



THE SAFEST PLACE, THE ONLY CERTAIN SALVATION

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Psalm 91

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The shadow of the events of September 11 still extends over our land. Every day we read about the past terrorist attacks and the fears about unknown attacks to come. As Christians we need to know how to think biblically about the times in which we live. That is our quest this morning.

Ten days after the attacks, on September 21, our neighbor across the street, a young mother named Shannon, was watching Hollywood's special telethon around six o'clock in the evening. She was soon overwhelmed by emotion. Maybe she watched that amazing opening number by Bruce Springsteen, when he sang about "my city's in ruins," and how his hands were folded in prayer. Wasn't that incredible? Bruce Springsteen leading Hollywood and the nation in prayer on national television! Such a thing was unthinkable before September 11. Our neighbor was deeply stirred. She knocked on our door, and said she wanted to meet with my wife Blythe. She needed someone to talk to, to pray with her, to help her make some sense of our terrorized world.

Shannon is a typical mother these days: her husband works long hours; she is often alone; she is outwardly cheerful but her eyes always seem to be a little misty, as if she is either on the verge of crying or has just finished wiping her eyes from the latest cry. She is not a believer. Her husband is very quiet and doesn't want to talk about God. Her father was sending her "twilight zone" e-mail messages claiming that Nostradamus prophesied about the terrorist bombings. She was deeply frightened. There are no anchors in her life.

Unfortunately, my wife and I were not home when Shannon came by that Friday night; we were out on a date. But the next day, Blythe went to see her. Shannon wanted to talk about God; that's why she rang our doorbell. She said she watched President Bush address the joint session of Congress on September 20. She said, "I got frustrated when they kept interrupting him with standing ovations. I just wanted to hear him speak, to listen to his words, just to hear his soothing voice. I just wanted to hear his voice. He sounded so confident." Can you hear the raw vulnerability in her words? Blythe shared Jesus Christ with Shannon. Even though her husband said he didn't want to talk about God, he hung around to listen in the background.

Meanwhile, back at our house that morning, I took that time to pray and ask God what he wanted me to preach the next time I got the opportunity. He took me right away to Psalm 91. I read the psalm, and my heart nearly stopped. As long as I live I will never cease to be amazed and thrilled by the relevance of the Word of God for the modern world. It was as if Moses, the human author of the psalm, composed it right after watching those planes crash into those buildings one more time on television. I was sitting there in awe of the Scriptures when Blythe came home. I read the psalm to her, and she immediately called our friend across the street and asked if she would let me come over and read it to her. I did, and this morning I want to share with you the same truths our gracious Lord led me to share with her, truths about the safest place I know, and about the only certain salvation there is.

Psalm 91 can be broken down into four parts. The first part describes the safest place Moses found during his wanderings throughout the wilderness (verses 1-2). He then describes the individual believer's safest place (verses 3-10), using riveting word pictures of security. Then the passage moves into a timeless place

in the third section (verses 11-13), where Moses as a prophet writes verses that figured prominently in Jesus Christ's life on the day he met and overcame the ultimate terrorist, during his time of testing in the wilderness. The final section (verses 14-16), is an amazing love poem from God the Father to everyone who believes in him. God promises believers that he will be with us forever, showing us his salvation, the only certain salvation there is.

Moses' Safest Place (Ps 91:1-2)

Ancient Jewish tradition holds that Moses wrote this psalm on the day the Tabernacle was completed. God's Shekinah glory was gathered in one swirling light, the concentration of the infinite into one small place, and it came down while Moses watched. The glory of God, the very essence of his perfect, very present being, the light of a perfect love that casts out all fear, came down before Moses' eyes and filled the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle. Moses must have been awestruck upon the sight of the eternal, limitless God concentrating his essence, swirling his very self, into one small place inside a tent in the desert.

