴ Romans 8:37.

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