

Security

[Psalms 121](#)

Sixth of series: Developing Mature Character in the Psalmic School of Prayer

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, February 20, 2005

Worship at 8:30, 10, and 11:30 a.m.

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As you are watchful, Almighty God, over us, let us be watchful of your presence among us. As you hold us tightly to yourself, let us hold tightly to you. As you speak your word now, may we hear the word of grace through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Psalm is about God's protection. The psalm is a promise that God will keep us secure in all circumstances no matter what happens in life. The psalm creates a tension at the beginning because it puts us in a quandary: Why is it mean things happen to people of faith? There actually is the tension between God's protection in everyday life – from the vicissitudes of what happens around us – and God's protection, in a deeper way, for our souls, our minds, and our hearts.

In an earlier service, we celebrated the trip into outer space on Friendship 7 that one of our members, John Glenn, took 43 years ago today. The moon and the coldness of the air did not attack him, and the sun and the heat did not destroy him. Yes, there were protections that were physical around him, but the protection that sustained him and has for all these years, is the inner protection of his faith in Jesus Christ.

In our Presbyterian pattern of life and our tradition, we affirm a very significant and strong word that God is sovereign over all things and that God's providence will keep us, no matter what. In Calvinism that is often referred to as the "perseverance of the saints." That's also called the "preservation of God in all circumstances." God's love will never let us go. God's grace will surround us and protect us from the inside out.

This wonderment about the nature of God's perseverance and preservation is always held in some tension with other theological traditions in the Christian faith. Richard Mouw, in his book, *Calvinism and the Las Vegas Airport*, gives an illustration of the tension. He writes about a train that's on a journey with several passengers onboard, and the train stops suddenly between two stations. Four theologians get off the train to see what's happened, and there beside the tracks is a dead body. The Lutheran makes the comment: "He jumped, and he was killed by the fall." The Catholic says: "I think he was pushed." The Methodist says: "I think he fell accidentally." The Calvinist, however, says: "If he is really off the train, he's never been on the train in the first place."

From my Baptist background, we used the term "eternal security" -- that once God has gotten hold of you, God is not going to let go. For those of us who walk in the tradition of the Reformed perspective, we would put it this way: once you have received the grace of Jesus Christ in your life, and you are in a relationship, God will never let you go. There's a heavy emphasis on God's action that takes the initiative and sustains us no matter what happens.

We are in a culture where security is a very important word. On a trip about a year ago, I was off to southern California and Malibu from the Lehigh International Airport – referred to as "international" because there is one flight to Canada! This particular day there was increased security and I literally had to carry my bags to three different places for people to send them through x-ray machines, open them up, and check them out to make sure there were no hurtful objects inside. The increased security gave me the sense that "I'm glad they're checking on all this; it looks like it's going to be a good flight." I got on the plane, gave my bags to the people who were going to put them in the luggage compartment, and got to the place where I arrived and ... no bags got off the plane. They said, "We can't understand that. It says the bags were on the plane. So wait for the next flight – the bags should be coming with them." I waited through the next flight – no bags. The third flight... the fourth flight... the fifth flight. By that time I decided to go where I needed to be.

At 2 in the morning, after 24 hours of waiting on the bags, the bags finally came. It may have been God's way of saying: "You think you're going to enjoy life in Malibu, but it's a little tougher than that." Well, I opened up the bags after they got there and sure enough, they were my bags, but half of all of my earthly goods that I put in them was gone. Somebody had taken my material goods out. What they were going to do with my size of clothes I do not know! They discovered later that somebody in security had taken the items from the bags--so much for security.

We live in an age of security. And the more we talk about security, the higher our anxiety goes that we are not secure. We are a country that's committed to Homeland Security, product safety, automobile safety (if you can be surrounded by at least a dozen airbags we hope that will make your life better.) Gun sale protection... Securities and Exchange security...home security... building security... firewalls... and virus protection. Unfortunately there's no job security. As we talk more about security, people who observe American life are saying that our anxiety goes up higher, and higher, and higher. There seems to be a reciprocal arrangement that the more we strive and drive for security, the more anxious we become. Now we're in a conversation about Social Security and you can tell the anxiety is going up even more.