Imagine what this must have felt like to the man who bore the crushing responsibility of leading a million homeless Hebrews wandering in the desert, in constant fear from foes seen and unseen. I wonder how often Moses yearned for the relative safety of the mighty walls of Pharaoh's palace in Egypt, where he grew up. And yet, when the warm light of God's perfect love came down in that tent in the middle of nowhere, and God was there, and Love was there with him in that desert, to be with him right where he was and wherever he would go, suddenly, after all the wanderings, everything seemed all right. He was safe. Standing there with his God, Moses found the safest place in the universe.

This explains the sense of the awesome that permeates the first verse:

**He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.** (Ps 91:1, NASB)

There was Moses, and there was God with Moses, bathing him in the warm light of a perfect love that casts out all fear, and the rest of the world just seemed to fade away.

There in the presence of his very own mighty God, Moses did the only possible thing to do: He worshiped his God who was there, proclaiming a very personal faith in a very present and personal God. Moses recorded his words in verse 2:

**I will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress,
My God, in whom I trust!'** (Ps 91:2)

There, bathed in the glowing Light of God's personal glory, Moses found his private refuge, his personal fortress in his God.

In my Bible I have drawn four little circles in verse 2 to highlight four striking things about this verse: I have circled the little word "my" three times, and I have circled that passionate exclamation point at the end of the verse. This tells us worlds about the personal and vibrant faith Moses had while leading a grumbling nation through a wilderness full of dangers and terrors. First, those three little "my" words, "my" refuge, "my" fortress, and "my" God, reveal that in the presence of his God, the one Moses whom had chosen to identify himself with rather than claiming his inheritance as a prince of Egypt, he discovered a security beyond anything he had ever known. It was far beyond the security he felt when leading massive Egyptian armies

against Ethiopia, which was not the safest place. It was far beyond the security he felt in the palaces of Pharaoh where he grew up, the greatest fortresses in the world at that time. But these fortresses were not the safest place. In the presence of his God, Moses found by faith a fortress of eternal strength, a refuge offering absolute security. He found the safest place. And Moses moved right into that refuge and fortress. By calling them “my” refuge, “my” fortress, he owned them.

And what opened Moses’ eyes to this eternal security was his faith. Moses is known as the Lawgiver -- Mr. Hardcore -- but here he stands before us as a father of our faith, reminiscent of Abraham. Listen to how emphatic Moses is about his own faith: “My God in whom I trust!” That exclamation point stands at the end of the verse like a mighty stake driven into the ground, a rallying cry of faith like a flag planted in the ground. This is “Exclamation Point Faith.” There in the mighty presence of God, Moses worships. He enters by faith into his personal place of absolute safety, and he exclaims his faith in a God who is very real, very present and very, very powerful.

Now you might say that Moses’ world is so far separated from ours that his experience cannot possibly inform us today. Nothing could be further from the truth. Moses led a nation of homeless Jews seeking to carve a sustained homeland in the Middle East, amidst a host of hostile Arab neighbors trying to keep their homeland for themselves. Does this sound familiar? Moses feared the unseen plagues and sicknesses that might infect the nation and spread like wildfire, killing thousands of the huddled masses he led. This picture is not at all unlike the daily reminders on virtually every newscast about the clear and present danger we face from bio-terrorism. We know that one of Moses’ great concerns in the desert was finding unspoiled water supplies to sustain the thirsty nation. Remember the bitter water at Mara? The nightmares that kept Moses up late at night in the wilderness are eerily similar to the nightmares described recently on TIME.com: “Ordinary Americans are waking up in the middle of the night with nightmares about poisoned water supplies.” Moses faced some of the exact same terrors we as a nation face today, post September 11, yet he found the safest place.

