

“Shelter In Place”, Rev. Doug Ashley
May 17, 2020

Good morning! I'm Pastor Doug and I'm glad you joined us today. We have tried to look at some familiar passages over the last several weeks as a way of finding our comfort in God during a trying time. This week is no exception. We are going to look at Psalm 91. We will primarily focus on the first two verses, but I'll refer to other verses in the psalm that relate to the main idea, so grab your Bible or open your Bible app if you have it. Here is Psalm 91:1-2:

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.”

Would you please pray with me?

God our Shelter, we come to you wanting to hear you speak to us. We know that you do today by the power of your Spirit through the living and active word you have given us. We ask you to take these words and renew our minds, help us to get ahold of the big things that you have for us so that we can truly rest in your security and in your peace. Thank you for the gift of your presence with us today wherever we are—we want to hear you, Lord. It's in Jesus name we pray, amen.

A friend of mine asked me to go climbing with him and some other people one day. It was a climb of about 100 feet with ropes and harnesses and all, so we had to do it in two pitches or sections. Everything went fine at first, but just as we were getting up to the very top I noticed our guide getting a little nervous. The sky had started darkening and now we knew why. A thunderstorm was approaching us from the other side of the rock formation and we were at the very top of it. We had two repels to go to get down! Thankfully, we all made it off that mountain unharmed. But as the lighting flashed and the rain fell around us we all wondered if we were going to make it back down. A beautiful day had turned into a dangerous one. A fun excursion had turned into a journey of survival. And it all happened so quickly!

We experienced the world as a dangerous place up on that rock formation. You may have had the unfortunate experience yourself. A difficult diagnosis. A possible layoff. A painful accident. Just look at what we are experiencing all over the world right now. Everything was fine and then it wasn't. The world can be a dangerous place. What do we do when we find ourselves in a dangerous or precarious position in life?

Our tendency is to seek out self-protection and minimize risk exposure. And yes, taking smart steps is a good thing. Hand washing, elbow sneezes, and face masks are good things. But what happens when all the sources of our security are no longer sufficient? Psalm 91 points to another source. Here we see that **God is great so we can find our security in him.**

Later on in verse 14, it is clear that the promise of our security in God is for those who KNOW him. And we get to know so much about God in these first two verses! So we are going to focus right there today. First we will look at the four names of God we see here that point to the shelter of God's REAL PRESENCE. There are four metaphors of God's work that point to the shelter of God's ACTIVE PROTECTION. Why four? Because he is describing a full and robust view of God for all people in all time. Psalm 91 is such a bedrock for our security.

First we see here that we find our security in God's presence. The four names of God here in these two verses are easy to slip past us. They seem to be in the background to the real meaning of this passage, until you recognize that the psalmist put them here in order to highlight God's very being as the source of our security. What do these names tell us about God?

He is the "Most High". This is the Hebrew word "El-yon" which translates as "high or highest" and it describes supremacy. This God is the highest of all heights.

He is the "Almighty". This is the Hebrew word "El Shaddai" which translates as "God of the Mountains". At that time, there was a connection with the worship of a deity and the mountains. It's as if people just naturally reasoned that in order to get closer to their "god" that they had to go up on a mountain. Used often in Genesis and Job, the psalmist is giving us a physical picture of a God who is above all others. He is the KING of the mountains.

He is the "LORD". This is the Hebrew word "Yahweh" which is the most common personal reference to God used in the Old Testament. It derives its meaning from the Hebrew word "to be". In Exodus 3:14, Moses stumbles upon a bush that is on fire but not burning up he meets God there and asks him: "Who are you?" And God answers Moses by simply saying: "I AM WHO I AM." That's where we get this word. This is the God who exists before all existence.

Finally, he is "God". This is the Hebrew word "Elohim" which is the most common of all the references to God in the Old Testament. It is a plural form of the word for "gods" but it is used singularly for the God of Israel. He is the God above all gods. But one thing to note is that the psalmist includes is that possessive pronoun "my". He is saying this is not just any "god", this is "MY GOD". This is not a general connection but an intimate one. This is the God who gets personal with his people.

