Tuesday: Introduction and The Claim

Every single week leading up to Good Friday and Easter, we’re looking at psalms that help us understand the workings of the human heart, and especially how to understand our own hearts. This particular psalm is about how to have your heart at peace during times of difficulty, how to have hearts at peace in the midst of a very dangerous world, dangerous circumstances. When I started out in the ministry, I was in my 20s. I was in a church that had a lot of elderly people in it, so I often went to the nursing home. I went to see people who were shut in. One of the things I noticed about older people was they worried all the time. They were very anxious. They worried about their children. They worried about their neighbors. They worried about their friends. They worried about themselves. I remember thinking, “Phew! Old people. They worry all the time.” I remember thinking, “Worry doesn’t get you anywhere. It doesn’t solve a thing. It doesn’t get anything done. It’s just a useless thing.” I realize now, looking back on it, that one of the reasons I didn’t worry as much when I was young was that I had this implicit belief that, yeah, bad things happen, but they don’t happen to me or to people I’m close to. They don’t happen to anybody I know. What happens to everyone is, as you get older, those things do happen, and they happen more and more. You come to understand how dangerous a world there is. Bereavement (people dying on you), serious illness, relational betrayal, and financial reversal, just to name four. There is no way to stop those things from happening. No matter how savvy you are, no matter how much planning, no matter how powerful or successful you are, there’s no way to stop those things from coming into your life. They will come into your life. It’s a dangerous world. Shakespeare’s great line, “Each new morn, new widows howl, new orphans cry.” So how do you get peace and poise in your heart in the face of a world like this? How do you live in a world like this and have peace and poise in your heart? That’s the question. This psalm is about that. It starts off with making a remarkable promise in the first four verses (it says it very clearly). Then in the middle part of the psalm, it describes the promise in ways that show us it’s actually very difficult to know quite how to read it, how to understand the promise. So there’s the promise, and then the middle part shows us it’s not that easy to understand exactly what the promise means. At the end, however, we will learn how we can rightly understand the promise so we can enter into what it promises. There’s a peace that’s offered. Then we’re going to see it’s very easy to misunderstand what the promise is, but if we misunderstand the promise, we won’t be able to enter into the peace that’s given to us.

* So there’s the claim,
* there’s the misunderstanding of the claim,
* and then how we can take hold of the claim in such a way that we enter into the peace that’s offered.

1. The claim (or promise). In the first four verses, it’s extremely clear. We’re told God is a shelter. God is shade. Do you see the word shadow? It’s the same word as shade. Shade from the sun in a hot, terrible climate. In a hot climate, the sun can be lethal. Getting into shade or the shadow can be a matter of life and death. He’s our refuge. He’s our fortress. Then finally it says, “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge …” There is image after image after image that says, “God will protect you.” Probably the most vivid image is this one where it says, “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge …” The wings of God is actually a metaphor that is used fairly often, and it evokes one of the most familiar and vivid sights we’ve all had: a mother bird protecting her young by spreading her wings over them, protecting them from the rain, from the sun, from predators. This image of a mother bird protecting her young with her wings conveys several things. It conveys strength. By the way, sometimes God is actually likened to a mother eagle and it talks about eagles’ wings. It’s strength and protection, but it’s also tenderness. The image conveys tenderness and love, and it conveys a third thing, which we’ll get back to. This metaphor is often evoked in the Bible. Boaz says to Ruth in Ruth, chapter 2, “May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” Psalm 36: “Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings.” Psalm 57: “In you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster is past.” Psalm 61: “I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” Over and over again, God is likened to a mother bird who protects her young with outstretched wings, protects from the elements, from predators, and so on. The vast majority of metaphors that describe God in the Bible are he’s a king and he’s father. They’re overwhelmingly masculine, but this occasional evoking of God as a mother bird, I think, is there partly to make sure we don’t misunderstand and think of God ever as remote and distant, which some human fathers can be. We’re not allowed to do that. This is a God who will protect you. Who’s you? It says, “I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’ ” My God is covenant language. In the Bible, when God says, “You will be my people; I will be your God,” that is covenant language. When it says, “My God, in whom I trust,” we’re saying, “If you trust God, if you’ve given your life to God, if you have entered into a covenant relationship with God, the promise is he will protect you.” There it is. That’s the claim. So how do we understand that? If we trust God, he will protect us. What does that mean?

