

Modern Longings; Ancient Words *Longing for the Secret Place*

Psalm 91

When our children, Heather and Brandon, were small (Heather was 6 and Brandon 2), we moved to a small home in Arlington Heights, IL and lived there for 8 years. [https://maps.googleapis.com/maps/api/streetview?channel=rdc-ldp-streetview&client=gme-](https://maps.googleapis.com/maps/api/streetview?channel=rdc-ldp-streetview&client=gme-movesalesinc&location=1127+N+Derbyshire+Dr%2C+Arlington+Heights%2C+IL%2C+60004&size=640x480&signature=Fus8pZaPhZXpJD7O3ifAe9egXY=)

[https://maps.googleapis.com/maps/api/streetview?channel=rdc-ldp-streetview&client=gme-](https://maps.googleapis.com/maps/api/streetview?channel=rdc-ldp-streetview&client=gme-movesalesinc&location=1127+N+Derbyshire+Dr%2C+Arlington+Heights%2C+IL%2C+60004&size=640x480&signature=Fus8pZaPhZXpJD7O3ifAe9egXY=) When I became a university president, we were able to move to a newer and bigger home. But, I think our kids always liked our smaller home at 1127 Derbyshire Dr. more. One of the main reasons for that was that, when we would go down the stairs and turn right, there was a secret playroom. It looked a little bit like this picture: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/80/dc/4e/80dc4ecc796a59fed015520184b845dd.jpg>

But, I know they would say without hesitation that their secret playroom was much, much better – more hidden, more mysterious, more fun. They would go there to read, to create magnificent edifices with Legos, and – at times – to get away from the hecticness of school and of life in general. It was their secret place that could not be destroyed by a bad grade on a test, a family dispute, or a neighborhood bully.

I remembered that secret place when I began preparing today’s sermon from Ps 91. As I’ve been telling you, in my final sermon series as your Sr. Pastor, I’ve turned to the passages from the Psalms that have been the most life-directing and life-transforming in my walk with God. Last week, I took you to Ps 40 and spoke of what to do when you’re in a slimy pit, i.e., in a situation in which you just don’t know where to go or how to get out of a mess. Do you remember [the formula I gave you last week about what to do when you are in a slimy pit? Slow Down – Remember](#) [what God has done in the past and meditate on it] – **Ask** [give the situation to God in prayer] – **(Wait, Wait)** [often the hardest part] – **Act** [seek to take one God-honoring step as you wait].

Many of you have told me you agree with me; i.e., that one of the hardest parts of dealing with those slimy pits is the “wait, wait” part. The problems that led to those slimy pit situations don’t always go away as you wait and sometimes they feel like they will destroy you. It’s because that is so often true that I want to speak to you of why Ps 91 is so significant in my walk with the Lord.

Ps 91 is a Psalm about God’s protection as we wait. [The key to experiencing the protection and peace God’s Word promises is a right understanding of its first verse, i.e., Ps 91:1.](#) I think I can give you help to remember where that verse is: Those three numbers, 911, are the numbers you call when you need protection. Right?

https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/51qGcT0Ap-L_SX425.jpg When you read Ps 91, you will see the Psalmist speaks of all kinds of emergencies that happen in our lives and rob us of our peace. Ps 91 tells us that in the Psalmist’s world and in ours too, the God who is our Father is with us and is greater than any crisis that might hit us.

So, look carefully at how the Psalmist begins this “911-Psalm” about God’s protection: *Whoever dwells in the shelter (or, the secret place) of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.* Today, in Ps 91, I want you to notice 1) the place, 2) the plot, 3) the promise and 4) the path.

- **The Place: What Is the Secret Place of the Most High?**

The term “secret place” comes from the Hebrew word *besether*, which means “to hide” or “to be concealed”. Most of our newer English versions translate the word as “shelter” because of the promise that whoever lives in that place will find rest as we are sheltered in the shade of the Almighty. Israel, where the Psalmist lived, is located in a hot, desert-like area so that people frequently sought protection from the damage of the hot sun. So, shelter from sun was something that people could understand. Shade is what keeps you from getting burnt!

However, the word *besether* was used to refer to more than just shelter from sun or shelter from a storm. A “*besether*” was a place to find protection from any person or thing in this world that might harm you. In fact, in **Exo 33:20**, when Moses wanted to have a personal encounter with God, God explained that no sinful human being can see the holy God and live. In other words, what Moses asked for wasn’t safe for him. So God allowed Moses to see His glory -- but only from a “secret place”, a hidden place.

That’s what made me remember the secret place at our home that my kids loved when they were little. Or, as another illustration, think about the National Safe Place (NSP) movement in our own country.

<https://www.nationalsafeplace.org/assets/images/safe-place-logo.jpg> It’s a prevention program for children and young people under the age of 18 who are in need of immediate help and safety – from storms, fires, gangs, bullies, etc. etc. When protection is needed, kids can look for the NSP sign to go and find protection from harm.

