

Sunday, May 10, 2020

“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” (Psalm 91:1)

On March 15 of this year, I did a brief talk about COVID-19, and one of the points I tried to make was that God deals with His children quite differently than how He deals with the children of the devil. The vast majority of human beings on this planet are what the Bible calls “children of disobedience.” They are without Christ, they are without hope, they are without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12). They’ve put their trust in the crumbling foundation of transitory things and have rejected the Rock of our salvation – to them, He is a stone of stumbling, a rock of offence (1 Peter 2:8), and foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:23). They are slaves to sin, and in fact are currently dead in trespasses and sin – dead men walking. They have no interest in repenting. They have no interest in being right with God. That is the current state of most of mankind, and the reality is it would be our state, too, were it not for God’s grace.

Today, God has been kind enough to give them a small reminder of His wrath and His power in the form of COVID-19. And regarding those whom He has not already sovereignly dispatched to Hell, He is patiently giving them space to repent of their sins. This is, without question, the work of our sovereign God. And this is, without question, the wrath of God upon the ungodly:

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed *it* unto them.” (Romans 1:18-19)

“For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh [present tense] the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience.” (Ephesians 5:5-6)

COVID-19 is all anyone wants to talk about nowadays, but the people in this world, by and large, refuse to see the hand of God in this pandemic. One cause of that is the shameful, cowardly, money-grubbing so-called “Christian preachers” that infest the landscape with their lies and lack of discernment. They either outrightly deny that God has had anything to do with this pandemic, or they hem and haw and equivocate until nobody even knows what they just said. If they do happen to speak some truth on the matter, that light is hidden with great care – they are the irrational men who light a candle and put it in a secret place (Luke 11:33). This thing is hitting them right in the wallet, after all. Apparently, they don’t want their yea to be yea, and their nay to be nay, if clear language might turn people away when they’re needing money in the coffers.

So, I thank God for this church, and I thank Him for His grace which is given to each one of us by Jesus Christ, who has given us a platform to speak clear, unambiguous words of truth, and who has given us merciful hearts to love and warn our neighbors to flee the wrath to come. Beloved, please don't forget what your duty is to your neighbor. And we can pray that perhaps God would use this pandemic as a thing of mercy whereby He will bring some of His sheep to repentance.

We see how this COVID-19 pandemic impacts our unbelieving neighbors, and Brent just did two sermons on that topic a few weeks ago. But what about the children of God? We're impacted by this thing, too. By the providence of God, nobody in this church actually has the disease – but we can't deny that we've been impacted by it. The situation reminds me, in some respects, of the Babylonian Captivity, which was, without any doubt, the punishment of God. But even in the midst of the outpouring of His wrath, He had little pockets of blessing and mercy towards the likes of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. God may do the same thing to two people with completely different intentions – with one He is dealing in mercy, and with the other He is dealing in wrath. In addition to the Babylonian Captivity, the Bible is replete with other examples of that concept.

For example, the list of curses in Deuteronomy 28 ends like this:

“And there [Egypt] ye shall be sold unto your enemies for bondmen and bondwomen, and no man shall buy you.” (Deuteronomy 28:68)

But Joseph was sold as a slave, and it was not because of God's anger or wrath towards him. It was not a curse. Here is what scripture says about it:

“But as for you, ye thought evil against me; *but* God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as *it is* this day, to save much people alive.” (Genesis 50:20)

Another good example can be found in Josiah vs. Ahab. The similarities between how these two men died is uncanny, but the result of each death was completely different. One ended in peace and mercy, and the other did not. Both men were promised that they would be delivered from some future judgment of God (Josiah not having to witness the Babylonian Captivity, and Ahab not having to witness God's curse on his house as He cut them off). Both were warned about going into battle (Josiah by Pharaoh-Necho, and Ahab by the prophet Michaiah). Both ignored the warning and ill-advisedly went to battle anyway (Josiah in the valley of Megiddo, and Ahab in Ramothgilead). Both disguised themselves so they would look like regular foot soldiers. Both were struck by an arrow, and both died from their wound. You can read about all of this in 1 Kings 21-22, and 2 Chronicles 34-35. Both died under strikingly