Wednesday: The Misunderstanding of the Claim (Part I)

The misunderstanding of the claim. In the middle part of this psalm, it starts to describe God’s protection, and the statements are so incredibly sweeping. Notice it seems to say that if you trust God you won’t experience violence. You know, the terror of night, the arrow that flies by day. “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.” That seems to be saying you won’t experience violence. You won’t experience disease. See verse 6? “… nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.” Down in verse 10 it says, “… no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near [you].” No harm, no disaster, no violence, no sickness. Finally, it actually goes so far as to say, in verse 12, you won’t stub your toe. “[The angels] will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” It looks like this is what it’s saying. You read it through, and at first reading it seems to be saying, “If you trust God, nothing really bad will happen to you. If you trust God, your life will go smoothly.” Of course, that would also imply the opposite, that if your life is not going smoothly, you’re not trusting God. You’re not being faithful to him in some way. Is that how we should read this? If you trust God, everything will go well, and if everything is not going well, it means you’re not trusting God. Is that what it’s saying? Is that how we’re supposed to understand and read the promise? Right away, there should be three reasons that immediately give us pause. I think any thoughtful reader will know there are three reasons why you shouldn’t read it that way. The first reason is because you want so desperately for that to be the way to read it. We read that and we desperately want it to say that. Whenever you know you desperately want a text to say something, you should realize, “I’m not objective here.” It should right away give you some pause. “Okay, maybe I’m not reading it right.” The second reason it should give us pause is because even inside the Hebrew Scriptures, inside the Old Testament, you have the book of Job. If you remember the book of Job, Job experiences a lot of these things. He experiences disaster. He experiences violence. Harm overtakes him. Disease and pestilence overtake him. A lot of the things it says won’t happen to you if you trust God happened to Job. Then Job gets these guys who come to see him, and they’re called Job’s friends, so-called. Job’s friends definitely read it that way. They say, “Job, if you trust in God, he will not let bad things happen to you. Bad things are happening to you; therefore, you must not be trusting God somewhere. You must be not being faithful to God somewhere.” That’s what they say, but as you know, at the end of the book of Job, God shows up in a whirlwind, in a storm, and he looks down at Job’s friends, and what does he say? “You have not spoken truth about me.” There’s God looking at these guys who say, “If you trust God, bad things don’t happen to you. If bad things are happening to you, it’s because you’re not having faith or something.” God looks them right in the eye and says, “You have not spoken truth about me.” If you have ever read the book of Job, you realize that you can’t read Psalm 91 that way either. Otherwise, you’re like Job’s friends. If you read it that way, God says, “You are not thinking truth about me.” The third reason we should not read Psalm 91 that way is because Satan wants you to read it that way. I know a lot of you are sitting there saying, “I’ve never heard a Presbyterian minister say anything like that.” “The Devil wants you to read it that way.” Usually Presbyterians don’t talk like that, do they? Well, no, and I usually don’t talk that way either, but the reason I’m talking like that is this. You know how Shakespeare says the Devil can quote Scripture for his purpose? It’s a famous saying. Do you know that in the Bible there is one place where the Devil actually does quote Scripture? Shakespeare is not lying. There’s one place in the New Testament where the Devil actually quotes Scripture, and the Scripture the Devil quotes is Psalm 91. So whenever you’re reading Psalm 91, always remember the Devil knows this psalm and quotes it. But what does he do with it? If you go to Luke, chapter 4, you will see Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness. What he’s doing there is trying to derail Jesus. He’s trying to get Jesus off target. One of the ways he does it is he quotes Psalm 91. In fact, he quotes Psalm 91, verse 11, which is the most extreme statement in Psalm 91. “If you trust God, God will protect you, and you won’t even stub your foot.” He quotes this to Jesus and says, “If God lets you suffer, he is not being true to his word. Look. God promises that you will not suffer, so if you suffer, that means God can’t be trusted.” Satan is nothing if not strategic. Satan knows that if you believe that, if you read Psalm 91 or any other text of the Bible like that … If you come to believe, “If I really trust God and I’m really true to him, then God is not going to let bad things happen to me,” he knows what that’s going to do. It means eventually you will be deeply disappointed. It means you will pull back from God. You will never come to know the powerful promise that’s here. He doesn’t want you to know that. Lastly, as you get older, you’ll not only get more and more anxious (which we do as we get older), but you’ll get more and more angry and bitter. It will totally derail your life. Satan is nothing if not strategic. It’s really interesting. There must be something so powerful that’s being given to us here in Psalm 91 that the forces of darkness want you to misread it so that you don’t get it. Well, then how can we start reading it right? What does it mean, then? What does it mean that God protects us?

