

Psalm 91 – Learning to Trust

Friends, ever since there has been truth... there have been truisms; which are those undoubted or self-evident truths that are too obvious to mention - except we do mention them... a lot... and most often when it's not terribly helpful – do you know what I'm talking about?

For example when someone is bemoaning the fact that they've broken up with their girlfriend again, their car got towed the night before, and pipe burst in their kitchen the next morning... and they ask *"I don't know why this is all happening to me?"*

It's almost inevitable that someone will say *"You know, everything happens for a reason; things have to get worse before they can get better!"*

That's a truism friends – a true statement which kind of says everything and yet at the same time says nothing and that is why these statements – though true – are not very helpful when we use them.

Now here's another truism, which we just read this morning – vs 1 of Psalm 91 *"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High, will rest in the shadow of the Almighty"*

Now in all likelihood, this was something that people in the ancient world would say about having divine protection over your life, just like we might say *"God takes care of His own."*

And if this saying had been left just sitting there as a generally true statement about God protecting someone - it wouldn't be much help to anyone.

But the good news is that the author of Psalm 91 was led by the Holy Spirit to take this truism and unpack it's truth in some specific ways; so it can help people learn how to trust God and put their faith in Him.

So let's take a closer look at how the psalmist unpacks the truth in this truism and how that still applies to us today.

He begins by shifting them emphasis in the truism from the general to the specific. The broad category of “Whoever,” and the generic terms of God “Most High” and “Almighty” that are found in vs 1 become “*I will say of Yahweh*” in vs. 2.

And by referring to God’s specific Covenant name, the Psalmist is making claim to the all the gracious covenant promises that God had made with Israel.

So, a quick reminder about those covenant promises... listen to Exodus 6:4-6; *“⁴ I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they resided as foreigners. ⁵ Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant.*

⁶ “Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am Yahweh, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.’”

These specific promises of deliverance are why the psalmist can specifically profess in vs. 2 *“Yahweh is my refuge and fortress, my God, in whom I trust”*

And the specific purpose of that covenant relationship with Israel, found in Exodus 19:4-6, is why the psalmist has confidence that Yahweh will continue to be his refuge and fortress...

Because God says *“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”* (Ex 19:4-6)

So the truth in the truism starts to become clearer as the psalmist gets specific and refers to God’s covenant name and promises.

Then he continues to unpack this truism by describing what God's protection is like in vs. 3-8, specifically using imagery and metaphors that evoke the memory of God's covenant promises of deliverance.

He refers to "pestilence" and "plague" which makes one think about the ten plagues inflicted on Egypt.

When we read that "a thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand as your right hand, but IT will not come near you" it reminds us of how God spared his people from the tenth plague where all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians died.

And when the psalmist describes how God "*will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge...*" (vs. 4) it brings to mind what we just heard in Exodus 19:4 "*I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.*"

And in vs. 8 where it says "*you will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked*" you can't help but hear echoes of Ex 6:6 "*I will redeem you with an outstretched arm*

and with mighty acts of judgment" and we remember how God destroyed Pharaoh's entire army as they attempted to pursue his people through the Red Sea.

So we can see how the psalmist uses specific imagery and metaphors to recall instances of Yahweh's covenant deliverance for His people.

So not only does this help to unpack the truism, but it also provides specific examples which demonstrate that Yahweh has the ability to protect you from whatever you might face.

If He could do that – He's more than capable of handling whatever you might encounter in your life.

Now that sounds like a pretty good deal – and I don't know about you, but I'd definitely be interested in this Yahweh.

And the psalmist seems to anticipate that we'd want to get in on this covenant relationship, so he instructs the reader in vs 9 to say "*Yahweh is my refuge,*" and thus "*make the Most High*

your dwelling...” which provides a specific answer to the questions begged by the truism of vs 1.

“Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High.” What does it mean to dwell in the shelter of the most high?

According to the Psalm 91 It means that you enter into a covenant relationship with Yahweh and seek His help.

And what does it mean to rest in the shadow of the Almighty?”

According to the psalmist, in vs. 10-12 it specifically means that *“no harm will overtake you; no disaster will come near your tent....”* Why?

Because *“Yahweh 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.”*

Now with the specific reference to angels in vs. 11-12 we find the same principle at work that we saw in vs. 3-8.