similar circumstances, but the difference is that Josiah genuinely loved God and repented of his sins. He had a tender heart, and truly humbled himself before God. He was one of God's elect, so therefore God, through the prophetess Huldah, promised him the following: "thou shalt be gathered to thy grave in peace." (2 Chronicles 34:28). Yes. He died in a bloody, violent battle, but he was at peace with God. Ahab put on a show of humility, and God acknowledged it, but Ahab didn't get a promise of being gathered to his grave in peace. His promise was this: "In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine." (1 Kings 21:19). And the promise was fulfilled: "The dogs licked up his blood...according unto the word of the Lord which he spake." (1 Kings 22:38). As Michaiah told him, "if thou return at all in peace, the Lord hath not spoken by me." (1 Kings 22:28). There is no sense in which Ahab went down to his grave in peace. About people like Josiah, Isaiah the prophet said:

"The righteous perisheth, and no man layeth *it* to heart: and merciful men *are* taken away, none considering that the righteous is taken away from the evil *to come*. He shall enter into peace: they shall rest in their beds, *each one* walking *in* his uprightness." (Isaiah 57:1-2)

A couple verses from Ecclesiastes to consider on this topic are:

**"All *things* have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just *man* that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked *man* that prolongeth *his life* in his wickedness."
(Ecclesiastes 7:15)**

**"There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just *men*, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked *men*, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also *is* vanity."
(Ecclesiastes 8:14)**

In other words, sometimes you see something happening to a righteous man that you would have expected to happen to a wicked man. And sometimes you see the opposite of that. So, we have to use a little bit of discernment, and not be presumptuous.

But the topic at hand is this COVID-19 pandemic, and how it relates to the children of God. So what about sickness? What about disease? Looking at Job's low condition, someone, like his three friends, might jump to the conclusion that God was punishing him for his sins. But we know from the text that that's not what happened. There are secret things going on in the providence of God. In the scripture, good people and evil people get sick and die. For example, we read about wicked king Jehoram: "The Lord smote him in his bowels with an incurable disease. And it came to pass, that in process of time, after the end of two years, his bowels fell out by reason of his sickness: so he died of sore diseases." (2 Chronicles 21:18-19).

But we also read about that great prophet Elisha: “Now Elisha was fallen sick of his sickness whereof he died.” (2 Kings 13:14).

When a righteous man gets sick, the Lord accomplishes whatever heart work He has intended to accomplish in that person, and we are guaranteed of the following:

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Where the wicked man has a cup of wrath to drink (Psalm 75:8, Isaiah 51:17), we have a cup of salvation (Psalm 116:13). Everything that they drink out of their cup is to prepare them for the great day of wrath, and everything that we drink out of our cup God has deemed necessary to bring us home to glory. So, we can say, with complete consistency, that the existence of this COVID-19 pandemic is the wrath of God on the children of disobedience, and it is simultaneously a great blessing and mercy toward His elect. Whatever the details are in how it touches the wicked man, it is aimed to “reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished” (2 Peter 2:9), because “the Lord hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil.” (Proverbs 16:4). And however it touches the elect of God, it is aimed to “deliver the godly out of temptations” (2 Peter 2:9) because we “are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (1 Peter 1:5).

At the risk of beating a dead horse, let me explain this one more way. The wicked man, when faced with this pandemic, will try to find help in everything but God. God is giving him space to repent – there is goodness and forbearance and longsuffering mingled with this wrath. But he won’t repent. If he lives, he will be like those men of Revelation 9:20-21 – “the rest of the men which were not killed by these plagues yet repented not of the works of their hands [idolatry, murder, sorcery, fornication, theft].” And he will openly blaspheme God, like Governor Cuomo when he said, “God did not do that.” A USA Today article appeared just yesterday with a sub-heading reading “LGBTQ Americans more vulnerable to COVID-19,” with a lot of caterwauling about discrimination and how one of the ways they’re going to fight this thing is to make sure they’re having lots of virtual “gay pride” events starting in June. These blasphemers and proud sinners are treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath (Romans 2:4-11). God is preparing the wicked man for the day of judgment, and his response in this pandemic will only be more evidence against him.