The fact of it is that: the more we invest in external security patterns, the less we are self-aware and committed to understanding the nature of internal security – which is what God's security is all about. Yes, God at times will protect us on the outside but the commitment God has to us in the sovereignty and providence is that God will always keep connected to us on the inside and sometimes it will show itself in outer secure events.

About 30 years ago, my wife and I were driving to the place where my parents live in southern California – a nice, peaceful country town made up of a number of retired people. We came upon a light that turned yellow; I slowed down and decided to stop. Within a few seconds I smelled some rubber and looked off to the side. I noticed there were huge tractor truck wheels that were now backing into the side of my car. I woke up just soon enough to realize that the driver behind me thought I would go through the yellow light. He had to jackknife the truck instead of running over the top of us. That could have been the end. There was a moment, evidently, when the angels of God were looking out for us. But I do not think for one moment that the angels of God always protect us from every tragic event. Those are the moments that get our attention – they say, “Are you leaning into God’s internal security?” Because that kind of bailing-out from tragedy will not always happen.

People around the world die in tragic events. We are called, because we see the evidence of it, to build a trust relationship with the God who says: I have made the heavens and the earth and I will provide security for you. Not that your life will be perfect and without trouble, but that you will have the possibility of a relationship where I am showing you how to live in trust.

Psalms 121 is called a “Psalm of Ascent;” it is one of 15 psalms of this section in the book of the Psalms. These are psalms that were sung by the pilgrims who were on a journey to Jerusalem to meet God in the temple – to meet God in the holy place of Zion. And they also sang those psalms on the descent back out of Jerusalem. They sang the psalms on the journey; these are journey songs.

Historically, there is a controversy about the primary question that introduces this psalm: “I lift up my eyes to the hills...” followed by the question, “From where does my help come?” There are those who believe that question affirms that God is on Mount Zion and the help is coming from the mountain. But there are many theologians who believe that the question reduces the importance of the mountain to its proper perspective: No, God is more than that mountain – God is more than that temple; God is more than that place. My help comes from the Lord who made the heavens and the earth.

God is greater than a place. God is greater than a circumstance; God covers all places and all circumstances because God is present among us, and between us, inside of us...God gives us security from the inside out. Calvin said of Psalm 121: We ought not to seek safety, but only where it is in God. People have long wearied themselves in hunting after remedies. They will at length find from experience that there is no assured help but in God alone. By the mountains the prophet means: whatever is great or excellent in the world. But we ought to account all such favors as less than adequate in comparison to the God who made the heavens and the earth. The higher power is not enough. The psalm is moving us to address once for all the Highest Power.

This psalm is built around the word “keep.” Six times that word is repeated; it is the Hebrew word, *shamar*. “He who keeps you will not slumber.” “He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” “The Lord is your keeper.” “The Lord will keep you from evil; he will keep your life.” “The Lord will keep you going out and coming in.” The Lord will keep you. *Shamar* means the Lord builds literally a hedge around you – to guard and protect you... surrounds you with grace...to preserve you... to make sure that you are secure. The Lord is watching over you. The Lord sees you and makes note of where you are, and who you are. The Lord is attending to you; the Lord is paying attention – *shamar*.

It would be the equivalent to these kinds of phrases today in our culture: ‘I’ve got you covered,’ ‘I’ve got your back,’ or the image of the secret service surrounding the President of the United States, making sure that no harm will come. The Lord has got us surrounded.

