

Dwelling Place

Psalm 91:1-16

Series: Exalt the LORD our God – Fall 2021

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Worship: My Dwelling Place

Key Sentence:

There is no better place to be than the dwelling place

Outline:

I. My Dwelling Place (Psalm 91:1-2)

II. Your Protection in the Dwelling Place (Psalm 91:3-13)

III. God's Pledge for the Dwelling Place (Psalm 91:14-16)

Psalm 91:1–16 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. ²I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”

³For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. ⁴He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. ⁵You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, ⁶nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday. ⁷A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. ⁸You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. ⁹Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge— ¹⁰no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent. ¹¹For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. ¹²On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. ¹³You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.

¹⁴“Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. ¹⁵When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. ¹⁶With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.”

Sitting in the car working on this while camping in Tennessee. It starts to rain. Is the car wet – yes, externally. Is the car wet? Not in any substantive or harmful way – it's dry inside and comfortable.

Dwelling Place

Psalm 91:1-16

Some words are in themselves comforting and comfortable. They are evocative – they inspire you to remember or imagine something pleasant. In 2019’s movie about J R R Tolkien there is a long scene between Tolkien and his future wife in which he imagines the legend behind cellar door, which he pronounces celador and which at least one linguist before him had called “the most beautiful combination of English sounds.” At the center of the central thought of Psalm 91, in verse 9, we find the phrase “dwelling place.” For me, and for many, the phrase is a deeply evocative, comfortable and comforting one.

I asked people in an e-mail and on Facebook earlier this week what those two words made them think or feel. Sherry Early who answered first and said “Dwelling place makes me think of the idea of dwelling on something, an idea or thought, so a dwelling place is the place where I stop and rest, meditate, pause . . . home.” Sylvia Stottlemeyer “A safe haven where I can remain and abide for a time.” Rob Lewis: “It feels primitive to me. A habitat kind of feel... a natural place to be if all was as it should be.” A few people had more concrete mental images. One said “My immediate association on reading the phrase “dwelling place” is a mental picture of a round, earthen, yurt-like hut. This is an odd way for me to view the term, since I certainly don’t want to make this type of house my “dwelling place”. She later added that her brother had said “a stick shack in the woods. “Associations from some book or movie perhaps.”

But many people focused on comfort and security. Bill Lighter said “When I was 4 my grandmother taught me the 23rd Psalm, my first memory verse. ‘I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.’ When I would say 'dwell', I always thought of a warm, safe place that would always be there for me...accepted even if I was bad. And while I didn't picture other people around me, I never sensed I would be alone there as surely Grandma would be there too.”

As my daughter Christina said “To me a dwelling place means indescribable safety and security that cannot be verbalized yet is overwhelming felt.” And her husband Paul said “A place to be and to rest. A safe place to return to that is consistently peaceful and feels like you belong there.” It seems that for most of us this slightly antique term, “dwelling place” has strong positive connotations. And well it should, for as we’ll see in Psalm 91, there is no better place to be than the dwelling place. It’s a place of trust, a place of protection and a place of promise.

Let's begin with Psalm 91:1-2 *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. ²I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."*

This Psalm is anonymous, but it begins with the psalmist's personal affirmation of protection in God as his dwelling place. In these verses we find four names of God each coupled with four nouns that reveal his provision and four verbs that reveal the psalmist's response. Let's do the names of God first. "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High." Most High is *elyon*, and comes from a root that means to climb or ascend. So God is the one above all things, and no danger or distress we're experiencing can rise above his control. As one commentator said "Most High is a title which cuts every threat down to size" God is also "the Almighty." This is *Shaddai*. The ancient rabbis saw this as a compound composed of "who" and "is enough" He is enough, self-sufficient. The Greek translators of this word chose *pantokrator*, "all powerful" and the Latin translations chose *omnipotens*, or omnipotent. More recent studies of ancient languages say that this may have developed from the idea of "the God who rules from the mountain," so that Most High and Almighty overlap.