This is meant to evoke memories of specific times in covenant history when God’s angels guarded and protected those in covenant relationship with God.

And it demonstrates that they are still capable of guarding God’s people in any situation we might encounter today.

So some reminders of how God’s angels have been a part of God’s covenant work in the past...

When God tested Abraham’s faith and asked him to sacrifice Isaac, the covenant son – it was the Angel of the Yahweh who told Abraham to stop and spoke on behalf of Yahweh saying;

“I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of

their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” (Gen 22:15)

When God determined it was time to keep his covenant promise and deliver Israel from slavery in Egypt- the angel of Yahweh appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. (Ex 3:2)

And when Israel was wandering in the desert on their way to the Promised Land, and Balak, King of Moab hired Balaam the prophet to curse Israel – the angel of the Lord stood in his way and told Balaam he would only be able to say what Yahweh allowed him to say, which turned out to be a blessing instead of a curse. (Numbers 22)

And there are many more examples throughout the scriptures friends, and we don’t have time to go through all them this morning – but these specific examples demonstrate that God’s angels can guard and protect in any and all situations that we might encounter.

Then in vs. 14-16, the psalmist boldly reveals the full implications of the truth in the truism.

A dramatic shift that occurs as the psalmist prophetically delivers a word on behalf of Yahweh; directed to the one who is in a covenant relationship with Him.

The psalmist writes ; *“The one **who attaches himself to me,**¹ says Yahweh “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 and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.”*

So friends, God’s word to us in Psalm 91 is that if we attach ourselves to Yahweh – by professing as vs. 9 instructs us to that *“Yahweh is our refuge”* then we will receive the covenant blessings and promises and protection.

¹ (the NIV uses ‘love’ which is a bad translation because it doesn’t really get at the covenant relationship very well, and is too easily misread with our contemporary emotional/sentimental sense of love)

Because through attaching ourselves to Yahweh we are acknowledging who He has revealed himself to be in His covenant name...

That's pretty specific isn't it – a far cry from the generic truism of vs. 1 and far more helpful to us, now we know how to respond, we have specific things we can do, we know what we can expect – this is amazing!!!

Except - this is Old Testament material... and we live in the New Testament era, so what are we supposed to make of God's word to us in this Psalm about attaching ourselves to Him now that Jesus Christ has entered the picture?

Well – let me share yet another truism in an attempt to answer that question *“all scripture leads us to Jesus Christ...”* but the good news is that we won't just leave that truism hanging there in its useless generality.

Instead we'll unpack it so that we can specifically see how God's word for protection in Psalm 91 leads us to Jesus Christ – and encourages our faith and trust and hope in Him!

So the first thing we can do to unpack this is to look at what Jesus does in John 10:36-39, where He says: *“Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God's Son’? Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.”* Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.

So here we see Jesus doing what Psalm 91 is speaking about – claiming Yahweh as his refuge; and even more than that he is attaching himself to Yahweh in a very intimate way – claiming Yahweh as his father and claiming that Yahweh is in him and He is in Yahweh and that his ministry proves it.

And when his opponents try to seize him to stone him for making this attachment which they consider blasphemy, they

cannot, because God delivers him from their grasp - “the *one who attaches himself to me;*” says Yahweh “ *I will rescue him...*”

Now this might be a bit simple – but it’s a specific connection between Psalm 91 and Jesus Christ.

And there is another specific connection between Psalm 91 and Jesus Christ in vs. 11-12. These are the verses that Satan quoted to tempt Jesus during our Lord’s testing in the desert.

And our Lord’s temptation in the wilderness supplies us with some specific examples that encourage us to trust that He is God’s ultimate expression of the protection and deliverance that is described in Psalm 91 – especially when they are contrasted with Israel’s experience in the wilderness.

In spite of Yahweh’s protection and deliverance, Moses gave into temptation and took the glory for himself when he struck the rock from which God provided water for the nation...

Even though Yahweh had shown his mighty power by giving Israel victory over their enemies in the wilderness – when they arrived at the Promised Land they put God to the test by doubting Yahweh’s ability to help them conquer it and they refused to enter in.