Thursday: The Misunderstanding of the Claim (Part II)

To give us a better idea of that, I’ll give you one biblical story and three biblical statements that will get us started toward reading it rightly. The biblical story … I could have chosen more than one, but I still think probably the best one is the story of Joseph. It’s in the book of Genesis. Most of you know something about it. Some of you know it well. It starts with Jacob. Jacob has a group of sons. He has Joseph, but he has other sons. Jacob, because of his own problems, because of the way his mother and father treated him, because of his own family history, favors one son over all of the others. He very visibly, very obviously favors Joseph over all of his brothers. You know what poison that is in a family. What you see happening as you read the story is, first of all, Joseph, even by the time he’s an adolescent, is becoming entitled. He’s becoming spoiled. He’s becoming arrogant. He’s becoming cruel. You can see it in his dreams. The brothers are becoming murderously bitter and angry and hard. As the story progresses, the brothers actually sell Joseph into slavery, and he goes to Egypt. Down in Egypt it gets even worse, because one of his employers falsely accuses him, and he ends up in a dungeon, in a prison. Not just a slave but in prison. For years, as far as we can tell, for decades, everything goes wrong. At every point where he would have cried out and said, “God, help me,” there would have been just silence. Year after year, decade after decade, time after time, everything goes wrong. God never comes through. No answers. Yet we all know that, in the end, if all of that hadn’t happened, if all that disaster hadn’t happened, if all the violence, if all of those bad things hadn’t happened, Joseph would never have become a great man. He never would have escaped the mean, self-absorbed person he was becoming. He would never have become a great man. Secondly, the brothers never would have been humbled and healed psychologically. Thirdly, multitudes of people, including his family, would have starved. Joseph was protected from being the wreck he was becoming. He was protected from his own arrogance. He was protected from his father’s loving mistreatment of him. He was protected, basically, from his brothers. His brothers were protected from themselves. The people were protected from starvation. All this protection was going on because of all this disaster that happened under God’s control as part of his plan. Now here are the three statements. The first statement is actually at the end of the story, Genesis 50:20, where Joseph says to his brothers, “You meant all these things for evil, but God meant them for good.” The second statement is basically an elaboration on that first statement. It’s very famous. It’s Romans 8:28. It’s often quoted, but please listen to it. It says, “All things work together for good to those that love God and are called according to his purpose.” It’s often quoted, not very often understood. “All things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose.” Notice when it says “All things work together,” that little word together is so important. There’s nothing Pollyanna-ish about this. There’s nothing superficial about this. This is not saying, “Well, all of these bad things are really good things. Every cloud has a silver lining,” or “Even bad things actually are good if you just learn to look at it like this.” No, no, no. Bad things are bad things. Horrible things are horrible things. God didn’t create a world with evil, violence, war, sickness, aging, and death. None of those things. He didn’t create the world that way. They’re the result of our sin that has come into the world. That’s what the Bible says. But when it says everything, even the terrible things, even the most terrible things, work together for good, what that means is that even though those things are terrible (there’s nothing good about them) God somehow is bringing his power to bear on all things in such a way that we will see from the vantage point of eternity that every bad thing that happened in the end brought about something better and more glorious than would have happened if the bad thing hadn’t happened. In other words, the bad thing brings about something better than if it hadn’t happened, which means all the evil intention of evildoers will be utterly thwarted. Evil will be absolutely defeated, if it’s really true (and it is) that every bad thing that happens in the end only leads to something more glorious and great than if it hadn’t happened. The third statement, which I think is actually the most important statement that will help us understand how to read Psalm 91 and not read it wrongly, is Luke, chapter 21, verses 16–18. It’s nowhere near as well known as the other passages I just read to