The last two mentions of God are with his traditional name and title. "the Lord" is *Yahweh*, the personal name God revealed to Moses, which has the idea of self-existence and self-sufficiency, "I Am that I Am." The final title is "Elohim," simply "God," though here personalized as "My God." The word "Elohim" is a plural word, though it is always used of God in a singular sense. In grammar this is a collective noun: you know it has parts, but you refer to it in the singular, like the word *bouquet* for a collection of flowers or *choir* for a collection of singers. So *Elohim* would be a collection of gods. But the Jewish religion was founded and built on the idea that "the Lord is one." It's God's hand at work that their word for God allows for the presence of multiple persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, in one God.

Four names of God; four metaphors of his provision. First, "he who dwells in the shelter of the Most High." God is a shelter, a word at times translated "hiding place." Both are great mental images. When Gail and I were on vacation back in July, we were at the top of the hill catching some signal to make a phone call, and a sudden thunderstorm came up. So we ran down the hill at top speed – one of my sons-in-law said they'd never seen us run so fast – and straight for the shelter of a canopy we'd set up where everyone was already squeezed in. For those of us who lean toward the introverted end of the spectrum, this image is of special comfort. When I want to run away, there is always a place to go. When I need a hiding place, he is there, even if I'm facing hard things.

But he is not only our shelter, he is the shade over us. When the sun and heat of life blaze on us, he is the shadow of a rock in a weary land. A second image is that when we are distressed we run to our father, or to the most powerful compassionate person we know, and we turn to face the threat when we are thoroughly in that person's shadow. A third Biblical image is the shadow of his wings. Psalm 36:7 "How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings." The Almighty One is also compassionate and loving, like a mother bird with her chicks.

The other two 'dwelling place' words are refuge and fortress. Both of these are also places you run to in distress. The difference between them is that a refuge tends to be a natural place, like the caves David hid in before he was king. A fortress is a manmade place, built up for defense. The Hebrew for fortress is *masad*, which is best known in Masada, the the fortress-palace plateau of King Herod near the Dead Sea. For the believer, especially David, God himself was the stronghold in whom he trusted throughout his trials

So the Most High, the Almighty, the Lord God is a fortress and refuge in which we can find shade and shelter. What does the psalmist do in light of all this? First, he dwells, dwells in the shelter. This word dwell, which we thought about when we began is a common Scriptural word, used over 1000 times. When translated dwell, it is often being used of us dwelling with God. Psalm 27:4 "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple." To the psalmist dwelling with the Lord was the highest good. And to God, dwelling with us is the highest goal. I have been saying for years that God's big idea is "You will be my people and I will be your God and I will dwell with you." The word dwell in that sentence is a different Hebrew word which comes from the idea of living in a tent, like the tabernacle. God promises to set up his tent, to tabernacle among us.

Second, I will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. To abide literally means to lodge, to spend the night in a place of safety. At first glance it appears that spending the night in the shadow of something doesn't make sense. But the same word is used in Genesis 19:8 where Lot proclaims that the two angels have come under the shadow or shelter of his roof. Thus to abide in the shadow of the Almighty is to seek out his place of protection, under his roof. The third verb is "say." "I will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress.'" This may appear an unimportant and mundane verb, and it's certainly a very common verb, used over 4000 times in the New Testament, but it's actually very important because of the way it's directed, "I will say to the Lord."

To say to the Lord is to pray. It's conversation. It's also admission. I need a fortress, I need a refuge, and I know that you, LORD, are the only one I can say this to with any hope of receiving what I need. This is turning from theory to practice, looking up to God, crying out to God as your refuge, your fortress.

The fourth verb is trust. "My God in whom I trust." To trust is to hope, to put your trust in someone. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament has a great article on this verb. "In Hebrew, *bāṭah* expresses that sense of well-being and security which results from having something or someone in whom to place confidence." "The Old Testament contrasts a sense of confidence which comes from reliance upon God with the folly of any other kind of security. All such trust will end in disgrace and shame, whereas those whose hope is in God alone will be delivered from their enemies; their prayers will be answered; they will walk in straight paths; will be given joy and gladness; will know inner peace and absence of fear." "The Psalms . . . also make the point that the cause for hope is not in one's merit with God or in some sort of "tit-for-tat" arrangement, but only because of God's *hesed*, his unswerving loyalty, his gracious kindness." Old Testament scholars sometimes say that this trust is more of a hope than a fully informed faith, but I don't see it. I think this is the equivalent of the New Testament concept of faith or believing.