The key word from verses 1-2 is this: now is the hour in our lives to plant our stake in the ground like Moses did, to stand and proclaim an Exclamation Point Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. What Moses saw in that desert tabernacle is what we carry inside the tabernacle of our bodies for our entire time on this earth as believers. Moses saw the glory of God, and there he found security and a bold faith. We believers own the glory of God, and that glory possesses us by the indwelling Holy Spirit. What Moses saw externally, living in that tent in the desert, we believers possess internally by our indwelling Jesus Christ. The glory of God is no longer out there, but in here, inside of us. And the safest place is not standing in the light of a tent where God dwells, but being ourselves the dwelling place of God where he lives wherever we are. He is Security Himself, the same One who so secured Moses in the wilderness. He lives within us to secure and anchor every one of us who believes in Jesus Christ, no matter what hellish horrors are unleashed on this world.

So, now is the hour for us to stand upon our indwelling Rock and rest secure in our Christ who indwells every one of us who believes. There, in intimate fellowship in the holy of holies of our heart, is our safest place -- a safer haven than any fortress or bunker in this world. This is the hour of Exclamation Point Faith, where we enter boldly by a bold faith into the safest place -- right here in the holy of holies in our hearts with Jesus Christ. He lives within us, and he loves us with a perfect love. “... neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

The Believer’s Safest Place (Ps 91:3-10)

This is the safest place, and we as believers carry this place in-

side us by faith, in intimacy with our indwelling Jesus Christ. This is a treasured place, and our nation today longs to find this safest place. By faith, Moses describes, in verses 3-10, what life is like for the believer in this safest place.

**For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper,
And from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with His pinions,
And under His wings you may seek refuge;
His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.
You will not be afraid of the terror by night,
Or the arrow that flies by day;
Of the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
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.
You will only look on with your eyes,
And see the recompense of the wicked.
For you have made the Lord, my refuge,
Even the Most High, your dwelling place.
No evil will befall you,
Nor will any plague come near your tent. (Ps 91:3-10)**

In verses 3-4, Moses uses an intriguing metaphor for the believer’s safest place. That safest place is the nest of God. In these verses God is pictured like a mighty father eagle providing absolute security to the little eaglets in the nest. The “you” Moses addresses throughout verses 3-10 is the individual believer (the “you” here is singular throughout), and in verses 3-4, that believer is depicted as a helpless eaglet. That eaglet is tiny, hairless, unable to fly, and thoroughly vulnerable amid a world of swirling dangers: trapper’s snares are set everywhere around it like the five- to seven million land mines estimated to be in Afghanistan; and deadly pestilences seem ready to infect the eaglets at any time.

Have you ever seen little baby birds in a nest in the wild? It is the very essence of vulnerability. One day last spring, Blythe and several of our children discovered a nest of baby meadowlarks right in the middle of a meadow. The nest was only about a foot off the ground, and the four little hairless, bulgy-eyed baby birds sat there with mouths constantly wide open in hungry grins accompanied by a never-ending chorus of chirps. Our whole family visited this nest. The father bird was nowhere to be seen. I came away thinking about those tiny birds in a field where coyotes prowl and howl every night. It is the picture of vulnerability -- unless there is a very large father bird covering the infants with his wings.

This is the exact picture that Moses paints in verse 4: “He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you may seek refuge.” The ultimately vulnerable baby birds become ultimately untouchable when covered by the wings of the mighty eagle. Haven’t you felt more vulnerable in the last few months than ever before? For the first time in most of our lifetimes, our country has been viciously attacked on our own soil. I have flown on every single one of those flights. I was doing business in Manhattan just six weeks before the tragedy. I so easily could have been there. The harsh reality of life in this world is that we are all as vulnerable as those baby birds -- only the believer has the eternal security that his or her soul is forever perfectly safe under the wings of our God. He will preserve us forever in our safest place. Without him, without our Father eagle, we have no safety, but with him, we have perfect safety.

In verses 5-10, Moses describes the confident walk of the believer through the minefield of life. Before we read these verses I want to note right away the key observation arising from them: inhabiting the safest place doesn’t mean retreating to a fortress in fear. It means walking fearlessly by faith through the minefield of life, knowing that everywhere you walk, your Lord is with you because he is in you. There is no call for the believer to shrink in fear. In fact, our communities need us to lead the way by walking fearlessly by faith.

