

Series: "Psalms in the Summer"
Part 7: "A Safe and Secure Place"

Anybody remember the TV show *Fear Factor*. That show sort of started the current fad in television programming where people do all kinds of repulsive, scary things to outdo other contestants. *Fear Factor* episodes had people eating worms, allowing swarms of bugs to crawl all over them, or doing daredevil stunts high above the ground. It ran from 2001-2006, then returned briefly in 2011.

While our culture seems to be enamored with people who go out of their way to put themselves in fearful situations, we don't really have to go looking for things in life that are risky or scary, do we? Life can be fragile...and frightening at times...*and we can feel afraid and insecure.*

Which of the Peanuts cartoon characters is known for his security blanket? Linus, right. Do your children or grandchildren have a "security blanket? Something they hold onto to feel secure? A teddy bear, a stuffed animal, a doll, a blanket? Of course, these items can become old and worn out and scruffy, but the child still wants to cling to it. (Maybe you still have yours!). I read of one child who had to have his mother's vacuum cleaner!

I'm not so sure that deep inside we all don't long for some kind of *security blanket* to steady us and make us feel safer when life becomes threatening or frightening!

Some of the psalms deal with this dimension of life. The psalm writers tell how they found God to be a reliable source of security and safety in a very uncertain world.

These psalms are sometimes called "refuge psalms", because they speak of God as a refuge, a hiding place. Psalm 46 is one of these "refuge psalms". The psalm begins: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, through the mountains tremble with its tumult" (Psalm 46:1-3). Notice, God is a refuge and *strength*. The words here mean a "defense" or "fortress". God is a very present help – it could be translated a "well-proved" help – in trouble. The situations described in these verses are not just tiny disturbances – the earth is changed or dissolved; mountains shake as in an earthquake; and the sea roars like a tidal wave. But even then we won't fear, because God is our refuge!

Psalm 91 is another of these psalms of refuge. "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.' For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler" (Psalm 91:1-4). When we live in the shade and shadow of the Almighty, God truly is a refuge, a "fortress" (like a wall around a castle or city). He is our deliverer. The imagery here is of one sheltered under God's wings, as a mother bird protects her little ones by cuddling them under her wings. We won't have to fear the terrors around us: "You will not fear the terror of the night or the arrow that flies by day" (verse 5). *Can you sense the quiet confidence of these psalm writers, who've found God to be their shelter and security from the storms of life?*

Perhaps you may want to interrupt: “C’mon, Harry. Are you peddling a religion that offers soothing sedatives to weaklings and cry babies! ‘C’mon little children with your runny noses and scraped knees and God will dry your little tears!” “This kind of religion’s for nerdy types, dependent personalities, who have no gumption when the going gets rough! Who needs these *psalms for sissies!*”

But aren’t there times when the strongest of us needs a refuge, and a strength greater than our own? When things are going well, it’s easy to think we are self-sufficient, we can get along without God. But sooner or later we come against experiences where we find our own resources are insufficient. Maybe some of us even now are going through something - illness, family problems, or we’ve just come up against something hard to handle. *We are weary, and spent. And we need a safe place where we can be healed and renewed.* The psalmist said, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

Sometimes we can be immobilized by our fears – afraid of what might happen. Now a lot of the things we’re afraid will happen *never materialize*. Yet these unfounded, sometimes irrational, fears can have great power over us. Many people I have seen in therapy are having problems with anxiety – anxiety attacks, panic attacks. Often there is no reason for these fears, but they can hold a person captive anyway. A woman in Arkansas was sitting in her car in a parking lot when she heard a loud bang, then felt a sharp pain in the back of her head. She was holding her hands behind her head when someone walked by and asked, “Are you ok?” The woman answered, “I’ve been shot in the head, and I’m holding my brains in.” Well, it wasn’t her brains. It was dough. A Pillsbury biscuit canister had exploded in the back seat, apparently from the heat, making a loud explosion and shooting the dough into the back of the woman’s head!