When I read Ps 91, it becomes clear to me that God knows what has happened to this once perfect world ever since sin entered into it in Gen 3. We live in a world filled with slimy pit situations and with people who

mean to do us hard. But, Ps 91:1 declares that God makes a secret place available so that no lasting harm can come to those who run to him. It is a secret place – not so much because the place is unknown as because it is inaccessible to whatever or whoever might do harm to the one in it. The secret place that Ps 91 describes, however, is not a physical location. It is the presence of the Most High God himself. *“The one who dwells in the secret place of the Most High will find rest in the shade of the Almighty.”* **God’s presence is the secret place.**

- **The Plot: How Might Psalm 91 Harm You?** – Misunderstand It and Misapply It

Make note of this now: Ps 91 is the passage in Scripture that the devil quoted when he wanted to deceive Jesus in **Lk 4:10-11**. Satan’s plot was to pull Ps 91:10-12 out of its context and make it mean something very different from what it meant. In Satan’s interpretation of it, he wanted Jesus to think that, if Jesus had enough faith, he would never have to experience any difficulties in this world; indeed, he would never even have to stub his toe. And, this is what some people have said about Ps 91 over the centuries since Satan lied to Jesus about this, i.e., that if you have enough faith in Jesus, you should never have to suffer at all in this world.

So, listen carefully: **Ps 91 is not saying that if you trust God enough, you will find he will not let you go through any difficulties.** That’s what Job’s false comforters said to him when he went through so many hardships. Do you remember what God said to them? *“You have not spoken the truth about me (Job 42:7).”*

Satan’s plot is to make you think that, if God lets you suffer, he’s not true to his Word. If you believe that, you’ll soon be disillusioned as you live in this world. Hardships are still a part of this world this side of heaven. Misunderstand Ps 91 and you’ll become bitter. That’s what Satan wants, of course.

Ps 91:1 speaks of you being able to rest in spite of being in a world filled with realities like a scorching sun. It doesn’t say that God will take the sun away. No, he promises to be a place of shade from the sun’s heat.

And, as you move to **v. 3**, Scripture speaks of another way God protects us in this world, i.e., *“The Almighty will save you from the fowler’s snare.”* https://www.birdlife.org/sites/default/files/styles/1600/public/cyprus_robin.jpg?itok=MueDafEj

The fowler was a trapper and the snare was a trap. God did not stop the trapper. God did not take away the trap. Instead, God said, “If you get trapped, I will get you out. Run to the secret place and I not allow that trapper and his trap to do any eternal harm to the person you are!”

You see, the trapper wants to take a bird down from the height of what God has created that bird to be and to do. The trapper wants to bring it down to the reach of its enemy. So, there are traps in this world that seek to bring you down from where God would have you be. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Made in the image of God, you were created to fly by living the life that God has made you to live. But, you find yourself trapped by the trappers of this world – by addictions to things like pornography, by anger in your relationships, or by the frustration of your finances. Satan’s plot is to make you think that, God would never allow you to experience any of those trappers or traps – that believe hard enough and you’ll be immune to them. It’s a deceitful plot.

So, don’t be surprised when you feel the heat of hard times or the enticement of traps in this world. The enemies of the kingdom of God – i.e., the devil, the world and your own human cravings are real – and will continue to be at work until Jesus returns and makes all things new.

When you read Ps 91:3-13, you’ll find the Psalmist talking about the kinds of things that can trap you in this world: disease, plagued, death, disaster, lions, snakes, etc. God never said that you will not have to experience such things. It’s Satan’s deceitful plot to make you think otherwise. So, what does God promise in the Psalm?

- **The Promise: What Does Psalm 91 Declare?** -- *The Lord says, “I will rescue him; I will protect him... I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble. I will deliver him (91:14-15).”*

I think **v. 4** is one of the most beautiful statements in all of Scripture about what God promises to do when the fowler tries to trap the birds or when the threatening storms of life seem overwhelming. God -- “the Most High, the Almighty, a refuge and a fortress in **vv. 1-2** -- wants us to know in **v. 4** that he is also like a loving mother hen caring for her chicks: *He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.*

In case you haven’t been on many farms and have not seen anything like this, let me show you this brief video so that you can see that God does: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-oz4dnh2G0>

What this means is that all who belong to God – who have become children of God by faith -- will rest with the confidence that God is greater than whatever happens on earth, that he is always with us, and he will use his

power to protect us. When we become those who dwell in the secret place, **v. 10** says nothing can happen that will do us eternal harm, i.e., do irreparable damage to the persons we are and rob us of our lives in God. Ultimately, even the worst this world can throw at us will not prove to be a disaster for God’s children, i.e., something that is so destructive of your inner being and your life in God that it cannot be restored.

With that in mind, hear this truth of Scripture: *If you say, “The Lord is my refuge,” and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your paths (91:9-11a).*

I see Ps 91 as being the Old Testament equivalent of **Rom 8:35-39**: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

That’s the promise. Now, the path.

