

The God who protects and promises

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[0 : 00] Now we're going to pray together. Let's pray. Lord of the years, we thank you for the years that have passed, for the good things in them, for the many blessings you have given us. And we thank you as well, Lord, for the tough and testing times.

Times when things were difficult, times when things were hard, and yet times in which we came to know your protection, to know your power, to know your strength.

And we commit to you now 2008, only a few days old, and only a few experiences having happened since the beginning of the year.

But we thank you that you are not only the God of the past, but you are the God of the present. You are the God of today, and you are the God of all the years to come.

And we pause for these few moments, as we turn aside from the good things and the bad things, from our work, from our other pursuits, from our homes, from wherever we have been.

[1 : 11] And we come to listen to you. We come to hear your word. And we pray that may be our experience today. We all come with different experiences. We all come with different levels of faith.

We all come at different stages of the journey. But we all need you. And we need to hear your voice. We need to know your guidance and your protection.

And so as we look together for a few moments at your word, we ask that at this stage, in this year, and on this day, and in these moments, you will give to each of us the message that you want us to hear.

That you will richly bless us. And that you will guide us in a way that we will not mistake. You will speak to us in a voice that is recognizably yours.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, if I could ask you to turn to page 497, please, in the Bibles.

[2 : 18] We are going to read Psalm 91 together. This isn't part of a series. This is a one-off, so to speak, for today. And next week, we'll begin another of our series in these talks.

But today, we are going to look at Psalm 91. And we'll read the psalm together. He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

I will say to the Lord, My refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust. For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence.

He will cover you with his pinions. And under his wings, you will find refuge. His faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

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

[3 : 39] Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place, the Most High, who is my refuge, no evil shall be allowed to befall you.

No plague come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.

You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him.

I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him. I will be with him in trouble.

With long life, I will satisfy him and show him my salvation. And this is the word of the Lord.

[4 : 40] And I suspect many of you are saying, if only. If only this psalm were true. If only this was my experience.

If only this was what happened. We are very familiar today with getting special offers, aren't we? And we often forget to read the small print. You get an offer from a hotel that says, two nights for the price of one.

You often find, when you look at the small print, you have to go on certain days. You can only get certain rooms in the hotel, the most expensive ones, which will cost you as much as two nights and a less expensive room would have cost you if you had paid the whole thing.

And very often you find that the special offer doesn't really work at all. The trouble is, Psalm 91 reads like a special offer without any small print.

Verse 3, He will deliver you. Verse 7, The trouble will not come near you. Verse 10, No evil shall be allowed to befall you.

[5 : 52] Verse 14, I will deliver him. So what on earth are we going to make of it? How many people here can read that Psalm and say, honestly, that's been my experience over the past year.

No evil has touched me. No harm has befallen me. Nothing has harmed me in any way at all. So what are we going to make about this Psalm then?

What is the Psalmist saying to us? Is it a romantic fantasy? The Psalmist feeling particularly happy in particularly satisfying experiences and he's just dashed off some lines that express his mood of the moment.

Now clearly, that's not the case. So we must be missing something if we think that of the Psalm. I want to suggest the key word of the Psalm comes at the very end of the Psalm in verse 16.

With long life, I will satisfy him. And show him my salvation. This is what the Psalm is about. It's about salvation.

[7 : 02] It's about salvation which God graciously gives us glimpses of in this life. There are moments, there are times in this life when all the things that the Psalmist says happen to us.

All of us can look back to experiences in which we can say with the Psalmist that he has delivered us, he has rescued us, he has saved us, he has brought us out of the troubles.

But aren't there many others, perhaps even at this moment, when we are still in the trouble, when he does not appear to have delivered us? And that's why we've got to hold on to this word salvation.

Part of what God gives us, we experience in this life. There are anticipations of it, but the reality of his salvation will only become true in the world to come.

Every word in this Psalm is true, but the experience of that will only come fully in the world to come. So let's remember that for a few moments then.

