

Palms and White Robes

Today, we celebrate Palm Sunday. It is the day that Jesus entered the City of Jerusalem while the people chanted, ***“Hosanna! Hosanna!”***¹, and waved palm branches to praise and honor the Messiah whom they finally recognized as having come. And how did Jesus come in—riding a great white stallion of a King? No—Jesus rode in on a donkey. This had been predicted by the prophets long before this. The prophet Zechariah saw a vision of this great day when he said: ***“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*** Zechariah 9:9 (NASB) But, that is not the end of the prophesy. There is another one, yet unfulfilled, involving the waving of palms that is so very important in the lives of Christians. We’ll come to that later.

But, as Jesus entered Jerusalem on that donkey and heard all the cheering from the crowds, He knew that looks can be deceiving. What appeared to be a wholly supportive crowd would, in a matter of days, be yelling something quite different. And Jesus knew this, for He wasn’t deceived at all. He knew that soon they would be screaming, ***“Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”***² And they would cheer on the Roman soldiers who were pressing that crown of thorns upon Jesus’ brow, and they’d spit upon Him and mock Him as He was led to die on the Cross. And Jesus knew that that is the way Satan operates—for he is very deceiving. Yet, Satan could never deceive Jesus. In fact, in the wilderness, Satan tried to use God’s own Holy Word to deceive Jesus.

There, Jesus had been fasting for forty days and nights and He was extremely hungry and worn out with great fatigue.³ And Satan tried several times to use the Scriptures to deceive Jesus. One of the passages that Satan used was Psalm 91. This is the exchange between Jesus and Satan relating to Psalm 91 as recorded in Matthew’s Gospel: ⁵ ***Then the devil took Him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple,*** ⁶ ***and said, “If You are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say [in Psalm 91:11-12], ‘He will order his angels to protect you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won’t even hurt your foot on a stone.’”*** ⁷ ***Jesus responded, “The Scriptures also say, ‘You must not test the LORD your God [Deuteronomy 6:16].”*** Matthew 4:5-7 (NLT2)

You see, Satan loves to twist God’s Word in a way to deceive and frustrate God’s people. And we need to be careful even today, because Satan would like nothing better than to deceive people by trying to prove the Holy Scriptures as being false to make them doubt God’s truthfulness and

faithfulness toward us. In fact, Satan would love to try once again to use Psalm 91 for that very purpose. So let's take a look at Psalm 91 to make certain that Satan does not practice such deception upon us.

Psalm 91 is a passage of great hope. It is a Psalm that we need to look to today as we struggle with the terrible trials of COVID-19. But in turning to Psalm 91, we don't want to allow Satan to deceive us as to its true meaning. First, let's read this entire psalm, then consider what it actually means—because what it means provides us with one of the most important assurances that a Christian can have.

Psalm 91 offers the following promises:

¹ Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
² This I declare about the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; He is my God, and I trust Him. ³ For He will rescue you from every trap and protect you from deadly disease. ⁴ He will cover you with His feathers. He will shelter you with His wings. His faithful promises are your armor and protection. ⁵ Do not be afraid of the terrors of the night, nor the arrow that flies in the day. ⁶ Do not dread the disease that stalks in darkness, nor the disaster that strikes at midday. ⁷ Though a thousand fall at your side, though ten thousand are dying around you, these evils will not touch you. ⁸ Just open your eyes, and see how the wicked are punished. ⁹ If you make the LORD your refuge, if you make the Most High your shelter, ¹⁰ no evil will conquer you; no plague will come near your home. ¹¹ For He will order His angels to protect you wherever you go. ¹² They will hold you up with their hands so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone. ¹³ You will trample upon lions and cobras; you will crush fierce lions and serpents under your feet! ¹⁴ The LORD says, "I will rescue those who love Me. I will protect those who trust in My name. ¹⁵ When they call on Me, I will answer; I will be with them in trouble. I will rescue and honor them. ¹⁶ I will reward them with a long life and give them My salvation." Psalm 91:1-16 (NLT2)