The Path: How Do You Get to the Secret Place? *I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust (91:2).”*

When trouble comes, I think we find ourselves asking, “Where is that secret place? What’s the address? How can I plug it into my GPS and get there right now?” We ask, “Where is the school that’s safe for my children?” “Where is the job that’s safe and cannot be taken away?” “Where is the relationship to a guy who will not abuse me or be unfaithful to me?” “Where is the neighborhood that no thieves or gangs can break into?” “Where is the place in this world with no worries, no depression...?”

With those questions in mind, I come back to my first point again: The secret place is not any location in this world. The secret place can exist any place we happen to be in this world – for it’s in the presence of a Person. *Whoever dwells in the safe place of the Most High will rest in the shade of the Almighty. And, the path to that Person is trust. I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust (91:2).”*

Remember again my message from Ps 40. It was about being in dangerous, slimy pits. The formula:

What to Do in a Slimy Pit

Slow Down Remember Ask (wait wait) Act

I told you that one of the hardest parts of this formula is the “wait, wait” part? Today, I want you to know that I have found Ps 91 teaches me what to do in this difficult world when I have to wait for God to step in and show me the next step to take. You find rest in the secret place. So, how do you get there?

The word I don’t want you to miss in Ps 91:2 is trust. Trusting in Jesus is the path into the secret place. So, let me add one step to the formula I gave you last week:

What to Do in a Slimy Pit

Slow Down Remember Ask (wait wait) Trust Act

Trust takes you to the secret place. But, know this: **Your trust in God will always be tried.** Learn to trust him in the challenging times. It’s easy to trust God when you’ve just gotten a raise. It’s not so easy when you’ve lost your job – or when you have to lay your loved one in the grave. If you will learn to be at rest in the turbulence of this world, deep down in your soul you will have to decide this: “Do I really trust God?”

Today, tell God, “I will trust you even when I cannot trace you.” “Lord, I’m confused but I trust you and will live for you.” “Lord, I’m hurting but I trust you and will live for you.” “Lord, I will trust you to be with me and give me new strength when I face that same old temptation again this week.”

And, there is one more critically important thing to see in **Ps 91:1-2**. It tells us that when we trust God, we dwell with God: *The one who dwells in the secret place of the Most High will find rest... God does not invite us merely to visit him when we get into trouble. The promise of protection and rest is given to those who trust in and “dwell” with him i.e., who live life always aware of and changed by God’s presence.*

I remember well when I began to learn to apply the message of Ps 91 to my life. It was near the end of my first year as a university president when I discovered how serious the financial situation at the school was. After having been a pastor for many years, I was feeling overwhelmed with the complexity of the presidency.

As I learned more about our school's financial condition, I felt less and less competent to do my job and more and more anxious. My wife Chris can give testimony to how restless I was; so much so that I could not sleep. It was in the midst of all this worry and sleeplessness that I came to Ps 91:1 – *“Whoever dwells in the secret place of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.”* I read that and slowed down to pray.

I wish I could tell you that all my anxiety melted away and that God gave me the solution to all the school's financial problems. That would not be true. But, I will tell you this: That day I began to take new steps to slow down in anxious times, to remember what God had done again and again in my past, to ask God to step in... And then, as I waited for God to guide me, I decided intentionally to enter in to that “secret place” and recommit myself to trust God. I found that, for me, it took that kind of conscious and intentional decision to entrust myself and my plight to God. I continue to have to grow in doing this – but I can tell you that, when I take time to do it, I reemerge from that secret place more rested and ready to face the challenges of life.

God invites us all to pack up and move from our self-directed, “I’ll-do-it-myself” kinds of lives to dwell in his secret place. When you do that, you have to walk away from the ways of this world that you’ve been living, ways that you may know displease God. I find that so many of us, when we say we will trust God and wait for him, too often move back to use our old schemes of getting through difficult times. Those are the schemes that have never really worked -- not in a lasting way. Why would we ever think we can get to a better place by trying to navigate the storms that come by the same old carnal ways – sometimes ways that resort to things like lying, deceiving and cheating... It's time to get rid of those ways and trust God's ways.

Experiencing the protection and rest of the secret place with God calls for you to live a life of honesty and transparency before the Lord. So, let me warn you: **Don't invite things that displease God into your secret place with him. That is a peril-filled thing to do.**

That brings us all to the Lord's Table now. I want you to remember what makes it possible for unholy people like we all are to be able to dwell in the secret place of the Most High. Jesus alone lived the sinless life we all should live – but have not lived. Then, he was willing to die the death we all deserve and to die in our place – to atone for our sins. He defeated both sin and death in his cross and resurrection. And what he calls us to do is to trust him with our entire lives.

Let's all slow down right now -- and remember. Remember what Jesus did. As you do, confess whatever needs to be confessed to God. He knows it already – so you might as well confess it to him. Then, repent of your sin and recommit yourself to a life of trust in the Lord. In this moment, let us together enter into the secret place of the Most High...