

A Song for the Sheltered

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[0 : 00] Hi, I'm David, and I'd like to add my welcome to Jonathan's. Here we are. The coronavirus crisis continues, and solutions for beating COVID-19 still seem a long way off.

I don't know how it's affected you in particular, but all of us will be in some way feeling the weight of the times, won't we? My family's recently experienced bereavement because of it. Perhaps you're in a similar boat as well.

There's the worry that comes from lost work or the threat of lost work. New companies collapse and announce job cuts daily. And journalists are now writing about the prospect of a global economic catastrophe.

There's the multiple frustrations of being stuck at home. The loneliness of being detached from friends and family. And the grim specter of depression is hanging even closer than ever as the world that we knew continues to hang just out of reach.

And I don't know about you, but music is often a help to getting us through the day. Sometimes I need some upbeat 80s pop to just bring my mood up.

[1 : 09] You can't really go wrong with a bit of A-ha's take on me, can you? Or sometimes you need something more reflective and melancholic. Those sad songs that help you process things. In the book of Psalms, God has given his people throughout the generations songs to sing that help Christians understand the times that they live in and understand God's purposes in the situations that they find themselves in.

One psalm that has been a great help to God's people in difficult times, times like these, is the psalm that we have read to us, Psalm 91.

It's a song for the sheltered. A song of confidence that Christian believers can sing because its lyrics say something about life lived in the shelter that God gives his people.

It's also an invitation. It's not all who read the psalm can confidently make it their own. So this song's an invitation to enter the shelter of which God comforts and protects those who trust in him. It's also a psalm which raises some questions about what the shelter of God actually looks like. And those questions we'll especially try to answer.

[2 : 27] We're going to look at the song by covering it in three points. The first, sheltered from fear. The second, sheltered from harm. And the third, sheltered with salvation.

So sheltered from fear, sheltered from harm, and sheltered with salvation. So let's dive into our first point, looking at the first eight verses. And what these verses do is show how believers are sheltered from fear.

The first couple of verses go like this. 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.

This sets out the big idea of the psalm. The one who makes their home with God will have the powerful creator of the universe looking out for them.

The writer is confident that dwelling in the shelter of the Most High is the best place to be in all the world. And the reason he says this is because to live under God's shelter is like being safely hidden within a fortress.

[3 : 42] To trust in God is to have the best protection in the world. He builds on this idea as we read on. Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence.

He will cover you with his feathers and under his wings you will find refuge. His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. The writer is convinced that God will save him from any situation that he finds himself in.

From the fowler's snare, a metaphor to describe harm that might come to us from other people. And from the deadly pestilence, something which we know all too well the need for safety from.

His protection is like great wings that envelop you and cover you completely. And the psalmist says his faithfulness will be your shield.

In other words, he won't let you down and will always protect you if you trust in him. It kind of reminds me of the eagles in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

[4 : 46] At points where the characters are in need, the eagles come and swoop up the adventurers in their huge wings. God's protection is better though because his wings are always wrapped around his people.

The confidence of the writer then continues as the next lines of the song reveal. He writes, You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.

A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

Building on imagery that he's already used, the writer says that to trust in God will relieve you of fear. He says that there will be no need to fear the night terrors, and there'll be no need to fear other people who want to do you harm.

He even says that there will be no need to fear disease and plague that kills all day and kills all night. The writer's assessment is that to trust in God removes the need for fear.

[6 : 02] Everything that could harm us should not frighten the person sheltered by the wings of God. We all know that life is scary. From the child kept awake by the terrors of the dark, to the grown-up whose fears can be just as monstrous, though cloaked with banality.

Financial fears, health fears, fears for those that we love. The Roman playwright Seneca quite astutely remarked that sometimes even to live is an act of courage.

Well, in God, the writer is saying, we can find that courage. Perhaps you're listening to this and your eyebrows have just been rising higher and higher.

Perhaps you're a Christian, this just hasn't been your experience of what it looks like to trust God. Or maybe you don't believe this for yourself, and what this psalm is boldly stating just seems too outlandish to even consider believing.

Well, hold that thought, because for all that this psalm does sound encouraging, the big question it does raise is, is it realistic? The psalm doesn't hold back from answering it, but it will require us to dig into what the writer is talking about.

[7 : 19] And so with that, let's take a look at verses 9 to 13, and our second point, sheltered from harm. So if the first eight verses were primarily focused on the idea that the Christian is sheltered from fear, well, these verses suggest that the Christian is sheltered from harm.

The writer starts this section by mirroring the first couple of verses. He writes, 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.

He's repeating these ideas and calling God a refuge and a dwelling to reiterate his big idea. To trust in God is to have God's shelter and protection.

In these verses, he focuses particularly on shelter from harm. Let's see how he continues. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

They will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the cobra. You will trample the great lion and the serpent.