As believers our souls are forever secure in Christ. We can walk forward confidently knowing one critically important truth: we need not fear death. For us, death is a set of swing doors we will pass through to enter into eternity with him. It will be that quick for the believer: just a push through swing doors -- from here to eternity. Jesus Christ took the sting out of death. He is the Lord of the Resurrection. Inside me is the essence of who I really am through the oneness of my eternal soul, united with the indwelling Spirit of my eternal God. And this "real" me, the eternal Dorman Followwill, cannot be touched by death. Any one of us may be touched by pestilence, by terrorist attacks, or we may die driving home on the highway. Death may claim this body today, and unless the Rapture comes, it will certainly claim this body some day. But the sting of death is gone: the body will die, but who I really am, forever united with my Jesus Christ inside, is perfectly safe with him forever. When I die, he and I dwelling together will pass through the swing doors of this physical world right into the heavenly realms. There we will meet face-to-face. I will see him for the first time. I will run into his arms to enjoy that embrace I have yearned for all my life, and there real life will begin for me.

As we learn this we have confidence that our lives are eternally safe in the palm of God's mighty right hand. We need not fear death. Therefore, we will indeed not be afraid of the terrorist by night, or of the plane that flies by day, of the bio-warfare agents that stalk in darkness, or of the sudden destruction that lays waste a few hours before noon. A thousand may fall at your side, even ten thousand at your right hand. Some of us may perish in falling buildings. Almost certainly, some believers passed on as the two towers fell in Manhattan. But we believers are absolutely safe for eternity in the unbreakable love of Christ.

When you have made the Lord Jesus Christ your personal refuge, and you have invited him to make your heart into his dwelling place and your safest place, that place becomes in you the down payment of heaven, the seed of eternity. Nothing in this world can take that away, not Osama bin Laden, not Satan, not even death. It is this note of absolute certainty that Moses sounds in verse 10, when he affirms "no evil will befall you, nor will any plague come near your tent." Moses had to use physical terms to describe a deeper spiritual reality. The plague will not come near your "tent," your tabernacle of the heart, your safest place. Moses isn't talking about physical perils attacking our physical bodies here. He is talking about our spiritual dwelling place inside the holy of holies of our heart, with our indwelling Christ. There we are safe from terrorists, safe from anthrax, safe even from death. These are words of comfort, safety and security that you can bank on forever.

On the last Thursday in September, I had to walk through the minefield of life, secure with Jesus Christ in my safest place, in a very personal way. That was the first time I flew on a plane since the terrorist attack. I have to admit to a very human lump in my throat in imagining what it would be like to enter the door of a plane, right there by the cockpit. My wife and I talked about it. More importantly, we prayed about it. Our Lord reminded us of some timeless truths: He is here. He is with us by living inside us. He is always the One who promises to shepherd us through the minefield of life, no matter what comes. Nothing has changed for the believer: we are called to live by faith not fear, to choose to pray for our enemies -- even Osama bin Laden -- because those men above all others need to have their hearts melted by the love of Jesus Christ on the cross. Perhaps our God will save Osama bin Laden like he did Paul, making an international Christian persecutor in the 21st century as fruitful as Paul, the 1st century international Christian persecutor.

And above all, we are called to live our lives in front of others as salt and light in this world. If we withdraw in fear, how will our neighbors see Christ in us at this hour of fear when they need our indwelling Christ the most? We must reject our fears, choke down our worries, pray and talk with our Christ who inhabits our safest place inside our hearts, and we must go forward. So, I walked right onto that plane with God, and went safely to and

from St. Louis. In fact, on that plane I had the joy of studying this psalm and writing these sermon notes, enjoying my Jesus Christ in my safest place, right there on an American Airlines flight. And I would have been safe had the flight gone down. This is what we have to know: we need not fear death, because we believers live forever in the safest place, both here and for eternity.