But there are real threats and real dangers. *Sometimes physical danger can create fear.* I mentioned recently in a sermon about the “Seminar Abroad” that was required of each student at Lancaster Theological Seminary. It meant spending in some foreign countries as part of an educational experience. That trip was my first flight on a commercial jetliner. On the return home we had a beautiful flight from Frankfurt, Germany. It was clear and calm. In fact it was fall, and we could look down on some of the New England states and see the leaves turning their colors. But as we got close to Kennedy airport in New York we flew through a thunder storm. We could hear thunder and see lighting just off the wing. We began to hit heavy turbulence. We were bouncing around, and everywhere you looked you could see people holding their little bags. (I mean they were throwing up!). And then one of our classmates, one of my friends, had a panic attack. He began to scream, and throw his arms high into the air. This created quite a commotion as the flight crew rushed to his side. Finally, as we approached the runway to land, we saw land – and the first thing we saw was water – Jamaica Bay. Needless to say, when the wheels touched down, I felt like singing the Hallelujah Chorus! It was a chilling experience.

Then there was the time my dad took off in a Piper Cub with me in the back seat. Soon after takeoff there was this puff of smoke that flew from the engine past the cabin. Then the engine quit. We were without power and had to make an emergency landing. My heart was in my

mouth. Fortunately, dad was able to turn the plane around and glide back onto the runway safely. Maybe you don't have any fear of flying, but there can be other things in the physical realm that create a sense of fear and insecurity, like heights or fireworks or mice!

All kinds of fears are attached to doctor's offices and hospitals. How many people just love going to the doctor's office? Who of us has not spent nervous days waiting for an X-ray or biopsy report? Probably all have at least some anxiety over surgery; it's one of those situations where we feel most powerless, when we're at the mercy of a surgeon's knife.

Changes in life can bring a sense of insecurity and uncertainty. One goes off to college, or into the military, or we start a new job, or move to a new location, or a spouse dies.

We may feel unsafe and insecure in our relationships at times. Our husband seems to be losing interest – is he seeing another woman? We're single, getting no dates – will I ever marry? Or a child sees his or her parents fighting a lot – does this mean divorce is just around the corner? I was preaching on fears one time, and afterwards a person on the way out of church told me that studies have shown that the number 1 fear people have is speaking in front of a crowd. One of the miracles of my life is related to this fear. When I was young, I was petrified having to speak in front of people. But by God's grace, this is now the thing I like most about my job as pastor (preaching and teaching).

After 9/11, there was a tremendous collective fear around the threat of terrorist attacks. While that has diminished somewhat, it is more localized now as people are anxious because of all the mass shootings taking place. Some live in fear of being mugged, attacked, or robbed, even in their own home. I recall an elderly lady in a church I served who carried pepper in her pocket-book in case she was attacked by someone. We used to kid her about it. Although we laughed, realizing pepper was hardly a deterrent to getting robbed or beaten, for her this was a real, pervasive fear. Bottom line: *All kinds of things can make us feel defenseless and afraid.*

Psalm 46 says, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). ***How can we find that safe place like the psalmist found in God?*** I think we can learn from the writers of these "refuge psalms".

First, recognize that we all struggle with insecurities, fears, and anxieties. Some of us have trouble admitting that we're afraid, or facing something we can't handle on our own. This is true *especially of men* – men, in our culture, are pre-conditioned, programmed to deny or repress our fears. "Real men are never afraid." Baloney! The psalm writers were not too proud to admit when they were afraid and needed divine help. I love this sentence in Psalm 56: "When I am afraid, I will trust in you" (Psalm 56:3). Notice, the psalmist did not say, "*If* I'm afraid" ...but "*When* I'm afraid". Being anxious at times, being afraid, is part of what it means to be human. There are things that can scare and intimidate us. The psalm writers are willing to admit their fears.

Secondly, the psalm writers are willing to commit their entire selves to God.

Psalm 31 begins: “In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me” (Psalm 31:1-2). The psalm writer wants God as a refuge. But read on: “You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name’s sake lead me and guide me” (verse 3). “Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God” (verse 5). The psalm writer yearns for God to lead him. He has committed his entire self to God!