- [8 : 05] And the Psalm I've called the God who protects and the God who promises. So let's first of all look at verses 1 to 13, which is the God who protects. protects.
- The psalmist praises God because he protects. He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.
- We all make promises, don't we? We all promise things and we can't always deliver them. So when the psalmist says the God who protects, he first of all tells us who God is.
- What kind of God is this? who says he protects. And we notice in verse 1 and 2 there are a number of names of God.
- Who is he? First of all, he is the Most High. Now there is a title of God that's going to cut down every threat to size, isn't it?
- [9 : 05] We all suffer, if you like, from high risks, high pressure, high dangers.
- And the psalmist says, well, God is higher than all these. Do you have a high risk factor in your life? Well, turn to the Most High. Shelter in him.
- I've just been reading a biography of Winston Churchill and part of it is talking about those air raid shelters in the city of London when the Luftwaffe was bombing London. Saturation point, people would go down into those shelters.
- Now, the bombs were still falling. The danger was still there. But they were sheltered. That's what the psalmist is saying. In the midst of the pressured lives that you live, there is something that is higher, someone that is greater.
- He's not just the Most High, He's the Almighty. Are there things that you can't do? Of course, there are many things that none of us can do. We're always up against pressure that's greater than we can bear.
- [10 : 11] Well, there is nothing this God can't do. And that's what the psalmist are always saying. My help is in the name of the Lord. Well, who is the Lord? The one who made heaven and earth.
- Children's chorus that used to be sung in my youth. My God is so great, so strong, and so mighty. There's nothing that He cannot do. That's the kind of God who is offering protection.
- But He is also the Lord, the covenant name, the God who has made promises that He will not and cannot break. But above all, He is my God in whom I trust.
- There is a personal relationship. This is not saying there is a great big power out there who is bigger than other powers. It's saying, my God, the God who has committed Himself to me.
- So that's the first thing. God is the protector because of who He is. But then the psalmist goes on to say, what does God protect us from? Well, the short answer is everything.
- [11 : 12] But what if you've just been bereaved? What if you have a broken relationship? What if you've just lost your job? What if you are struggling with some temptation that's proving too strong for you?
- What does this mean? He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with His wings. You will not fear the terror of night. And first of all, the psalmist talks about what you might call unseen dangers.
- Now, there are many dangers in our lives which we can protect ourselves against, either by diligence or by foresight, by being sensible. I mean, we can eat sensibly and protect ourselves against heart attacks.
- We can lock doors and prevent ourselves against being robbed. But we know perfectly well that none of these things are absolute protection. But here the psalmist is talking about the unseen, unexpected things that come into our lives.

And look at the kind of words he uses. The snare, the pestilence, the terror of the night, the arrow that flies by day, the pestilence that stalks in darkness, the destruction that stalks at noonday.

[12 : 24] Now, all these words are deliberately poetic words, deliberately vivid words, because the psalmist is saying, we are surrounded by enemies, enemies who are enemies of God and of Christ.

We are attacked by Satan himself. Now, when you realise that, we realise also that Christ has defeated the devil.

By his death, by his resurrection, he has given a death blow to the devil. And that means that we'll not necessarily be protected in the sense of being rescued out of these in this life, but it does mean that none of these things can finally harm us.

That none of these things can destroy our salvation, to come back to the words which we began. None of these things can permanently damage us. Do you mean to see what the psalmist is saying?

The psalmist isn't saying, come on, live with me in a fantasy land, in a cloud cuckoo land, where everything works out beautifully, where everything we try succeeds, where everything that we want simply falls on our lap.

[13 : 37] That's magic, that's fantasy land. No, the psalmist is saying, even when these things happen, they're not the final word. God will have the final word. And notice how in verses 7 and 8, he goes on to talk about individual protection.

It will not come near you, and the you is emphatic to you, it will not come near. Once again, that doesn't mean immunity. Read the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis.

What happened to Joseph? He was betrayed, he was imprisoned, he was slandered. The best years of his life, 13 years or so, between the ages of 17 and 30, he was in prison.

