

“LIVING IN THE SHELTER OF THE MOST HIGH”

READING: *Psalms 91 verses 1-16*

Everyone has a favourite verse, or passage, from the Bible. For me, it depends how I am feeling at the time whether I turn to **Romans chapter 8**, or **Psalm 139**. At funerals, I am quite often reciting **Psalm 23**, partly because I know it is the one Psalm which most people will have heard or sung together. But also, because I feel that it covers everything which people need at such a time as in bereavement – the assurance of One who cares for them, who provides for them, who journeys with them at those difficult times in life and who will not leave them in their darkest moments.

Even as I prepare these thoughts, I am welling up. It has been a difficult week for many people for very different reasons. It has been difficult for those dealing with lockdown as they adhere to the rules and guidelines whilst others seem to be flaunting them; those who are keeping away from family for their own, or their family protection, when all they want to do is to hold those children / grandchildren / great grandchildren, but know they can't; and those who have lost loved ones and cannot give them the funeral service their loved one merited. For those who are not members of Bethel, you will have to forgive me for dwelling a moment on the recent “promotion to glory” of Dorothy – a much loved member of Bethel who, this time last year, was enjoying the fullness of health until her diagnosis of a tumour in the abdomen suddenly brought uncertainty. But Dorothy faced her treatment with great courage and faith. It was during this time that **Psalm 91** became very special to her and it was a joy to have been able to find a card with that very Psalm on it and to be able to get it framed and give it to her. It was a joy to visit her and to see that very Psalm prominently displayed, to be able to read it with her and to share our thoughts on it. At her funeral service on Thursday, I shared the opening verses of that very Psalm with those who were able to gather at Glyntaff, and also over the webcast. But what made it so special to Dorothy, and what makes it appropriate to each of us?

Psalm 91 is a Psalm which continues to be a source of strength, hope, promise and encouragement to many, and I feel that was the case for Dorothy. It is an expression of the child of God's confidence in divine protection and deliverance. Whenever we feel insecure and inadequate, we need a refuge - a shelter.

In Scripture there are conditional and unconditional promises of God. Most promises that begin with the word “if” are conditional. We can claim the promises of **Psalm 91** if we meet the requirements that is If we make the Lord our refuge; if we make the Most High our shelter, then God promises to do something amazing - He will rescue us and save us.

Beginning with **verse 1** we are introduced to those who live, not merely a weekly visitor, or saying the right words, but those who dwell, who stay, who remain in the shelter of the Lord, will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. In Hebrew the word translated as “shelter” literally means “a hiding place, to cover, to hide secretly”. In **Psalm 32 verse 7** it is translated as “hiding place” - **“you are my hiding place; you protect me from trouble. You surround me with songs of victory.”** In this place of shelter there is protection and provision for those who believe in God and trust Him in every situation and circumstance. God's miracles of protection and His power to keep the people of God in the face of great difficulties are seen time and again throughout the Bible and many know that power and protection today. Despite all that Dorothy endured over these past 10 months, she remained in the shelter of the Lord. When pain became too much, she knew she could shelter in the Lord. So, it is true of us that no matter what storms might rage against us, we can shelter in the Lord, trusting in His protection and in His strength.

In **verse 2** the Psalmist goes on to say: ***“I will say of the Lord: He is my refuge, and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.”*** This is an act of will. We have a choice whether to say it or not. We also have a choice as to whether we do it or not. I am certain that there have been times when our faith and trust in the Lord has not been as strong as we would have liked. In times of collective worship on a Sunday, it is easy to declare our complete trust in God, but when we are on our own, sometimes that trust gets challenged. Sometimes the fear creeps in, uncertainty raises its head. Dorothy did ask me on a couple of occasions “what have I done wrong to end up like this?” Let’s face it, it is a very natural reaction. Sometimes those assurances feel the bombardment of doubts and fears but we need to try and remember ***Proverbs 18 verse 10*** which reminds us that ***“The name of the Lord is a strong fortress; the godly run to Him and are safe.”*** Something which is easy to sing in the chorus “Blessed is the name of the Lord” but difficult to hold to when the time comes. In ***1 Peter 5 verse 7*** we are reminded to “Cast all your cares on Him, for He cares about you”, or as one modern version reminds us, “you are His personal concern.”

Verse 3 goes on to reassure us that ***“He will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence.”*** Here you might rightly say that the Lord did not deliver Dorothy from “the deadly pestilence” – her cancer. You might say that about someone you have faithfully and earnestly prayed for. We prayed for Dorothy’s healing, as you may have about people for which you have prayed earnestly and sincerely, claiming every promise of God, and still they have been taken from us. I have not great insight into the ways of God or the will of God, except that His word tells me and personal experience has taught me that “His ways are not our ways.” But that does not mean that He abandons us. Dorothy knew the Lord’s presence, even in the midst of pain and suffering. ***Psalm 23 verse 4*** reminds us that ***“even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Death, I will not fear, for Thou are with me...”*** As God has promised never to leave or forsake us, we are assured of His presence even in the confusing and difficult times in life.

Verse 4 tells us ***“He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge.”*** Another picture of His ongoing protection. There is the story told of a great fire which raged through a farm and once it had been contained, the search began to see what, if anything, had survived. The searchers found a pile of ashes and as they moved them, discovered that they had once been a chicken and from under the burned feathers emerged some little chicks. It seemed that as the fire raged, the mother hen, gathered her chicks under her wings, protecting them. The same is seen of birds of prey, protecting their chicks in the midst of storms. We should remember the words of ***Ephesians 6 verses 10-18*** encourage us to put on the whole armour of God to protect us in the spiritual battle which we face, day in day out.

These opening verses I read at Dorothy’s funeral service. In these words, as well as the rest of the Psalm, Dorothy took courage and so can we. We have no grounds for fear, or reason to despair, even in these uncertain times. There is no circumstance or situation which can crush us when we draw close to God. We have no real idea how long the onslaught of trouble might last or how deep the troubled waters may get, but they will pass and one day eternal life is offered to those who believe and accept the love which the Eternal, all knowing, all powerful, ever present God offers to us - our refuge and our strength.

We are still in uncertain times, but the unchanging, unwavering love of God is ever available to us. Christ died for us each to prove the extent of God’s love for us, and to promise His presence at all times, whatever life may throw at us. May we each trust in the promises of His Word and thus prove the depths of His love. **AMEN**