Jesus' Certain Salvation Against the Ultimate Terrorist (Ps 91:11-13)

For He will give his angels charge concerning you,

To guard you in all your ways.

They will bear you up in their hands,

Lest you strike your foot against a stone.

You will tread upon the lion and cobra,

The young lion and the serpent you will trample down. (Ps 91:11-13)

This timeless text reaches all the way back to expand on the truth of Genesis 3:15. These words foreshadow the life of Jesus Christ in an amazing way, describing a salvation and victory that we believers enter into today. It is the text describing Jesus Christ's certain salvation and absolute victory on the day that he came face to face with the ultimate terrorist, Satan himself.

Verses 11-12 are instantly recognizable as the verses that Satan threw in Jesus' face on the day of the temptation, when Jesus was weak in the wilderness. Satan used these verses to try to snare him into the pride of proving himself as God's Son by taking the big plunge down at the Temple to test the truth of these promises and prove himself to the crowd. It was twisted thinking from the ultimate terrorist himself, the father of lies and all twisted thinking.

But, if we look closely at verse 13 we see the genius of God revealed. There was a reason Satan stopped quoting Scripture at verse 12. He didn't want to remind Jesus of verse 13, because it speaks of Jesus' personal victory over Satan. This verse literally says, "You will tread upon the lion and cobra, the young lion and the serpent you will trample down." The word picture here is one of Jesus Christ standing triumphant, with his foot on the head of the serpent. This amazing verse expands on the truth of the very first prophecy about the Messiah Jesus Christ, in Genesis 3:15. Then God spoke to that old serpent in the garden, the original terrorist, saying, "And I will put enmity between you (the serpent) and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." Here, in Psalm 91:13, Moses reiterates this ancient promise, fulfilled in history on that day in the wilderness when Jesus defeated Satan by the sword of Scripture well-quoted and well-understood.

Now, lest you think we are going way off on some theological tangent, bear with me for a moment. There is a basic dynamic introduced in Genesis 3:15 that spans every page of Scripture, from Genesis through Psalms through the Gospels to Revelation. It is this: Satan gets excited because he scores a blow, but Jesus Christ scores the absolute victory and defeats him every single time. Just when Satan thought he had struck a mortal blow to humanity in the Garden of Eden with Adam's sin, God pronounced ultimate judgment, saying that some day a Son of a woman would stand with his foot on the serpent's head, crushing it into the dust of eternity. This dynamic repeats itself throughout the Bible and throughout human history. Just when Satan thought he might stamp out the Jews through Pharaoh's genocide, God raised up a beautiful baby boy named Moses to deliver them to the Promised Land. Just when Satan thought he had struck a blow on all the babies in Bethlehem through an enraged edict from Herod, the baby Jesus was traveling to safety down in Egypt, safe and secure in his mother's arms. And when Satan thought he had finally won it all when Jesus was laid dead in a tomb, our Jesus Christ delivered the crushing blow to Satan by walking alive out of the tomb three days later.

This is the greatest theme in the Bible: though Satan strikes a

blow, Jesus Christ always wins the victory -- not once, not twice, but every single time. Read your Bible, read your newspaper; it is always there. Just when Satan tried to destroy God's chosen nation through Hitler's genocide during World War II, and over six million Jews perished, afterwards God re-established the Jews in their promised homeland in Israel for the first time since 70 A.D., when the Temple was razed by Titus. And we ourselves, as believers in Christ, inhabited by our victorious Jesus Christ, enter into his victory over Satan. To understand how all this affects you and me personally, just read the book of Romans. The only time the name of Satan is mentioned in that victorious book is at the very end, in Rom. 16:20, where Paul writes to the Roman believers, "And the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you."

This is the truth that you and I can take away from verses 11-13: that Jesus Christ is always victorious, and because we are with him and in him, we enter into his victory over Satan. His salvation and victory over death and Satan is our salvation and victory over death and Satan; therefore we need have no fear -- no fear of Satan and terrorists like him, and no fear of death no matter how death comes. We as believers need have no fear!