How!—what words of great comfort in trying times such as these! But, what do they mean for us as Christians? Does Psalm 91 mean that we are safe from the ravages of this dreaded coronavirus? Does it mean that if you are truly right with the Lord that this virus cannot touch you—cannot kill you? After all, in verse 3, Psalm 91 says that God will ***“protect you from deadly disease,”*** verse 6 says ***“do not dread the disease that stalks in darkness,”*** and verse 10 assures you that ***“no plague will come near your home.”*** But, the reality is this—it was reported just a few days ago that even faithful pastors have succumbed to this virus. Rev. Ronnie Hampton, a pastor from Shreveport, Louisiana, recently contracted COVID-19 and his symptoms became so serious that he had to be admitted to the hospital. From his hospital room, he sent out a video on social media stating that those in Christ shouldn't fear the virus. Not long before sending out the video, someone had told him that this pandemic is a sign of the last days before the end of time. But, Pastor Hampton responded, ***“My theory is that we've been living in the last days ever since Jesus died on the Cross and ascended in to Heaven. What I'm saying is basically, keep your spiritual lives in order. Be truthful in your relationship with Jesus. Jesus is not meant for us to be in bondage. He is meant for us to be free and He said that [those] who the Son set***

free [are] free indeed."⁴ He went on to say: "***Don't let no coronavirus steal your praise. Don't let no coronavirus steal your worship. Don't let coronavirus steal your spirit.***"⁵ And then shortly thereafter, he died.

And there have been other pastors who have been victims to this virus as well. The Rev. Isaac Graham was the pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church in New York City. The 66 year old died only six days after he tested positive with COVID-19. Closer to home in Gretna, Virginia, Pastor Landon Spradlin, who was also 66, died from the virus. Landon was an accomplished musician and was actually inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 2016. In his younger days, back in the 1990's, he was bold for Christ. In fact, he pastored a church that was located between two strip clubs in New Orleans, not to mention another one for bikers in Texas. Where did that biker congregation meet?—Well, Landon met them where he found them, and so many of those church services were conducted in a local bar. And for that reason, Landon's daughter rightly referred to her father as "***a modern-day Apostle Paul.***"⁶ Even so, he is now dead.

And so, what do we make of this—Pastors dying because of this plague? How can this be in light of Psalm 91? These were pastors who certainly preached the Word of God, who knew and believed the promises of Psalm 91—those promises that included God's pledge that: "***If you make the LORD your refuge, if you make the Most High your shelter, no evil will conquer you; no plague will come near your home.***" (Verse 9-10) Unbelievers would scoff at this verse in light of the deaths of those pastors, each of whom were clearly men of God. And yet if unbelievers mock God in that way, and we look intently behind them, we can see someone else. We can see someone lurking there in the shadows. And when we look closer, we will realize that it is that same evil being who was there with Jesus in the wilderness—that same Satan who urged those former palm-wavers on that first Palm Sunday to shout, "***Crucify Him!***" and then they nailed Jesus to the Cross. It is like I said earlier—Satan loves to twist God's Word—to make people doubt God's goodness and His faithfulness by twisting the meaning of God's messages to us.

So what is that message that God is trying to give to us in Psalm 91? Well, let's start with what it is not telling us. Psalm 91 is not telling us to toss caution to the wind. It is not encouraging careless behavior simply because we believe in Jesus Christ.⁷ Rather, we need to be able to learn from Jesus and do as He did—i.e., we need to use Scripture against Satan, rather than allowing Satan to manipulate Scripture to play upon people's fears and doubts. And so we need to understand that by believing in Jesus Christ, we are not assured of physical immunity from the dreaded coronavirus. No—any one of us could get that virus and die just as those three faithful pastors did. Psalm 91, though, does offer

something infinitely better than the mere assurance of ***physical*** protection against death, and it does it on two levels.

The first level deals with the Church as the collective Body of Christ. You see, when Psalm 91 was first written, it was directed to another larger group—it was written to provide comfort and hope to the people of Israel who were so often pressed on every side with threats of extinction. For example, throughout the history of Israel, God’s people were constantly faced with perilous threats from enemy nations that made war against them, or from famines, droughts, pestilence or other natural disasters that seemed ready to wipe them out. But, in Psalm 91, and again and again throughout the Bible, God promised those who would keep the faith as the People of God, He would protect them and never allow the remnant to fall. So here in Psalm 91, we have God’s promise to all the faithful as a collective group that He would always protect them even though the world around them seemed to be falling apart.

And the second thing that Psalm 91 teaches is perhaps the most important because its message isn’t merely about our ***physical*** lives here on earth. Rather, it is about something much more permanent. And that something is God’s promise of eternal life on an individual basis for those who trust in Him. Yes, God can, and does, rescue us from illnesses and diseases—there is no question about that. He provides those miracles every day. But, other times God calls His own people home, and sometimes that call comes about even through the instruments of diseases and plagues. Death comes to all of us—there are no exceptions—and the forms that death takes are many. But, the Apostle Paul puts this into perspective in a ***spiritual*** sense when he writes: ¹⁶ ***“For this reason we never become discouraged. Even though our physical being is gradually decaying, yet our spiritual being is renewed day after day.”*** 2 Corinthians 4:16 (TEV) Paul is not just being optimistic here. When he says ***“for this reason”*** we’re not discouraged, he means exactly that—there is a ***reason***, and the ***reason*** is this: ¹⁴ ***“We know that the same God who brought the Lord Jesus back from death will also bring us back to life again with Jesus and present us to Him along with you.”*** 2 Corinthians 4:14 (TLB)