The righteous man, when faced with this pandemic, will take refuge in God. He will grow closer to God. He will commune with God. He will bless and glorify and thank God. He will find peace in God. One of my favorite Psalms about this is Psalm 91, and I’d like to spend the rest of this sermon saying a few words about it. Here it is in its entirety:

“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, [He is] my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, [and] from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth [shall be thy] shield and buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; [nor] for the arrow [that] flieth by day; [Nor] for the pestilence [that] walketh in darkness; [nor] for the destruction [that] wasteth at noonday. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; [but] it shall not come nigh thee. Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked. Because thou hast made the LORD, [which is] my refuge, [even] the most High, thy habitation; There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in [their] hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone. Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet. Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I [will be] with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him. With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation.” (Psalm 91)

Before getting into this, we have to be careful about a few things. One might be tempted to read this and conclude that if you’re one of God’s people, then you’re never going to fall into any traps, you’re never going to get sick, nobody who lives in your house is ever going to get sick, you should go out and start playing with poisonous snakes, and you’re guaranteed to live a long life here on earth. There’s danger here, because even if you’re not that blatant about it, you still might take some part of it and interpret it to your own circumstances and say that this or that thing is never going to happen to you. Here are a few reasons that that type of interpretation is bad:

- It is contrary to reality, both in what you read in the Bible, and in your own experience. Compare scripture to scripture. Think of the examples I gave above - Job, Joseph, Elisha, Josiah. Think of what you’ve seen in your own life. One of the golden rules of interpreting the scripture is that if how you’re interpreting it is contrary to reality, then it’s not the scripture that’s wrong – it’s you that’s wrong.
- It is liable to result in you blaspheming God. If you’ve decided that this passage means that you’re never going to get some particular disease, for example, and then you get the disease, you might curse God in your heart, and accuse Him of being a liar.
- It tends toward arrogance and presumptuous behavior. Remember, it is from this very passage that Satan plucks forth a verse to try to tempt Jesus Christ to cast himself down from off the pinnacle of the temple. And Christ’s answer is, “It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.” (Matthew 4:7). If reading Psalm 91 results in you

being presumptuous, you are engaging in a Satanic reading and interpreting of this Psalm. It's one thing to cower in sinful unbelief, not trusting God, afraid of your own shadow. It's another to do the COVID-19 equivalent of jumping off the pinnacle of the temple. We ought to approach this somewhere between those two extremes, where we're not being distrustful of God, but we're also not tempting God.

- It is myopic. By that, I mean you're too focused on the temporal, earthly side of things, and not focused enough on the spiritual and eternal meanings of the passage. Temporal things are important, no doubt, but I think the main import of the Psalm relates to the spiritual and eternal realm.

A few other passages might shed some light:

“When thou passest through the waters, I *will be* with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.” (Isaiah 43:2)

It's not that we won't ever go through the waters or the fire, it's that when we do, He will be there with us, keeping us.

“*Some* of you shall they cause to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all *men* for my name's sake. But there shall not an hair of your head perish.” (Luke 21:16-18)

This gets to the heart of it. Even in being put to death, not an hair of your head will perish. We're talking about your eternal standing before God – no affliction on this earth can cause that to perish. Like Josiah, you'll go down to your grave in peace.

**“[Some] escaped the edge of the sword...[others] were slain with the sword.”
(Hebrews 11:34,37)**

The ones who escaped, it was in faith that they escaped. The ones who were slain, it was in faith that they were slain. Again, the important thing is your eternal relationship to God through faith in Christ. That can't be touched by worldly events, whether you escape the sword, or you are slain by the sword.

Psalm 91 is about the security that we have in the Lord. It is about the protection that He provides for His people. Nobody else has any business taking comfort from this Psalm, because nobody else is afforded this type of security and protection - this is for God's elect, and God's elect alone. The people who receive the blessings of this Psalm are described as those who dwell in the secret place of the most High, those who refer to God as “MY refuge

and MY fortress: MY God,” those who trust in God, those who have made God their habitation, those who love God, those who know the name of God, and those who call upon God. If that doesn’t describe you, then this Psalm isn’t for you.

