

Menno Mennonite Church

10/17/2021

Blessings Misinterpreted

Emily Toews

There's a legend about the 91st Infantry Brigade of the US Expeditionary Army in World War I. The brigade was fairly green – they were on their way to Europe to enter the war effort with no experience at all. Their commander, a devout Christian, called an assembly of his men where he gave each a little card on which was printed the 91st Psalm. They agreed to recite the Soldiers' Psalm daily. The 91st Brigade was engaged in three battles of WW I: Chateau Thierry, Belle Wood, and the Argonne. While other American units similarly engaged had up to 90% casualties, the 91st Brigade did not suffer a single combat related casualty!

Because of this story, Psalm 91 is frequently described as the “soldier’s psalm” and as the “Ultimate Shield.” You can find Psalm 91 devotional booklets distributed to soldiers to help keep them safe.

It may very well not be a true story – I’ve read conflicting reports... Yet... the story gives such comfort. Stories have a way of comforting people. We all love stories. And even when the story isn’t completely historically accurate, we still can glean truth from them. And part of the joy of hearing and reading stories is the engagement with the characters... their stories become part of our stories – and we want the goodness that the character’s experience.

People want a faith that produces demonstrable results. We want a faith that will keep us safe. We want our faith to keep our children safe. We want everything neat and tidy and most of all, we want the easy simple answers that are found in our happily ending stories. We want no complexity or ambiguity in our faith. We want yes and no, black and white. Psalm 91 certainly seems to offer a biblical guarantee that those who take shelter in God will always be protected from every kind of terror and trouble.

Pause

We find a similar attitude in Job’s friends when they come and talk with Job about his life, his grief, and the downward trend of luck he’s been having. To review: Job had been a good man, a righteous man, yet because of a wager between God and Satan he lost all that he had – he lost his fields and flocks, his houses and his children. His goodness and his faith were no shield against disaster.

Job’s friends came to comfort him in his grief, and they urged him to repent of whatever sin had caused these calamities in his life. They reasoned, like so many of us do, that if Job were a good and honest man, he would receive blessing and protection and wealth and everything good. If Job’s faith was strong, he’d be in God’s good graces again. That he lost everything was evidence of his wickedness.

We heard the blessings that would be heaped on Job if only he would repent...but I'll review. Job would receive healing, deliverance from enemies, food in times of famine, protection from the sword, gossip, destruction and from wild beasts, a safe home and many secure possessions, many children and descendants, plenty of grain and death at an old age.

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Job's friends were quite confident of this; there could be no other explanation. "Look, we have investigated this, so it is true. Hear it and apply it for your own good." (Job 5: 19 – 27)

Psalm 91, like the arguments of Job's friends, can easily be taken out of context and applied to a lifestyle of prosperity. Those who have all blessings – are faithful, and those who have nothing have done something to offend God. But this is not, really, how God works. Here's the deal. Life is hard and God knows it. Faithful people will have a hard life. Part of being faithful to God means that we **MUST** resist the temptation to simplify God's promises to read what we want them to.

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he was lead into the wilderness, into the lonely desert where he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil came and tempted him to use his divine power to turn some stones laying nearby into loafs of bread, but Jesus refused.

The devil then led Jesus up to a very high place and showed him, in an instant, all the kingdoms of the world and promised to give all authority to him if he would just worship the devil. But, again, Jesus refused.

In the latest Anabaptist World Magazine, Bradley Roth (former Warden pastor) said the devil, when tempting Jesus in the wilderness quoted scripture – in fact, the devil quoted Psalm 91:11-12 when he tried to convince Jesus, in the third temptation, to jump from the highest pinnacle of the temple roof. "After all," the devil said, "he will command his angels concerning you..."

We **WANT** this simple faith – this simple interpretation of God's promises where the good are protected and the wicked are punished. The good live long and healthy lives, gain wealth and die happy. The wicked get their just desserts, reaping all that they have sown.

The Devil quoted Psalm 91 to Jesus, encouraging him to take advantage of God's unconditional, unqualified promise of protection. But Jesus refused this interpretation, both in this account of the temptations – and throughout his ministry. Jesus refused that kind of simplistic interpretation of Psalm 91 that says that God will protect us from any danger.

Jesus' life – or the fact that he died - certainly wouldn't point us to this unconditional divine protection. Jesus suffered the pain and the humiliation of the most excruciating of deaths. Shouldn't he, if anyone, have had God's divine protection? The religious leaders pondered these questions too. In Matthew's account of Jesus' crucifixion the religious leaders were mocking him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'"

What if we look at the lives of Jesus' followers, his disciples? Those who were faithful to the message of the good news of God's love, were devoted followers, were upright and righteous – yet they all endured much suffering before many died a martyr's death. Did these not make their

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shelter in the Most High, or dwell in the shadow of the Almighty? These faithful did not seem receive this unconditional promise of divine protection.

And what about our Anabaptist Mennonite foremothers and fathers who refused to participate in state-religious affairs, and who challenged the religious hierarchy as being counter to Jesus' teachings on the Kingdom of God. They were not spared – in fact; we have a whole book in our library dedicated to telling their stories of martyrdom.

So... what does this mean for us? What can Psalm 91 mean for us today? Do all those beautiful words of protection amount to anything?

This week I once again delved into family history. Many of you can trace your ancestors back three four even five generations to the first generation Menno congregation – some even back to Kansas. Bryce can trace his family all the way back to Mennonite settlers in the colonial period.

I can trace my family all the way back to Prussia – to a Gerhard Toews in the town of Vogelsang who moved to Ukraine with his family to farm a plot of land in the Mennonite colony of Molochna – near Crimea. Here the family prospered – they had many babies and the land was rich. Like Job, they were truly blessed.

Story of my family:

And perhaps the whole point of Psalm 91 isn't that the faithful will be protected from all harm. Rather, the whole point can be found in verse 15: ¹⁵ When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.

For Job and for Jesus' followers, and for us today. This is the point. We will, indeed, face trouble and suffering, but we will not be alone. We will never ever face this alone.

Thanks be to God for this glorious gift.