And what did he say about it afterwards? God meant it for good. In other words, God took these awful circumstances, working through them, not preventing Joseph from being in prison, not preventing him from being hurt, but God meant it for good.

And then in verses 11 to 13, just as we have supernatural enemies, we have supernatural defenders. He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

[14 : 52] Words that Jesus quotes himself in the temptation in the desert. The hosts of heaven protect us and save us in many ways we don't know. Charles Spurgeon in his great commentary in the Psalms says this, Fools in flesh and foes in the spirit are alike cheated off their prey when the Lord of hosts stands between us and their fury.

So you see what the psalmist is saying. The psalmist is not saying in the year 2008 everything is going to work out just fine. You're going to win a cruise in the Caribbean, your relationships are going to be wonderful, money is going to pour in, there's going to be nothing but good happens.

The psalmist is saying whatever happens the Lord of hosts is with you. Whatever happens he will work it for his good purposes. That brings us to the second part of the psalm, the God who promises verses 14 to 16.

You see in verses 1 to 13 the psalmist has been talking about himself and about God. Talking about the protection of God. Now what happens here is that God himself speaks.

And that's so important because in the Psalms we have both God speaking to us and us speaking to God. But here God is underwriting what the psalmist says.

[16 : 17] So if God is saying by the way when the psalmist talked in this way he was telling the truth. He wasn't fantasizing. He wasn't saying things that are unreal. Because he holds fast to me in love I will deliver him.

I will protect him because he knows my name. And notice the two sides of it. Because he holds fast to me in love I will deliver him.

What does it mean to hold fast in love? Does that mean some kind of psychological gymnastics whereby you are always feeling oh I love God oh I trust God I have no problems at all.

That's not what God is saying. God is saying hold fast. You see as if God is saying so many of these things have surrounded the psalmist the snare of the fowler the deadly pestilence the terror the arrows that thud through the day and so on.

All these things have happened but he's still held on. Now that's so important. It's not that the psalmist has felt good about these things he's kept on believing.

[17 : 24] I think this is wonderful. God looks at our love at our faith in all its weakness in all its feebleness and he is pleased with it.

I like what a character in one of the Narnia stories says and I must confess I can't remember which one no doubt somebody from Cornhill will tell me at some point.

One of the Narnia characters says speaking about Aslan it is the courtesy of deep heaven that when we mean well he takes us to have meant better than we did.

That's what the psalmist is saying here or rather what God is saying to the psalmist I know you're struggling I know it's difficult I know it's tough but I'll deliver you because you have been you've opened your heart and the second thing we end where we began with salvation with long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation obviously that does not mean long life in this earth and Craig McRitchie's family know that only too well long life is not promised to everyone in this life but surely this means endless life beyond the grave indeed James Montgomery in his very fine paraphrase of this actually that's the line with which he ends endless life beyond the grave because that's ultimately what salvation is about it is about life in this world but life in this world only as it leads to life in the next and notice

I will show him my salvation the metaphor here is a wonderful one God is inviting his child giving a kind of preview of the house he's going to live in for all eternity I will show him my salvation so we finish today two things which I think are tremendous messages for the new year first thing is this 2008 will no doubt be like 2007 and the years before it we will experience all of us will experience some of these things many of these things perhaps we will experience the dangers that by day and by night and so on these are not signs of God's disfavour these are signs that God is in fact with us and leading us through them but the second thing is this and I don't know everybody here if you are a Christian take courage from this you are on the high road if these things are happening if you are not a

[20 : 07] Christian and wondering whether to take that step or not it's not a step that's going to remove all your problems from you what it is going to do is give you someone who will be with you in those problems and will ultimately lead you to salvation to endless life beyond the grave may God bless you all and give you a very happy and very prosperous 2008 let's pray when he calls to me I will answer him I will be with him in trouble I will rescue him and honor him with long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation Lord God we are weak but you are strong we are mortal but you are eternal and so we place our lives our families our friends our hopes and fears into your hand knowing that when we come eventually to stand with you and look back over our lives that we will be able to say and say with conviction

God meant it for good and we thank you for this in Jesus name Amen