The Believer's Certain Salvation (Ps 91:14-16)

**"Because he has loved Me, therefore I will deliver him;
I will set him securely on high, because he has known My
name.**

**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 behold My salvation."** (Ps 91:14-16)

The final three verses of this psalm give us an eternal assurance of our security in Jesus Christ, based on a very personal promise from God himself. The voice of this poem changes in verses 14-16 to become a direct quote from God himself. This is a promise of God to Jesus Christ first, and also to every single one of us who believes in him. If you are struggling with fear in these days you would do very well to memorize these three verses and quote them to yourself in your dark hours as the very voice of God for you.

This is such a personal message from God to each one of us that I want you each to envision God your Father cupping your face in his great hands as he tells you "Now this is from Me to you," as he tells you this special love poem he has written just for you and me in verses 14-16.

These verses represent magnificent poetry in Hebrew. Here are seven direct promises from God, a perfect number, three "I WILL" promises on each side of the central promise of all, the "I AM" timeless present promise that he is with us in distress. The poetry looks like this, in a direct Hebrew translation:

- (a1) I WILL DELIVER HIM
- (b1) I WILL ELEVATE HIM (because he knows My Name)
- (c1) He will call upon Me and I WILL ANSWER HIM,
- (d) I AM WITH HIM IN DISTRESS,
- (c2) I WILL RELEASE HIM and
- (b2) I WILL HONOR HIM
- (a2) I WILL SATISFY HIM WITH LONG LIFE AND SHOW HIM MY SALVATION

This is a personal poem composed by God himself, written as a love poem to everyone who loves him, who believes in him, who clings to his salvation as the only true and certain salvation in this world. Many of the great passages of the Bible are written according to this form of poetry, which revolves around a central theme that is the most important point of all, like an arrowhead focusing itself upon the sharp center-point.

And in this poem, the center-point is the central promise of the Bible for the believer: the promise that our God is with us in distress. Think about this throughout the pages of Scripture. When Joseph was alone as a young man in a land he did not know, we find out in Genesis 39:2 that "the Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man." When Moses stood barefooted before the burning bush and was asked to do the seemingly impossible, he said, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" And God answered with this simple promise, "Certainly I will be with you." And my, how God was with Moses during the Ten Plagues and the parting of the Red Sea! When Joshua had to fill the very large shoes of Moses, in Joshua's hour of distress, the Lord spoke to him saying, "Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you may go." And when Jesus Christ ascended up into heaven, when he looked upon the anxious faces of his disciples in the hour of their distress, what promise did he give them? "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

This is the greatest promise across all the pages of the Bible. It is our certain salvation: our risen Jesus Christ says to us, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." That means September 11, 2001, and it means now and every day in the months and years ahead.

So, what does all this mean for us today and Monday morning? First, let us be strong and courageous. Let us walk boldly through the minefield of life, because we are enjoying our living Jesus Christ inside the holy of holies of our hearts no matter where we physically find ourselves -- even on an American Airlines flight! This is the hour for Exclamation Point Faith. Let us be strong and courageous, for our Lord, our great "I AM" is with us always, even to the end of the age.

But there is something more that we are all called to: to pray for our unsaved neighbors, co-workers, friends and family members who are searching for a safe place in a terrorized world. We have found the safest place in the universe in Jesus Christ. The fact that he is with us forever guarantees us a certain salvation. People everywhere around us are dying to have what we have. Shannon was searching for it so strongly that she walked across the street and knocked on our door to talk with someone about God and to pray. These are the days to share the hope that is in us with a hopeless world. May we all pray that our risen Christ will reveal himself in us, that everyone around us will be drawn to him, that he will be with them too in their hour of distress. And may we share with anyone and everyone we know who does not yet know him and the certainty of his salvation for everyone -- man, woman, boy and girl -- who believes. Amen and amen.

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