you. It’s Jesus’ own statement. Listen carefully. Jesus was talking to his disciples, and his disciples were listening in. Jesus was saying, “You’re going to be persecuted. Bad things are going to happen. After I’m gone, many bad things are going to happen to you.” Listen to what he says, though. Listen very carefully. “You will be betrayed by parents, brothers, family, and friends. Some of you will be put to death. You will all be hated for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish, and in patience you will possess your souls.” Did you hear that? I’m going to read it again. Listen carefully. “You will be betrayed by parents, brothers, family, and friends. Some of you will even be put to death, but not a hair of your head will perish.” Wait a minute. Did he really say that? “Some of you will be betrayed. You’ll be thrown into prison. You’ll have your goods plundered. In fact, some of you will actually be killed, but not a hair of your head will perish.” What? Then he says, “And in patience you will possess your souls.” What is he saying? I actually think it’s the clearest of all. We’ve already gotten close to it. We’ve moved toward it in Joseph. Joseph needed to be protected from a whole lot of things that would destroy him forever. So did his brothers. So did everybody. The hair on their heads, spiritually speaking, you might say, in the ultimate sense … The only way they could really be protected was by other things coming into their lives. When Jesus says, “Bad things will happen to you, but not a hair of your head will perish,” and then he adds (which is very helpful), “And in patience you will possess your souls,” I think there you have a key. If you love anything more than God, if there’s anything in your life that gives you meaning in life more than him and his love … You can believe in God. You can even go to church. You can be a good person. You can believe in Christianity, but if there’s anything in your life that’s more important to you than God, you don’t possess your own soul. That has the title to your soul. It owns you. A career. Everybody should care about your job. Your career matters, but if it’s the most important thing to you, if it’s the thing that really turns your crank, that really gives you meaning in life, gives you your self-worth, much more than your relationship with God, then it owns you. You don’t possess your own soul. It possess you. It will drive you. You’ll be anxious. You’ll be up and down all the time. There will be no rest in your life. There will be no poise. There will be no peace. Only when something bad happens to your career and if you take shelter under his wings … What does that mean? What it means is when you reinvest in God that which was invested in this thing you’re losing now because bad things are happening, you become somebody else. You become yourself. In that sense, you possess your soul in patience. The word patience there means longsuffering. “In suffering,” Jesus says, “if you rest in me and trust in me, then when the bad things happen, you will become a person who finally, in a sense, is self-possessed.” That is to say, you’re not scared. You’re not up and down. You’ll become a person with that peace, with that poise. Look at Joseph. He would never have become a person of power, of depth. He needed to be protected from his own self-absorption, and he was. Here’s what this means. If you read Psalm 91 in a superficial way and say, “Well, this means no bad thing will happen to me,” here’s what you’re actually saying. “Oh, Psalm 91 is telling me that all of the things I love more than God that, though I don’t know them, are actually possessing my soul and making me a somebody who will never be able to handle hardship, never be able to handle trouble, never be able to handle the dangers of life … I’ll just be wracked. I’ll be whipsawed back and forth between anxiety and having my head inflated because my career is going well and being destroyed because it’s not going well. I will never, ever, ever be a person of poise and peace if I hold on to all these things.” You can’t read Psalm 91 as saying, “God is going to let me keep all of the things I love more than him.” That would be the worst thing for you. Instead, you have to recognize what it’s really saying. “I will protect you. I will protect the real you. I’ll protect the you that will last forever. I will protect the only part of you that really matters. There are a lot of other parts of you that need to be shed anyway.” We’re on the verge of knowing what this means. It means you must trust God in trouble in order to become a person who can handle trouble, not trust that God will prevent or make you exempt from trouble, which would be the worst thing possible for you. It would have been for Joseph. You say, “Okay, that’s not easy, to trust God in trouble.”

