

Where We Find Protection From Terror

In every person's life, there are defining moments that stand out in such relief that the course of our individual lives will never be the same. Rarely, however, is there a moment of such cataclysmic proportions that the collective heartbeat of a nation seems to stop—a supremely defining instant after which our collective lives will forever be changed. Such an event was the real and symbolic 911 call that arrested the world's attention at 8:46 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001.

This unspeakable act of barbaric cruelty left us in a state of primal shock and fear for ourselves, our children, our way of life, our nation and our world. Our emotions ranged from blood-red rage, righteous wrath and an indiscriminate cry for revenge to a grief too powerful and profound to be spoken—and in many instances even shared.

But the overriding response to the tragedy was a staggering sense of insecurity. For decades Americans had taken comfort in our nation's position as a superpower and had assumed an attitude of invincibility. Suddenly we realized just how vulnerable we are.

In the aftermath of the event, we also became more aware of terrorist acts and increasing unrest in other parts of the world—the Muslim persecution of Christians in Sudan, suicide bombings in Israel, fighting in the Middle East. Continual warnings of potential terrorist acts serve to remind us of persistent danger on our own soil. There seems to be nowhere that can be considered safe.

Believers cannot escape this insecure world, but we can be secure in the midst of it. Our safety does not lie in any external means of protection but in the knowledge that God is

in control and is looking out for us.

In my own attempt to process the tragedy, I found myself reading and rereading Psalm 91:1 and marveling that God had already prepared an emergency response for 9/11 in His Word. It is not coincidental that it is 91:1 as well! Line by line and precept upon precept, throughout Psalm 91 we find comfort, strength, protection and grace to deliver us from the greatest enemy since the events of 9/11—fear.

THE PLACE OF PROTECTION The first verse of Psalm 91 declares, “He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty” (NKJV). This is a powerful promise, but it does not apply to everyone. It applies to the one who “dwells”—remains, stays, inhabits, lives in, resides and takes up his abode in—the secret place of God.

God is not a respecter of persons. But He does have a special place for those who are “God chasers,” who stay close to Him, not just in calamity but in good times as well; who want relationship with Him not favors from Him. They “dwell” in that place of closeness, of intimacy with God, of communion and fellowship with Him, of joyfully embracing His Word, His law and His presence.

This is the one who “shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” Abiding under the shadow means close to, in proximity to, up close and personal. “Under the shadow” also creates the image of a greater one hovering above and covering a smaller one.

This is a direct reference to the contrast of God’s overarching grandeur and person with our insignificant selves. We will find respite, shade, solace, comfort, protection and security once we snuggle up close to the source of the shadow, the very presence of God.

THE PERSON OF PROTECTION The key to finding security in an insecure world is to examine the source of the promise of safety. In

other words, who is the person promising to provide help in need?

It is this question that, since 9/11, has left so many people feeling insecure and vulnerable because the attacks came against the things America has relied on for “security” in the past. Now we can no longer feel safe in relying on any of our traditional sources of power: military, political or economic.

The very source of our military power and leadership was struck in the Pentagon. Our source of political power, the government, was most likely the target of the failed attempt of the fourth plane. Our economic invincibility was dealt a major blow in New York City, the financial capital of the world. None of these, therefore, can provide the sense of safety that we have been craving since 9/11.

But look at Psalm 91. In this case it couldn't be better. The Person of protection is the one immutable fact of the universe.

He is the Elohim, the El Shaddai, the creative God who steps out on nothing and speaks light, the physical universe and life itself into being! The all-powerful One. The all-sufficient One. The many-breasted One, who is the ultimate provider of all things. This God, this almighty God, the intimate God of our fellowship, stands poised and ready to give us the care, comfort and protection we need and crave in this uncertain world.

Note the intimate “personal-ness” of the protection David writes about. He says, “I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him will I trust” (Ps. 91:2, emphasis added).

The second verse of the psalm is critical because it details the intimate and personal relationship that God requires of us. Times as uncertain as these, following 9/11, make it

important for every individual to be certain of his standing and his personal relationship with God. This is not the time to believe in traditions or in family religion.

In certain cultures, "religion" is what we inherited from former generations. "Religion" is something you do on Sunday. It is more about cultural and historical activities than it is about intimate personal commitment and worship and praise.

But here the psalmist calls us back to the main point of the text: the requirement for personal intimacy with God in order to survive the kinds of events that have perplexed us since 9/11.

Listen to David's positive and personal affirmations. "I will say of the Lord..." It is his personal testimony. It is based on his personal experience. It is not the tradition of the elders of the family or the Jewish leaders—not even the priesthood.