The first two verses vividly describe what it is like to dwell in the Most High. Verses 3-13 next ideally depict our protection in the dwelling place. Psalm 90:3-13 *For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. ⁴He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. ⁵You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, ⁶nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday. ⁷A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. ⁸You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. ⁹Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place— the Most High, who is my refuge— ¹⁰no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent. ¹¹For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. ¹²On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. ¹³You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.*

Now the psalmist spells out for each of us (the you is singular) some aspects of the truth he has just outlined. This is done in nearly absolute terms, ideal terms, which by the end of the section have us wondering and doubting. Does God really care for us this way?

“He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler,” makes our lives like those of a helpless bird. But God delivers us. The second one, a deadly pestilence, we’re familiar with. The deadliness of COVID has been more and more apparent in the last few months. But God, the psalmist says, delivers us. Verse 4 reinforces the imagery of verses 1 and 2: “He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.” God is the mother bird protecting her young in the shadow of her wings. God’s faithfulness is like armor, protecting us from the attacks of enemies.

Verse 5: You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, ⁶nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.” Day and night, night and day, God is our protection, our place of safety. The psalmist points to the wild animals of the night, enemies who shoot arrows by day, disease that attacks us in our beds, and the ravages of war and says that we need not fear any of these things. In Verse 7 the exaggeration for effect, for that’s what this is, reaches a peak: “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. ⁸You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked.” Like a charmed soldier at whom the enemy cannot even aim an arrow, you’ll be safe in the battle. You only need to watch as your enemies are judged by God.

I say this is exaggeration for effect, because it is. But doesn’t it begin to wear on you? We all know people who’ve had friends and loved ones die of this plague of COVID. It doesn’t appear to be distinguishing between believers and non-believers. No plague that we know of ever has. We all know people who’ve had friends and relatives die on the field of battle. In car crashes. In natural disasters. We know believers whose lives have been ruined by financial disasters, by cancer, by heart disease. We know that a promise like that in verse 10 “no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent” isn’t our experience. So what’s going on here? The psalmist, I believe, is projecting the ultimate goodness of dwelling with God into our daily circumstances. This is not how it is, but this is how it’s going to be. To see a parallel to this, think of Romans 8. The promise there is that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” But that verse comes just a few verses after Paul’s contention that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Suffering is real but it is not the last word. And a few verses later he says that “tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword, which are all real, cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

What this psalmist is trying to say is that dwelling with God both now and in the promised future outweighs all the trial and distress that might come our way. Verse 9, this is “because you have made the Lord your dwelling place.” Now the full phrase, ‘dwelling place’ is used. This is not the same word as in verse 1. This is a home, a habitation, sometimes used of God’s dwelling in heaven. Deuteronomy 26:15 “Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.” It’s also used, as here, of God himself as our dwelling place. Last week’s Psalm, 90, verse 1: “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.” Deuteronomy 33:27 “The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” This week’s theme, God as our dwelling place, is tied back to last week’s theme, God as eternal and everlasting. The psalmist says here “the eternal God who is my refuge.” The same first person voice who spoke so eloquently in verses 1 and 2 of God as his shelter, shade, fortress, and refuge, now affirms all who follow his lead and make the LORD their dwelling place.

I believe part of the idea here is not to read this whole middle section of the Psalm as always literal, though God can do any of these things at any time, but to read it as evidence of how good it is to run to God as our dwelling place in the midst of the suffering of a fallen and broken world. I initially prepared for this message months ago on vacation, sitting in my car. It was raining. And I wrote “Is the car wet – yes, externally. But is the car wet? Not in any substantive or harmful way – it’s dry inside and comfortable.” These are not always promises for external circumstances but are promise for internal and spiritual reality.