And it is this same Jesus who told us to look out for times like these. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus warns: ⁹ ***“And when you hear of wars and insurrections beginning, don’t panic. True, wars must come, but the end won’t follow immediately—¹⁰ for nation shall rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom,¹¹ and there will be great earthquakes, and famines in many lands, and epidemics, and terrifying things happening in the heavens.”*** Luke 21:9-11 (TLB) And, He follows that up by saying that there will be great persecution of Christians just before the end of time. But, He told his disciples then, as He tells you now, ¹⁸ ***“But not a hair of your head will perish!¹⁹ By standing firm, you will win your souls.”*** Luke 21:18-19 (NLT2) Do you hear what Jesus is saying? He is telling us that for those who remain

faithful to Him, they may **physically** die (in fact, they someday will), but they will inherit an **eternal heavenly body** that won't even evidence a single hair on their head being damaged. Those three pastors whose physical bodies fell to COVID-19, they are now secure in God's eternal kingdom—fully alive forevermore!

Don't let Satan twist your understanding of Psalm 91, or any other Scripture, in a way that you cannot see the awesome truth of God. And in this regard, how true are the words of the Christian author, Lianna Davis, who tells us, "***Even if my body is touched by COVID-19, it cannot be harmed. In the paradox—[there, is] hope. For, the age to come is not ever to be viewed by the believer as a distant and abstract reality. . . The promises of God—of life to come and of His divine purposes in this life***"—[they are the promises of Psalm 91—the ones of "shade" and "shelter" that offer us true hope.] "***When fears of the coronavirus and its impacts surround us, how much fiercer is the security of an infinite God!***"⁸

So what does this have to do with Palm Sunday? Well, everything actually—and that takes us to that prophesy that I mentioned at the outset of this sermon, but waited until now to reveal to you. It is that prophesy that has not yet come to pass, but it surely will. It is a prophesy that also points to the **waving of another set of palms branches, held by some very different sets of hands**—only when this future prophesy comes to fruition, those palms will be waved in true praise of the Holy Son of God in all His glory! It is a prophecy that the palmist longed for when he wrote Psalm 91, and it speaks of a future time that Jesus died on the Cross to bring about. And, appropriately enough, the prophecy is found in the Book of Revelation. It is the prophecy of the Apostle John which came to him in a vision of the following heavenly scene—John describes it this way:

⁹ After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and [WHAT WERE THEY DOING?—THEY] were **holding palm branches in their hands**.¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,¹² saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?"¹⁴ I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."¹⁵ Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tent over them."¹⁶ Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.¹⁷ For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Revelation 7:9-17 (NIV)

And then, there will be no more crying, no more fear, no more COVID-19 or any other plagues that may someday descend upon humanity, because in that Heavenly Kingdom of God there will be no more death. That is the promise Jesus Christ gives to you today. It is a promise bound together by the nails that were driven through His hands and feet, and by the spear that pierced His side. It is bound together by His spilt blood that secures eternal life for all of those who, in the words of the psalmist in Psalm 91, believe in Him and trust that **“He will rescue you from every trap and protect you from deadly disease.”** Psalm 91:3 (NLT2) It is a promise that remains true, even in these trying times.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
April 5, 2020
Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor
©2020 All Rights Reserved

¹ John 12:12-15 On the next day the large crowd who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, ¹³ took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet Him, and began to shout, “Hosanna! BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD, even the King of Israel.” ¹⁴ Jesus, finding a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written, ¹⁵ “FEAR NOT, DAUGHTER OF ZION; BEHOLD, YOUR KING IS COMING, SEATED ON A DONKEY’S COLT.” (NASB)

² John 19:13-15 ¹³ Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, “Behold, your King!” ¹⁵ So they cried out, “Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” (NASB)

³ Matthew 4:1-2 ¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. (NASB)

⁴ John 8:36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. (NASB)

⁵ Leonardo Blair, “3 pastors killed by coronavirus; one thought God allowed infection so he could ‘get a little rest’,” Christian Post, www.christianpost.com (March 27, 2020).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lianna Davis, “How Psalm 91 Speaks to Your Coronavirus Fears,” www.biblestudytools.com (March 24, 2020).

⁸ Ibid. Lianna Davis, “How Psalm 91 Speaks to Your Coronavirus Fears,” www.biblestudytools.com (March 24, 2020).