Friday: Take Hold of the Claim

3. How we can take hold of the claim. Let’s look at the last three verses. The last three verses is a kind of oracle. It’s basically God speaking very directly to the reader. By the way, it not only proves that what I’m saying is right but also shows you how to get the power to trust him when troubles happen. Notice it says in verse 15, “I will be with him in trouble.” There it is. It does not say, “I will be with him (the one who trusts in me) and prevent trouble from happening.” If you read the rest of the psalm wrongly, when you got to verse 15 you’d say, “What’s that doing there? It looked to me like he said, ‘I’ll protect you from trouble.’ ” No, it says, “I’ll protect you in trouble. I will be with you in trouble.” That shows that what I’ve been telling you is right, that you need to read Psalm 91 in line with the rest of what the Bible says to understand it properly. There it says, “I will be with him in trouble,” but here’s what’s great about that line. It points forward to the rest of the Bible. It points forward to the New Testament. It points forward to the gospel. It points forward to Jesus. How so? Well, think about it. When you’re reading Psalm 91, it seems to say, “I will be with him in trouble.” What does that mean? You think that just means, “I’ll feel God’s presence in trouble.” God went a lot further than that. Do you know the lengths to which he has gone to literally be with us in trouble? You won’t know that until you get to the story of Jesus, until you get to the New Testament. There we’re told something about God that no other religion says about God. No other religion makes this claim. Only Christianity makes the claim that the transcendent God and Creator, who was exempt from trouble … He was perfect. He was all-powerful. How could he experience trouble? He became a human being, was born in a manger, became a person who experienced betrayal, who experienced wrongdoing, experienced injustice, and experienced what it was like to die, what it was like to be beaten. The invulnerable God became vulnerable. The immortal God became mortal. The invulnerable God became killable. He went to the cross. When he says, “I will be with you in trouble …” That’s the first thing you need to use on your heart when bad things happen to you. What does it mean to take shelter under his wings? What does it mean to really rest in him and invest in him? How are you going to do that? When bad things are happening and you feel like, “Why is all this happening to me?” the first thing is, “You know what I’m going through.” That’s the first thing you need in order to really rest in him. “You know what I’m going through. You’ve experienced worse than I’ve experienced.” That’s important. This doesn’t just point to the incarnation; it points to substitution. How so? It talks here about rescue. It talks about salvation. It talks about grace salvation, but not until the New Testament do we understand what that means. I told you that this illustration, this metaphor of a mother bird conveys three ideas. It conveys protection, it conveys love and tenderness, but it also conveys substitution. The mother bird is spreading over her young her wings to protect the young from the rain. Well, how does she protect the young from the rain? She gets wet. How does she protect the young from the sun? She gets hot. How does she protect from the predators? She gets eaten. She puts herself between the bad and her young. She takes it in herself. There’s only one time where Jesus Christ identifies with a mother bird. It’s when he’s riding into Jerusalem. It’s in Matthew 26. You can also find it in Luke 13. He’s talking about judgment. He’s talking about the fact that the people of Jerusalem are going to be judged for their sins and wrongdoing, that judgment is coming down. As he’s talking about judgment, that is where he says the famous thing. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I wanted to gather you as a mother hen gathers her children under my wings, but you would not.” That seems very sweet. “Aw, Jesus is identifying as a mother hen, and he would like his little chicks to be under his wing.” It’s the context that matters. He’s talking about judgment. Judgment is coming down. In that context he says, “Oh, if you believed in me, I would be your mother bird, and you would take shelter under my wings.” Shelter from what? Judgment. That means judgment will fall on him. That’s how he protects us. True story. Remember the terrible fires in Yellowstone National Park? National Geographic ran an interesting little article. It talked about park rangers who went into the parts of the park that had been ravaged by fire after the fires had died down. Two park rangers were walking along, and they saw this tree that was just a charred stump. At the base of the tree, they saw a very creepy, macabre kind of sight. It turned out it was a mother bird still sitting upright in her nest, but she had been completely burned to a crisp. It was a corpse. She was charred. She was basically ash, but she was sitting there like this, completely upright. It was very creepy and sad. One of the park rangers decided to knock it over. He took a stick and knocked it over, and three little live chicks ran out from underneath it. They realized the reason the chicks had lived was that when the heat came, the mother did her thing. She just sat there. She let the fire come down on her. When Jesus Christ was on the cross, he looked down at people betraying him. He looked down at people denying him. He looked down at people abandoning him. He looked down at people mocking him and jeering at him, and in the greatest act of love in the history of the world, he stayed and was burned to a crisp by the judgment of God, by the fire, by the wrath of God. He took what we deserved. That’s what the Bible says. There’s the answer to understanding Psalm 91. If you read Psalm 91 and say, “Well, if you trust in God, God will never let anything bad happen to you …” Well, Jesus Christ is the only person who ever completely trusted in God, the only human being who ever trusted in God fully. Did anything bad happen to him? Yes. Why? Because through it God was going to bring redemption. He was going to bring joy. He was going to bring glory. Here’s how you can rest under the shadow of his wings. When bad things happen to you, it’s always a way for you to possess your soul by taking your heart’s overinvestment in these other things and putting it in God. The way to do that is not just to do it in some abstract way. “Yes, I need to love God.” Look at what Jesus Christ did. Look at him taking the judgment. Look at him being burned to a crisp so we could be saved, so we could live, and say, “Lord Jesus, if you suffered for us like that, I can suffer right now with patience.” In patience you will find yourself. You will become yourself. You will possess your soul. Let’s pray. Thank you, Father, for giving us a glorious promise that is so easy for us to misread, and Satan wants us to misread it. He doesn’t want us to enter into the remarkable promise that’s offered, the remarkable peace that’s given to us here. We ask that you would help us to enter into that peace to avoid the false interpretations. Please give us, O Lord, the ability to sing in the shadow of your wings. Help us to put our hearts at rest in a very dangerous world. Do it because your Son died that we could have that. We ask for it in his name, amen.