I think the key to understanding the Psalm is the first couple verses: “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.” To “dwell” means to live there, sit down, abide, inhabit, settle, stay. This is as opposed to stopping by to visit every once in awhile, like stopping in for a few minutes to say “hi” to an acquaintance or staying the night in a hotel. The secret place of the most High is where you have set up shop. Your living arrangements on earth are irrelevant here – no matter where you are, you dwell in the secret place of the most High if you are one of God’s children.

What is this secret place? It is the very bosom and presence of God. It is the place that Christ made accessible through His sacrifice, symbolized by the veil being rent in twain. This is where I go for comfort. Where I go to bare my soul. Where I go for intimate communion with my Beloved. Where I find peace, rest, refreshment, help, safety, assurance. It is through the blood of Christ that we have access to this secret place of the most High:

“Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And [having] an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.” (Hebrews 10:19-22)

One of Paul’s favorite phrases is “in Christ” (or “in Him”). When we believe, we are “in Christ.” Likewise, Christ tells us to abide in Him (John 15:4-10). I found a note I wrote to myself a year or two ago: “To be ‘in Christ’ means that God views us always in connection with Christ. Our identity is with Christ. Our union is inseparable. What Christ did, we are accounted as having done. What Christ gets as an inheritance, we get.” Spurgeon said: *“To abide in Jesus is never to quit Him for another love or another object, but to remain in living, loving, conscious, willing union with Him.”* If it helps, think of it as being clothed in Christ – this is a metaphor Paul uses in Galatians 3:27 (“For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”) It is only by our union “in Christ” that we can dwell in the secret place of the most High.

The first benefit of this dwelling is that we get to abide under the shadow of the Almighty. This is a beautiful image of safety, comfort, protection and nearness. Spurgeon says: *“When you walk with a friend in certain positions of the sun, your friend’s shadow falls on you, but you cannot expect to have the shadow of your friend unless you are near him. We read in the Song,*

'I sat down under his shadow with great delight' (2:3). There must be nearness to get under the shadow. So there must be great access to God – great familiarity with him. There must be something of the assurance of faith before we can grip such a word as what follows in this Psalm."

We have a similar image in verse 4 – “He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust.” The image is of a hen protecting her chicks with her wings. If you’ve never seen it, it’s a very touching sight. But you’ll want to look at it from a distance. I had an altercation once with a hen, and I still bear the scars on my body. She is very tender towards her chicks, but she’s not going to put up with any enemies trying to harm them. Jesus uses the same metaphor:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *thou* that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under *her* wings, and ye would not!” (Matthew 23:37)

There He is, the only source of eternal security and protection. And they absolutely will not come to Him. They’re so far from coming to Him that they will do everything in their power to keep anyone else from coming to Him. It makes you want to say, “Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die?” (Ezekiel 33:11). It also makes you want to say, “Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with *their* eyes, nor understand with *their* heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.” (John 12:39-40).

Now, I’m not going to expound each verse of this Psalm, but I hope you see that the big picture here is that we have a safe and secure dwelling place in God, and nothing that happens on this earth can take that away. Nothing can adversely impact that. In fact, everything that happens here can only strengthen and solidify our trust in God and His truth. The more we experience here on earth, the more we experience God’s presence and faithfulness to us. It doesn’t matter if it’s the snare of the devil, or the pestilence, or the terror, or the arrow, or the destruction. It doesn’t matter if it happens in the middle of the night or at high noon. Whatever the danger, whatever the time – we have God as our refuge and our fortress. We have angels given charge over us, to keep us in all our ways (that is, all our lawful ways – they’re not going to help us sin). Isn’t that amazing? There is a whole spiritual plane of activity going on around us. We have angels employed in keeping us, bearing us up in their hands (like a parent would hold a child), so we don’t dash our foot against a stone (and there are many stumbling stones that would otherwise undo us). Have you considered all the danger and folly that you’ve been snatched out of because God has dispatched angels to help you?

The wicked don't have this. They don't have God as their refuge. They don't dwell in the secret place of the most High. They don't abide under His shadow. They don't have angels charged to keep them. Whatever they've been trusting in, whatever they've been hoping in, will ultimately unravel like a cheap suit, and they will get their reward. Yesterday, the AP had a story about how this pandemic is impacting Congress: *"Like so much of the world, lawmakers are experiencing a humbling dose of fear, sorrow, anger and isolation."* That's their reward, because they don't dwell in the secret place of the most High.