[8 : 32] If you were sceptical about this psalm before, those verses might just seal the scepticism. And I must confess myself, I've never seen an angel carry a Christian who's about to take a tumble.

So what can the writer mean? Are these just empty platitudes? Or is there something more to what he's saying? We're going to come back to those verses. But before we do, I'd like us just to flick forward to the Gospels, the New Testament accounts of Jesus' life.

Why? Well, because understanding what this psalm means was quite an important issue when the devil came to tempt Jesus. I'm going to read some verses from Matthew chapter 4.

And the context that they come in is this. Jesus has been in a barren wilderness area for about 40 days. And the devil comes to tempt him. And ultimately, what the devil wants to do is to stop Jesus going to the cross.

Because when Jesus died on the cross, the devil was defeated. And in this wilderness, the devil uses this psalm to tempt Jesus to abuse his identity as the Son of God.

[9 : 42] Matthew writes, Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the highest point of the temple. If you're the Son of God, he said, throw yourself down, for it is written, He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

Jesus answered him, It is also written, Do not put the Lord your God to the test. Isn't it interesting how Jesus responds to the devil's use of this psalm?

He rebukes him by saying that to throw himself down would be to put God to the test. He doesn't deny that the angels would carry him if he jumped. From Jesus' response, I think we can clearly say that they would.

But to do that would be to test God. And Jesus would fail to obediently go to the cross in the way that his Father had laid out for him.

What's really interesting is that after the devil leaves Jesus, we're told that angels came and attended him. And in Luke's Gospel, we're told that Jesus, in his moment of greatest fear when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, at this moment of fear, anxious of the cross to come, Luke tells us, An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him.

[11 : 06] So Psalm 91 proved to be true for Jesus. The angels did come to help him. But they didn't stop him from suffering. What they did was minister to and comfort him in his suffering.

The writer to the Hebrews writes, Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? The Bible doesn't really give us a comprehensive guide to angels.

But it is clear that the angels are sent by God to help his people and to minister to them. Often in ways that are unseen. As the writer to the Hebrews says, Some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

And there could be no doubt that God will send help to his children when they face fear, harm and adversity. Otherwise, all our prayers would be in vain.

We pray to God because he listens to his children's voices. And we trust that he can do what we ask. And this is a reminder to those who follow Jesus that God does listen to our prayers.

[12 : 20] And he can answer them. And it's easy to become fatalistic and think that God doesn't act in the world on our behalf. Instead, he sits in heaven and just lets his plan play out.

But that's not how the Bible describes God on the way that he acts. He can and does enter into the world and help his children.

He's a father. If you've yet to experience the comfort of being a child of God, this is one of the blessings. He hears his children and he comes to shelter them from harm.

There's a fairly well-known Nick Cave song called Into My Arms. It begins with the line, I don't believe in an interventionist God. Sometimes I wonder if Christians live as if that line is true.

The truth is, though, God does intervene on behalf of his children. He's the perfect father. And the chief intervention was what was achieved at the cross when Jesus died.

[13 : 24] This psalm doesn't just exist on its own. We do need to read it within its wider context. Remember how Jesus responded to the devil when the devil quoted this psalm at him?

But Jesus quoted a different part of God's word back to him. This psalm exists within the whole of God's word. And God's word is also clear that Christians will suffer.

God doesn't always act in the way that we wish. And God doesn't always protect his people from harm, even though he can. Psalm 44 tells us that for God's sake, we face death all day long.

We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. Does this then empty the psalm of its power? Well, absolutely not. Because the psalm itself is aware of this.

And in its final verses is pointing towards the eternal shelter found in Christ. And this lands us in our final point, sheltered with salvation.

[14 : 28] Let me read from verse 14. Because he loves me, says the Lord, I will rescue him. I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call on 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. The rest of the psalm has been spoken by the writer, the psalm writer.

Verse 14 is a major shift in perspective. Because these words are God's own words. Because he loves me, says the Lord, I will rescue him.

It reinforces what the writer's been saying all along. His confidence hasn't been misplaced because the Lord himself, the Most High and the Almighty, reiterates what the writer has already said. The one who calls on God will find an answer. The one who faces trouble will have the creator by their side. The one who trusts in God will be delivered from danger and honored when the danger is done and dusted.

[15 : 41] And the psalm finishes with this wonderful line that's going to guide the rest of our thoughts. With long life, I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.

Anytime the psalms speak of salvation or deliverance, they're pointing to the salvation that Jesus achieved for his people. It's this salvation that the writer is ultimately pointing us towards here. God can act to deliver his people from present suffering. Sometimes he doesn't. John Piper, a minister from the US, helpfully puts it like this. No ill befalls the saints, but what God's love permits. And even this ill will not conquer them. So God can and will protect his people from harm. But he also, in his love, may allow his people to go through trials and pain.