God is their security because of his very real presence with them. And is this not the God you and I want with us and for us? If you and I know this God, intimately know him not just knowing about him. If this is “my God in whom I trust” then this is of great comfort. If this mighty and powerful God is the one in whom I find my security, then I can find myself experiencing great confidence. In the midst of a dangerous world, where we find our hearts can be shaken, the psalmist tells us that it is this God with whom we dwell. His presence is powerful because he is a big God.

John Ortberg tells the story of a group of friends who were walking along a street. They come upon a fight that had broken out in a bar and spilled into the street. Even though they did not have much experience with this kind of thing, they knew they had to do something and so they told the guys to cut it out and knock it off. It was to no avail. The fight continued. And then all of a sudden, the brawlers stopped fighting and began to slowly disburse and slink away. And that’s when the group realized that a man who came up behind them who was about 6 foot 7 inches tall and weighed about 300 pounds—all of it muscle. The fighters were not going to stop for the group, but they would stop for this guy! His BIG presence had changed the whole scene. It ended the fight.

Do we worship a God who is actually the God described in the Bible? Is our God that huge? Or have we so shrunken him into tiny images so that we can try to manage him? Will we always feel his presence? If we don’t, does that mean that he doesn’t love us anymore? No. But maybe what it means is that my view of him has begun to shrink. Maybe the best thing for us is to let the bigness of God overwhelm us. We have got to remember that the God we serve is a BIG GOD. It is in THAT God that we find our security.

We remember that since **God is great we can find our security in him**. The four names of God referenced in this psalm paint for us a picture of the enormity of God with whom we dwell. But how else do we find our security in a dangerous world? How act to secure us?

Psalm 91 shows us that we find our security in God’s protection. There are not only four names for God used here but also four metaphors used to describe what God is doing to protect his people. This is an active protection, not a passive one. It says God is our shelter, our shadow, our refuge and our fortress. We will take the first two and the last two together

So what does it mean that God is our shelter and shadow? In Psalm 91:4, the psalmist describes God’s sheltering and shadowing ways as a mother bird for her chicks. Predators are bad for baby birds. The mother must hide her babies away to keep them safe from harm. The sun and rain are ultimately good for baby birds, but not when there is too much of either one. We catch a glimpse of God’s protection of his people here, as he hides what can bring them ultimate harm. He also manages the good that they receive in just the right proportion to what they need. God is our shelter and our shadow.

So what does it mean that God is our refuge and fortress? These are military references and they remind us that the world we are in is a battlefield. God has already won the battle, but the defeated enemy—Satan—still has the ability to cause trouble. One takes refuge with someone who can actually defend them, and a fortress is constructed in a way that keeps one safe from the arrows of the enemy.

These are beautiful descriptions and they paint a picture of a God who actively and intentionally protects his people. And yet, a thought comes to mind: “If this is true, if God is our protection, then why is it that people we know who love God are dying of cancer or are getting in car accidents or are being ravaged by addiction and mental illness?” How could it be that a God who claims to protect the ones he loves, could allow these things to happen? The passage that Pastor Shelley shared in the children’s lesson helps us here. God says this about those he shelters:

When he calls to me, I will answer him;
I will be with him IN TROUBLE;
I will rescue him and honor him.

Did you see that? He is with them IN TROUBLE. He does not take them out of it but walks with them in it. He is after their transformation, not their comfort. We see this elsewhere in the Bible. The book of Job is probably the best example. We see God allowing terrible things to happen to Job but if you read the whole story of Job, the Lord is in it with him all the way through it. Satan has his part. Job’s friends have their part. But God, he is in it all WITH Job. He does not prevent the trouble in Job’s life, but he is with Job IN THE TROUBLE.

Friends, today we need the security of God. Not simply to take away what we don’t like, but to be with us in a world that gets dangerous and to protect us for himself. How did he do it? He sent us Jesus who took on the trouble of our sin for us on the cross. Through his death, and by his trouble, we experience the **greatness of God so we too can find our security in him**. Let’s pray together...

God of our Shelter, thank you that in Jesus, we grow into people who rest securely even in the trouble of a dangerous world, because you are with us. Thank you that in Jesus, we become the kind of people who can walk in confidence because we know you assure our salvation. We thank you for securing us by your greatness. In Jesus name we pray, amen.