No, it is based on the years that David wandered in the wilderness, hiding in caves, homeless and a wanderer in the very land over which he was already the anointed king. All the time, God protected him. He kept him one step ahead of Saul and his superior forces. He took him into the caves, spun the spider web to protect him, fed him where there was no source of food, gave his enemies into his hands time and time again.

So David comes forward to speak in the personal language of the Psalm, "I, David, from my firsthand intimate knowledge, will say of the Lord, 'He is my personal fortification.'"

David takes "ownership" of God. "I will say of the Lord, 'He God, in Him I will trust.'" David's model becomes our model of security.

THE PROCESS OF PROTECTION Verses 11 and 12 of Psalm 91 speak of the process of God's protection. "He shall give His angels charge over you to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a

stone.”

Because David is a figure shrouded in antiquity, readers may think: Sure, God did those things for him in biblical days, but of what relevance is that to me in light of my fears today? How does what He did for David provide me with any sense of security as I look at the “real” world post 9/11?

The Bible tells us that God is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). We can rest assured that if He was there for David, He’ll be there for us.

As I read through this section of the psalm, my spirit began to rejoice at God’s ability to provide things for us in time and space that are completely outside our radar screens. Knowing that God has untold ways of providing for our protection, I drew inspiration and an incredible sense of security from the remarkable stories of “angels” coming to the rescue of 9/11 victims as the towers blazed and collapsed around them.

One is the story of the wheelchair-bound woman, trapped more than 70 floors above the ground with no chance of survival. Surely she is the personification of the text, for she had indeed “dashed her foot.” Unable to walk, unable to negotiate steps in a wheelchair, she faced certain death in the inescapable inferno.

But in line with God’s Word, two total strangers became the “angels” God used to “bear her up in their hands.” They didn’t know her. They didn’t know each other, but seeing her as they passed her floor, they said, “You need some help,” and carried her in her wheelchair down more than 70 flights of stairs to safety.

Another is the story of the blind man, trapped more than 80 floors above the ground. Believing that he would die in the blazing ruins of the World Trade Center, he sent his beloved guide dog away, so that he, too, would not die an excruciating

death.

But through the smoke and debris, the heroic dog came back, miraculously leading his master through pitch-black smoke, shattered glass and twisted steel, down 80 flights of stairs to safety.

Truly, God's angels come in all shapes, varieties and sizes. Both these people can echo David's testimony: "He shall give His angels charge over in their hands they shall [indeed] bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone" (Ps. 91:11-12).

THE PROMISE OF DIVINE PROTECTION God says He will respond to our pleas for help in threatening circumstances. "'He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him'" (Ps. 91:15).

The last person to be pulled alive from the rubble of the World Trade Center was an African American woman who said as she stopped on a landing to take off her shoes, she heard the terrifying sound of the building collapsing around her. She felt herself falling as literally tons of blazing twisted metal, shattered glass and concrete came tumbling down around her. But as she fell she prayed, "God, give me a miracle."

While she lay trapped and unable to move under tons of debris for more than 27 hours, she called repeatedly, "Somebody help me!" Finally, she heard the tapping and scraping sound of someone digging nearby. With a broken shard she frantically tapped back.

A voice above the rubble replied. Although unable to move her body, she extended one finger through a tiny opening between the rubble and made contact with a valiant New York City firefighter, who grabbed her finger and cried: "I've got you! I've got you!"

Although it took hours for the firefighters to dig through to save her, she could “live” on the promise that help was on the way. I would submit that we can too. We can live on the promise that God has said: “I’ve got you! I’ve got you!”

For me, these true-life miracles of the protection of God in the midst of calamity are living proof of the truth of God’s Word in Psalm 91.

The acts of 9/11 were a 21st-century phenomenon requiring the most modern technology: the Internet, jumbo jet aircraft, cell phones, secret electronic bank accounts, secret training camps, and sophisticated means of communications to coordinate, plan, and execute. But God knew the terrorists by name thousands of years before the event.

He prepares us ahead of time for the threat of biological warfare and the anthrax scare. He pre-empts the enemy’s mechanisms of fear by telling us not to be afraid of the terrorist’s plotting by night, nor the biological agents that are released in the darkness, nor the rhetoric of propaganda prophesying “collateral damage” in the thousands (see Ps. 91:5-6). He lets us know that in spite of the danger, He is still in control and still able to keep that which we have committed to Him (see Ps. 91:14-16; 2 Tim. 1:12).