Verse 11 “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. ¹²On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.” Do you recognize those verses? They were used by Satan when he tempted Jesus in Luke 4 and Matthew 4: “Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple ⁶and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, “ ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and “ ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’ ” ⁷Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ” Jesus did not condone the use of these verses in a health and wealth or spiritual prosperity way. Though he was in fact later comforted by angels, he would not demand this of the Father. He would not, verse 13, have had his people go out and look for cobras or challenge young lions. He would have his people trust God even in a world that has cobras and young lions – and COVID and hurricanes.

So the point of the first section is that dwelling in the presence of the Most High, the Almighty who is our Lord and God is the best and safest place to be. The point of the second section is that the true blessing of the dwelling place cannot be exaggerated. Not every good thing mentioned is meant for right now, but you can't beat life in God's presence. The point of the final section is that God himself affirms this truth. Verse 14-16 *"Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. ¹⁵When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. ¹⁶With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation."*

The first section was first person "I will say to the LORD." The second section was second person "You" will experience all these things. This third section is God speaking. "I will deliver him." Verse 14 gives God's perspective on our dwelling in his presence. He says that person "holds fast to me in love." We often talk about God's love for us, but we're also commanded to love him, and in this phrase the action that shows our love for him is holding fast to him. As we do, he says he'll deliver us. All these promises we just looked at, all these good things that are going to happen do not change the fact that there will be difficult and even crisis situations in our lives. God will have to rescue us. Hold fast to him and he will. That deliverance might be immediate rescue from the storm. But it might be spiritual and emotional rescue. One of our missionaries, Layo Leiva, answered my question about 'dwelling place' by saying "A 100% secure place for me during the raging storm." He brings us to the dwelling place not out of but in the midst of the raging storm.

"I will protect him," God goes on to say, "because he knows my name." Another great truth. God allows us to know his name, his character, his nature, his very self. To know his name is to trust him. Psalm 9:10 "Those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you." God does not protect us because we are good enough, but for his own name's sake, because having turned to him and clung to him, we have come to know him. Psalm 79:9 "Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name's sake!"

Verse 15: "When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him." Do you see how this all fits together? By God's own promise the door to the dwelling place is voice operated. When he calls to me I will answer him. To call, to cry out, to seek, to hold fast, all of this is our part in entering that place of safety and rest in our spirit. And God's part? "I will be with him in trouble." Notice again: living in the presence of God and with the rescue of God does not guarantee we will not have trouble.

Jesus himself said “In the world you will have trouble. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” You will have trouble. That’s a promise. “I will be with you.” That’s a promised dwelling place. God concludes the psalm by saying “I will rescue him and honor him. ¹⁶With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.” God rescues us, not only from physical and emotional and spiritual danger, but from our sins. He honors us with forgiveness, like the prodigal father honored the prodigal son. He gives “long life,” not only in this life, for some, but for all eternal life in the life to come. And then the last word: I will show him my salvation. That’s literally the word Yeshua, the Jewish name for Jesus. We said last week that the Psalms point to Jesus and to our salvation in Jesus, usually without mentioning him. This Psalm comes pretty close though. God told Joseph, through the angel, to name the baby “Jesus,” because he will save his people from their sins. We’ll remember at the Lord’s table in a moment how he did that, but one of the outcomes is that Jesus himself becomes our dwelling place as he dwells with us.

In the first chapter of John we read that “the Word [Jesus] became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” The word dwelling refers back to the promise of God that he would dwell among us or tabernacle among us. That promise is fulfilled in Jesus. The book of Hebrews tells us that we draw near to God by the blood of Jesus. It’s fulfilled in the Holy Spirit, who dwells with all those who have become God’s children by faith in Jesus. And it will be finally fulfilled when the new heavens and the new earth become one. Revelation 21:3 “Now the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

The final answer to “what is a dwelling place?” is the presence of God. One of my elementary school friends responding to my question said it well: “quiet connection with God in my soul. Settled and secure.” There is no better place to be than the dwelling place of God.