There are a lot of people who’d gladly have God protect them in times of trouble, but they don’t want any part of God telling them how to run their lives beyond that! If we want God’s protection in the bad times, we’ve got to be willing to surrender our entire selves to God and His will when things are good also! It’s not a matter of wanting God in our life *only* for protection. It’s important to seek His will and guidance in every aspect of our life.

Third, note that the psalm writers teach us to get our eyes on God, rather than people and circumstances. Turn to Psalm 56. We have already looked at verse 3, “When I am afraid, I will trust in you”. But let’s read on further. “In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me...in God I trust; I am not afraid. What can a mere mortal do to me?” (Psalm 56:4, 11). No doubt you have heard this advice before, but it works. Get your eyes off *circumstances*. Don’t focus on *other people*, and what they may or may not do for you. Are we going to trust that *circumstances* will work out? They may, or may not. Are we going to trust in *people*? People may come through, or they may leave us down. Focus on *God* – on God’s power, His unlimited resources! “When I am afraid, I will trust in ***you***”, the psalmist said.

Also, I believe the psalmists found a stability that we often lack because they ***took time to slow down and be with God.*** I have been quoting from Psalm 46:1, God is our refuge. Near the end of that psalm are these words, “Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations. I am exalted in the earth” (Psalm 46:10). It’s difficult for many of us American Christians to take time for prayer and meditation. We are so busy! But it’s hard to find God as a refuge if we rarely take time to pull aside and allow His presence and power to saturate us at a deep, emotional level. A regular quiet time with God can help us gain inward serenity and dissipate our insecurities.

There is another thing I noticed as I looked through some of these “refuge psalms” to try to find out why the psalmists knew so much about God as a secure and safe place. ***They praised God – even in the midst of their fears and troubles.*** This is beautifully expressed in Psalm 57. The psalm begins: “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by.” But then the writer breaks into praise: “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth...I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations. For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness extends to the clouds. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth” (Psalm 57:5, 9-11). Praising God in times of fear or when we’re feeling overwhelmed may be hard to do – but it can create a different atmosphere – a more positive attitude of hope and trust.

There is a safe and secure place for us when we go through rough seas or when we face things that are fearful and threatening. A young boy came running into the house to his dad. “Dad, dad. Mom just backed the car over my bike and it’s all messed up.” The father replied, “Son, I’ve told you a thousand times where to put your bike so it’s safe when your mother has to use the car. I told you to park it in the middle of the driveway, and not on the front lawn.” Well, we can park ourselves in the middle of God’s driveway and be safe!

Maybe you have been thinking throughout this message, “Harry, what if the thing I fear does come true?” Valid question. The truth is, we can be a follower of Jesus, and put our trust in God, but that doesn’t mean we never get hurt, or never have an accident, or never get cancer or a stroke, or never have to die. But here’s the thing: *God does promise that His power will be sufficient for all our needs, if we trust Him. And that nothing **eternally** can harm us or keep us from Him!*

There have been many times in my own life when I’ve been anxious and afraid – for instance, when we had to pay for kid’s college bills, or when we had to move to a new town and start in a new church, or when I faced surgery for prostate cancer. I still remember a time when I was a teenager. I was becoming more active in the church, and was more serious about my commitment to Christ. I hesitantly agreed to serve as an officer in what was then the sub-district youth fellowship – a youth gathering that included youth from other Methodist churches besides my own. We were to have a consecration service for the new officers one Sunday afternoon. My part was to get up in front of the group, read a Scripture verse, and light a candle. That’s all. But I was a shy kid, and a nervous wreck over this. I kept asking the adult advisor, “Now what do I do? Where do I stand. When do I come in?” And I still remember the Scripture verse I had to read that day before I lit the candle. It was Psalm 27:1: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” Did you get that? “The Lord is my light and my salvation, *whom shall I fear?* The Lord is the strength of my life, *of whom shall I be afraid?*”

What a great motto for life!

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