Psalm 91 ends with the promise of divine provision and protection. In the beautifully poetic language of David, the poet-warrior king, God Himself declares: “‘He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him, and show him My salvation’” (vv. 15-16).

So what can we know with certainty in this uncertain world? What can we be sure of when all else fails? Where can we turn for help when our traditional props and sources fail? We can turn to the two things that will never change: the immutable God and His Word.

I no longer experience the haunting fear and insecurity that I felt immediately after Sept. 11. The numbness has gone, as have the vague feelings of uneasiness that left me virtually speechless for days. I now have an answer for 9/11; it is the promise of God's protection in Psalm 91:1!

WHY THE CONFLICT? The crisis of September 11, 2001, is troubling for us as Americans partly because the acts of terrorism perpetrated against our country on that day seemed to be random and unprovoked. Our lack of insight shows that Americans are not well-informed about other nations. The Middle East is a particular conundrum because its past consists of intricately interwoven threads of history, politics, culture and theology.

Many of the events of the history of the Middle East, however, are recorded in the Scriptures. In fact, the foundation of the nation of Israel is based on the life of the patriarch Abraham.

Abraham was called out of his father's home, away from his kindred, on the promise that God would make him a great nation (see Gen. 12:1-3). He and his wife, Sarah, both advanced in years, seized the promise by faith and went out according to God's instructions.

Though God had promised them a son, nothing happened for many years. So Sarah gave her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, to Abraham to bear a child for her.

Hagar gave birth to a son, Ishmael, 13 years before Isaac, the promised son of Abraham and Sarah, was born. The dysfunction, rivalry, aggression and hostility of competing loyalties within blended families immediately began between the two mothers and their sons.

It is widely held that the descendants of Ishmael are the modern Arabs, while the descendants of Isaac are the modern-day Jews. The conflict among brothers that began in Abraham's time continues to this day.

To make matters more complex, following the final fall of the ancient Jewish state of Israel in the 6th century A.D., the Jews were dispersed outside their homeland. In the Diaspora, as it is known, the Jews abandoned Palestine and spread to all the countries of Europe and even to sub-Saharan Africa.

The state of Israel, then, disappeared off the world's maps for more than a thousand years, until after World War II. Only the territory known as Palestine remained.

Following World War II, the conscience of the world was aroused by the unprecedented persecution and systematic extermination of the Jews by the Nazi regime. The world had not been moved to prevent the Holocaust, but it was moved at the end of the war to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine, welcoming the oppressed Jews back from all over Europe to a home in their own nation.

Thus, the state, or nation, of Israel was reborn in 1948, created by partitioning Palestine—taking bits of territory from several Arab states to carve out the tiny arrowhead known as Israel.

In the process, Palestinian people, mostly Arab and Moslem, who had been living on that land for more than a thousand years, were told that the land now belonged to the Jews. Homes, farms, shops, schools—even whole towns that had been in Palestinian hands for generations—were taken from these people and used to create Jewish settlements. The dislocated Palestinians thus became refugees in what had been, in their eyes, their homeland.

Although I am simplifying the history greatly for the purposes of this discussion, it is easy to see that the situation I have described was the fermenting soil in which the seeds of today's violence were sown.

There is a natural animosity between the conflicting cultures, religious traditions and ethnic backgrounds of the Arabs and

the Jews. There is conflict over the holy places throughout this troubled land. There is conflict over political and economic rights and power. And in virtually every instance, the United States has linked its national interests with those of Israel, giving economic, military and diplomatic assistance to the tiny nation.

Therefore, the United States has perpetually been associated with Israel in the eyes of the Arabs throughout the Middle East. Many of them feel that if it were not for our powerful nation, which supports Israel militarily, the displaced Palestinians might have been able to overwhelm and drive out the Jews by the sheer weight of their numbers. This is at least one of the reasons we are a target for terrorism.

Nevertheless, as Psalm 91 promises, “[We] who dwell in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. [We] will say of the Lord, “He is [our] refuge and [our] fortress; [our] God, in Him [we] will trust.”

“Surely He shall deliver [us] from the snare of the fowler and from the perilous pestilence. He shall cover [us] with His feathers, and under His wings [we] shall take refuge.

“A thousand may fall at [our] side, and ten thousand at [our] right hand; but it shall not come near [us]. Only with [our] eyes shall [we] look, and see the reward of the wicked. Because [we] have made the Lord, who is [our] refuge, even the Most High, [our] dwelling place, no evil shall befall [us], nor shall any plague come near [our] dwelling; for He shall give His angels charge over [us], to keep [us] in all [our] ways” (vv. 111, NKJV).

Read a companion devotional.

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