The image here in the middle of the Psalm is one of a general calamity, like this COVID-19 event. A myriad of people are dropping dead (the word translated "ten thousand" here doesn't literally mean "ten thousand" – it just means a whole bunch; a myriad; an abundance). We're promised that because God is our refuge and our habitation, it won't come near us. We're promised that we'll be spectators in the matter, watching the wicked receive their reward. This might cause some of us some distress, because it seems black and white – it clearly says, "it shall not come nigh thee" and "neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling." What are we to make of this? Here are a few thoughts I have about it:

- God is not lacking in power and could certainly keep this plague physically away from us. You'll recall He did that at the Passover when He killed the firstborn of the Egyptians. And it is absolutely appropriate for us to pray for Him to do that, if it is His will to do so.
- The wicked don't have God as their refuge and their habitation. We'll see them die without any hope. It's not simply that they have died – it's that they've died in their sins. There is no more chance for them to repent. They've received their reward. And for eternity, we will look upon them. (See Isaiah 66:24).
- It's not a guarantee that a plague will never come near us, period. The sense is that it won't come near us for evil. If God, in His wisdom, does send the plague near us, it won't come near us in the same way that it comes to the wicked, but will rather be for our good. From a spiritual perspective, COVID-19 can't get anywhere near you or your dwelling place, because you dwell in Christ.

I think a word from the commentators will help with this. Gill in his commentary on Psalm 91:

Verse 7 - ***"But it shall not come nigh thee. The meaning is, that it should not come so near such as to seize their bodies and they fall by the distemper; there being a particular providence oftentimes concerned for their safety, which guards them from it; see (Ezekiel 9:4). Not but that good men may fall in a common calamity, and by an epidemical distemper; but then it is for their good, and not their hurt; they are taken away from the evil to come, and are delivered from a worse plague than that by which they fall, the plague of their own hearts, the evil of sin."***

Verse 8 - **“See the reward of the wicked.** *The vengeance of God upon them, and this as a just punishment for their sins; not looking upon it with delight and pleasure, rejoicing in the misery of their fellow creatures, any otherwise than as the glory of divine justice is displayed in it; (see Psalms 52:6, 58:10). The pestilence is always threatened, and it always comes, as a Judgment upon a wicked generation of men; and so it is ever to be considered, and is considered by good men. (Leviticus 26:25, Deuteronomy 28:20-22).”*

Verse 10 – **“There shall no evil befall thee.** *The evil of sin cleaves to the best of saints, the evil of temptations besets them, and the evil of afflictions comes upon them, as chastisements from the Lord; for they must expect to receive evil, in this sense, as well as good, from his hands; but the evil of punishment never touches them; and therefore, when any public calamity befalls them in common with others, yet not as an evil of punishment; it is not an evil to them, it is for their good: **neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.** How should it, when they dwell in God, and have made him, the most High, their habitation (Psalm 91:1,9). Otherwise it may come nigh their temporal dwellings; though it may not enter into them; and, should it, yet not as an evil, or by way of punishment (Proverbs 3:33).”*

Isaac Watts in his hymn, *“He That Hath Made His Refuge God”*:

*But if the fire, or plague, or sword,
Receive commission from the Lord
To strike His saints among the rest,
Their very pains and deaths are blest.*

*The sword, the pestilence or fire,
Shall but fulfill their best desire;
From sins and sorrows set them free,
And bring Thy children, Lord, to Thee.*

Just one final word on the last verse of the Psalm – “With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation.” If this is talking about length of days here on earth, Matthew Henry says: *“They shall live long enough: they shall be continued in this world till they have done the work they were sent into this world for and are ready for heaven, and that is long enough... A man may die young, and yet die full of days.”* But I see a spiritual message here. I read this to mean eternal life, and He begins showing us His salvation now and continues that forever in glory in heaven. I don’t think He’ll ever stop showing us His salvation, and it will be one of the joys of heaven to see the infinite facets of that great work of redemption that He has wrought.

I love you. Amen.