Yet his shelter is not compromised. Because the shelter of the Christian is in our eternal salvation. When Jesus died on the cross, rose again and ascended into heaven, he made it possible for everyone who trusts in him to be saved.

[17 : 02] To be saved means that at death or when Christ comes back, the Christian will be welcomed into eternal life. A life forever free from hurt and fear, sin and death, suffering and disease.

And that's why the Christian ultimately is sheltered from fear. It's why the Christian is ultimately sheltered from harm. The one who trusts in God as their refuge and shelter.

There's nothing to fear from this life because the next life is so certain. The one who rests in the shadow of the Almighty is sheltered from hurt because nothing can hurt the one who has eternal life.

It's a bit like this. Imagine you've sat an exam and you've got to wait for weeks to find out your results. But you know someone who's on the inside who's told you that you've already passed. So the way it's off your mind, you don't have to wait for weeks. Because you know that you've done it, you've passed. Now, legally, that's probably dubious. The security that comes from knowing that Jesus has saved us and given us a life forever, well, it's legally watertight.

[18 : 20] But the challenge will often come in trusting that watertightness, won't it? The challenge the Sam is posing to us is the challenge to trust in Jesus. Often we can know on an intellectual level that we can trust Jesus, but it doesn't always filter down into the way that we live our lives.

If you're someone who knows and loves Jesus, we need to ask that question of ourselves. Are we living in the shelter that Jesus has brought us into?

Or are we living as if we're still out in the open and exposed to the elements? And it can often feel like the elements are giving us a right battering, can't it?

Sometimes it does feel like we're not protected. But remember that Jesus has promised you a future. And nothing, nothing can take that future away.

The Apostle Paul puts it better than I ever could at the end of Romans chapter 8. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

[19 : 31] As it is written, for your sake we face death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In short, nothing can tear us from the love of Christ. And therefore, nothing can tear us from the hope that we have in him.

Nothing can tear apart the shelter of his salvation. So whoever you are, whether you know Jesus or not, this psalm is a reminder that Jesus is the saviour that we all need.

Now, in amongst all the different videos that have been designed to encourage us in lockdown, there's one that resonated with me particularly. It was a video of Jodie Whittaker in her role as the doctor from Doctor Who, encouraging children during this strange time.

[20 : 45] It was heartfelt and it was nice. The idea being that at a time like this, we need a message from a hero. In the Bible, we have a message of comfort from a real hero.

More than that, a saviour. It's nice to have a fictional hero give words of encouragement, but to children and adults alike, it's a little shallow when they can't actually achieve anything.

We know that even government and NHS workers try as they might, but they're not perfect. I think often our culture puts an overwhelming burden on those who've chosen professions which aim to support people.

At the end of the day, we're all human, aren't we? The only shelter that really works is Jesus. And in Jesus, we have more than shelter.

We have victory. Romans 8 tells us we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Jesus won the victory over the devil at the cross.

[21 : 52] And we share in that victory too. If we return to verse 13 of the Psalm again, it says, you will tread on the lion and the cobra.

You will trample the great lion and the serpent. At the start of the Bible, all the way back in Genesis, the first book, there's a great promise that Jesus will crush the head of the serpent, the serpent being the devil.

The devil who is also characterized as a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. The devil, the lion, the serpent, he is crushed by Christ.

In Christ, we will trample the great lion and the serpent. In fact, we already have, if we're trusting in Jesus. The stronghold is not just a defense against the devil, but it's an offensive move against him.

So if you're following Jesus, I hope that you feel encouraged as we close. You live a sheltered life. Not necessarily sheltered from all the pain of this world, but certainly sheltered because all the pain of this world cannot make a dent in your certainty of the next.

[23 : 11] And the strength of his shelter cannot, cannot be overstated because no one can take it from you. It's yours forever.

And so as we finish, I want to end with just a few thoughts about how we should respond. Perhaps you've never considered getting in under the shelter that Jesus brings.

Well, now might be a good time just to probe a little deeper and see if the stronghold of Jesus really does stand up to testing. Many of us listening will be living inside the stronghold already.

And our need will be to continue to trust that the defenses will hold. It's easy to look with our eyes and be disheartened and discouraged.

And from there, it's very easy to live in fear, anxious because we aren't trusting God. But if we listen to this song and live as those who believe it, we won't be broken by fear.

[24 : 14] We will have strength in Christ to face each day because we will know that the Lord is our refuge and our fortress who shows his children his salvation.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of shelter that you have given and to all who trust in you.

Father, help us to remember that you are looking out for us. Help us to trust in you anew and to give thanks for all the good gifts that we have in Jesus and the salvation that he has gifted to us.

Father, we thank you for your mercy in Christ and we praise you for him. In his name. Amen.