The Apostles Creed teaches that “We believe in God the Father, Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” We believe that the God who created all things is protecting me and you – protecting us together. The Heidelberg catechism says:

To believe in God the Father, Almighty, maker of heaven and earth is to trust him so completely that I have no doubt he will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul. Moreover, whatever evil he sends upon me in this troubled life he will turn to my good, for he is able to do it, being Almighty God, and he is determined to do it, being Faithful Father.

We are to be patient in adversity, grateful in the midst of blessing and to trust our faithful God and Father for the future. People who are on the journey of life – people who were on the journey to the temple and from the temple – were surrounded by the possibility of pain and hurt...of accidents...of thieves... of murder. They knew their life was in danger as they made that trek.

This past week, we have seen how Shiite Muslims made the pilgrimage from various places in Iraq to Carballah, knowing that their lives were in danger on their journey and while they were in the midst of worship in their mosque. But they were willing to go because they were committed to the God who would be with them on the way, while they were there, and when they were coming back. If it is true for Muslim people in their faith, how much more should it be true for Christian people in our faith: we believe that God’s protection, in spite of the violence and attacks and the insecurity on the outside, will give us the sense of inner security, because the Spirit speaks to our hearts through Jesus Christ.

It is important that we know that we are not driven by external security. I ran across the reflections of a 6-year-old Ethiopian orphan in the newspaper the other day, standing by a window watching for her parents to return. They had been gone for two years. They dropped her off at the orphanage, knowing that they would die in a few weeks from AIDS. She’s still standing at the window looking for them; she would quite often go outside and plant white flowers in their honor. One day the person who was writing the article heard her sing a song about a girl who wakes up one morning to find that she has only arms and legs. The main part of her body is gone. A bird has flown away with her heart and her torso. The girl in the song is healthy but she misses her heart and asks the bird to return it. She misses her parents; her heart is gone with them.

There is a movement in our lives when we turn our sense of security from our earthly parents to our Heavenly Parent. And when we do that, we become aware of the eternal security that is available to us today. That God, in all of God’s greatness, can touch our lives personally and give us a sense that neither life, nor death, nor height nor depth can do damage to us, because God’s love protects us.

The Apostle Paul says that God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus – from the inside out. There are times that is all we have – that sense of God's security on the inside. This past week I was privileged to be a invited to join a family at the hospital during a tragic moment. The daughter was expecting a baby; the baby was full-term and everything was going very well. They were extremely pleased with how the baby was coming along. The baby was born absolutely gorgeous; they had never seen such a beautiful baby. There was just one problem – the baby was born brain- dead. The family and the mother were beside themselves with grief and pain. "I don't understand," the young woman said. "The ob-gyn promised me that she would help me have a healthy baby." Her dad met with me and privately said, "I've tried to protect my daughter all her life from these kinds of pains. I can't protect her from this one. What do I do?" In these moments, you could sense that the family was turning from a sense of external protection -- that God is going to magically make everything bad go away -- to a sense of what does it mean to be driven from the inside-out: that the security of God is in our hearts, and our minds and our spirit.

Unless we make that transition, we miss the full meaning of the psalm. For we know that the people of God – whether they are Christian, or Jewish, or Islamic, or any other person who is giving themselves to a faith that is strong and true, will come to the place where they realize that life is tragic. We who affirm that Jesus is the Son of God, the Christ, the Savior of the world – affirm that it is he who is the Good Shepherd, who keeps us from falling apart when we go through the hardest times, who on the way to the cross will not abandon us because he's been there and he's done that. Jesus will lead us home, and nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Psalm 23 affirms that we will live in the house of the Lord forever, because the Lord is our Shepherd.

There is no guarantee that when we leave here today we will be protected from violence, accidents or mistakes. The commitment God is making to us is that God's protection will guard our hearts and our minds and our spirits. And we are moved to have that sense of protection from the inside out. If you think Homeland Security is going to protect you and give you less anxiety – it's not true. Because the only true way of releasing anxiety is to accept the peace of Jesus Christ in your own life. It is in Jesus Christ that we have peace, and nothing can separate us from that love. Amen.