

Psalm 91. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 15 October 2014.

As you know, we are part way through a series of talks based on a selection from the Book of Psalms. The set psalm for this morning – Psalm 91 – is reasonably long, and I shall therefore limit our reading to a few key verses:

‘He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High’, the psalm opens, ‘shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.’¹

I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I will trust" ...

He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings² you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and your coat of mail’.³

And then, in the latter part of the psalm ... ‘Because you have made the Lord, my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place ... He shall give His angels charge over you ...in their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone’.

Psalm 91 can lay *three* claims to fame.

First, the opening two verses bring together the four great names and titles of deity in the Old Testament: ‘the Most High’, ‘the Almighty’, ‘the Lord’ and ‘God’. The first two express God’s greatness – His supremacy as the High One exalted above all creation,⁴ and the Almighty One – invincible and all-sufficient. But the psalmist directs attention not only to God’s greatness. He speaks of Him also as ‘the Lord’, using God’s personal name which stresses His unique relationship to the nation of Israel. And then finally he (the psalmist) expresses God’s intimate and personal relationship with himself, speaking of Him as ‘*my God*’.

The psalm’s *second* claim to fame lies in that it is the only psalm which speaks three times of God as the ‘refuge’ of the believer.⁵ As we have read, ‘I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge" ... under His wings you shall take refuge ...Because you have made the Lord, my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place’ and so on.

And, in this connection (that of God as our ‘refuge’), what a wonderful picture is painted in our minds by the words of the opening verse, ‘He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide *under the shadow of the Almighty*’.

As you know, we are now well into October. It was in October 1958 (fifty-six years ago) that a young woman, not long widowed, taking her three year old baby girl,⁶ went to live among a fierce native tribe in Ecuador,⁷ a tribe known at the time as the Aucas.⁸

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Elisabeth Elliott’s action was that she went to live and to serve among the very people who, in January two years before,⁹ had murdered – had speared to death – her young husband Jim,¹⁰ together with his four missionary friends. Six months before going to live among the Auca’s,¹¹ she wrote her late husband’s biography, a biography based largely upon the journals he had kept during his relatively short life – I say ‘relatively short’ because when Jim was killed he was but 28 years of age.¹²

In that biography, Elisabeth Elliott tells¹³ how, earlier on the very day that they were martyred, after lunch, Jim and his four young missionary friends had (and I quote) ‘sang together ... spontaneously and joyously’ a hymn they each knew well.¹⁴ The last verse of that hymn reads ...

‘We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender!
Thine is the battle, Thine shall be the praise;
When passing through the gates of pearly splendour,
Victors, we rest with Thee, through endless days’.¹⁵

Those were the last words any of the five were to sing in this world, for, ‘before 4.30 that afternoon’, Elisabeth continued, ‘the quiet waters of the Curaray (the local river) flowed over the bodies of the five comrades, slain by the men they had come to win for Christ’.

‘Over’ their ‘*bodies*’, yes, but Elisabeth knew well that the *souls* of the five had then, as they had sung, ‘passed through the gates of pearly splendour’ – ‘through endless days’ to rest ‘*with*’ Him, as their hymn expressed it, ‘*on*’ whom they had rested during life. And, given the link between words which speak in both the first and the last verse of that hymn of God as ‘our shield and our defender’, and the opening verse of our psalm (‘He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty’), it is scarcely surprising that Elisabeth Elliott entitled her husband’s biography, ‘Shadow of the Almighty’, quoting the whole of that verse on its title page.

But I said that our psalm today, Psalm 91, can lay three claims to fame. And so it can, for not only is it unique in that its opening two verses bring together the four great names and titles of deity in the Old Testament ... and not only is it the only psalm which speaks three times of God as the 'refuge' of the believer ... but, thirdly, it contains the only words in scripture which we know to have been quoted later by the devil. For the last words which we read from the psalm this morning ('He shall give His angels charge over you ... in their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone') were employed craftily by Satan during our Lord's wilderness temptation to provoke Him to throw Himself down from the high tower of the Jerusalem temple, and thereby, following a miraculous descent, to win for Himself instant acclaim as the Messiah of Israel.

In this way, Jesus could, the devil implied, introduce God's kingdom without the suffering of the cross. But the devil's ploy to use these verses of our psalm to persuade the Saviour to bypass the cross – and thereby, of course, to thwart God's purpose of salvation for sinners like me – proved altogether unsuccessful. The Lord Jesus would have none of it, and to the cross He went, and went willingly.

And, thinking of that cross, but with my eye on the expression from our text for this morning, 'the shadow of the Almighty', I am reminded of the words of the well-known hymn:

Beneath *the cross of Jesus* I fain would take my stand,
The shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land;
A home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way,
From the burning of the noontide heat, and the burden of the day.

Upon that cross of Jesus mine eye at times can see
The very dying form of One Who suffered there for me;
And from my stricken heart with tears two wonders I confess;
The wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.¹⁶

'Beneath the cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand'. I have read that a 15th century German painter by the name of Hans Memling once painted scenes from the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus on the altar of the Lübeck Cathedral.¹⁷ Apparently, it is a magnificent altar piece, depicting some soldiers with spears, others gambling, a motley crowd, women in tears, and rulers with mocking looks and sneers. There, high above the crowd, stand three crosses. But right in the middle of the throng, at the foot of Jesus' cross, is an empty patch of ground. It is possible that the artist wanted to convey the simple message that at that very spot, at the foot of the cross of Jesus, there is a free space where you and I can, by faith, take our stand if we wish.

And certainly for any of us to enjoy that of which our psalm speaks – 'the shadow of the Almighty' – we must first take our stand beneath the shadow of 'the cross of Jesus'.

Footnotes

¹ To be in somebody's shadow you have to be close to that person.

² Cf. Psa. 17. 8.

³ As in C H Spurgeon's 'The Treasury of David'. But TWOT, numbers 1936 and 1486c suggests that the reference is to a large and to a small shield.

⁴ Psa. 83. 18.

⁵ Psa. 91. 2, 4, 9.

⁶ Valerie was born in 1955.

⁷ Where they lived for five years. She and Valerie returned to the US (Franconia, New Hampshire) in 1963.

⁸ Now known as the Huaorani.

⁹ 8 January 1956.

¹⁰ Born 8 October 1927.

¹¹ The 'Acknowledgements' page of 'Shadow of the Almighty' is dated April 1958.

¹² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elisabeth_Elliott. See too <http://www.elisabethelliott.org/about.html>.

¹³ 'Shadow of the Almighty', page 20.

¹⁴ 'We rest on Thee', written by Edith Cherry, who died at the age of 25 in Plymouth. She had been crippled as a result of polio at the age of sixteen months. See <http://www.stempublishing.com/hymns/biographies/cherry.html> and <http://wordwisehymns.com/2010/02/09/today-in-1872-edith-cherry-born/>.

¹⁵ Watch ... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opQ1m9kVyP8>

¹⁶ Elizabeth C D Clephane. 1830-1869.

¹⁷ The altar piece is now in Lübeck's St. Annen Museum. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Memling. Also see 'Jesus our destiny', by Wilhelm Busch, pages 151-152.