And it didn’t seem to matter that Israel had experienced Yahweh’s protection from the gods of Egypt and Pharaoh’s army as he brought them out to worship Him at Mt. Sinai... within a few days of their arrival they had built a golden calf and were worshipping it instead...

But Jesus’ time of testing in the wilderness produced different results. He rebuked Satan’s attempt to get him to use his power for himself and to turn stones into bread trusting in God’s power to sustain him...

And He refused to put God’s love and care to the test by throwing himself off the highest point of the Temple to see if Ps 91:11-12 was true... instead He embraced his calling as the Messiah sent to save the world.

And when Satan took Jesus to a mountain and offered to give him all the kingdoms of the world, if he would just bow down and worship Him – Jesus refused and stayed loyal to Yahweh...

So here we have some specific examples of how Jesus Christ was the perfect, faithful and loyal covenant partner with Yahweh in a way that Israel was never able to be.

So, when Yahweh speaks in Ps 91: 14-16 and says *“Because he has attached himself to me, I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name...”*

We know and all the protection and blessings which Yahweh promises to His people are ultimately given in their fullness to Jesus Christ because of His perfect loyalty and faithfulness.

So friends, if we want to enter into a covenant relationship with Yahweh in order to receive all His benefits and protection - from harm and danger, and especially from our ultimate enemies, the devil and our sinful nature – then we must say that *“Jesus is our refuge”*

It’s because of Jesus’ faithful attachment to Yahweh, that we have access to all the benefits and protection described in Ps 91 – this is how Jesus becomes our refuge and saves us.

And we can list some specific examples from Jesus’ ministry which prove that Jesus can save you from any circumstance you might encounter in life...

From sickness by his healing, from hunger by his providing food, from natural disaster by his telling the sea to become calm, from the demonic by his casting out demons, from the twin perils of legalism and lawlessness through his teaching...

And from injustice through his kingdom, from loneliness through his presence, from sorrow through his comfort, and ultimately from ourselves by his taking our sinful nature to the cross.

Friends whatever circumstances you encounter in this life you can call on Jesus to save you, protect you and deliver you.

But, we must be wary that we do not turn that into a truism...

So at this point it is especially important that we look at what vs13 reminds us of when it says *“You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.”*

We should hear echoes of Genesis 3:15 where God curses the serpent and promises that one of the woman’s offspring *“will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”*

This reminds us that Jesus’ crushing victory over Satan, sin and death is not painless, it involves suffering – the bite to the heel, and when we look at how Jesus’ victory was accomplished through taking our sin to the cross it can actually look like God is going back on everything He promised to Jesus in Psalm 91.

And Satan knows this is where our faith and trust in Jesus Christ is the most vulnerable...

We may have experienced God’s protection and deliverance through Jesus Christ in some wonderful ways – and yet God still allows us to experience some suffering and tragedy in our

lives; job layoffs, critical illnesses, accidents and injuries, disasters that destroy our homes and property...

And when Satan sees that God has allowed something like this to come into our lives, he jumps at the chance to twist God’s promise of protection in Psalm 91 that *“no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent”* into a truism..

And he mocks us with this, waving this truism in our face, trying to undermine our faith and trust in God’s protection, just as he attempted to tempt our Lord.

But Christ defeated Satan – so we are also protected from these kinds of attacks on our faith if we trust in Jesus’ way of responding to truisms with specific truths from scripture.

When the enemy is using truisms to tempt us to doubt God’s goodness and protection - we must answer back by specifically confessing Romans 8:28 *“we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*

Specifically this means that whatever crosses our path has been filtered through Yahweh's covenant purposes for this world and our life and He is able to use them to bring all things to His desired end for His creation – and to refine us...

And if Christ achieved victory through suffering, then we too will achieve victory through suffering – though the sorrow may last for a time... joy comes with the morning. (Ps 30:5)

So, if we say Jesus Christ is our refuge, then it matters not what we endure in this lifetime– because He will protect us in life and in death and keep our faith and trust in him safe until that day when He brings in the new heavens and the new earth.

So friends if were to get really specific about unpacking how Psalm 91 leads us to Jesus Christ - I think in the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:36-39 articulate it rather well – so I offer them to you as God's word to you this morning.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?”³⁶ As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ 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.”

And friends – that is not a truism... that is the truth. Believe in it, receive it, and live by it...

Amen.