

Abide Under the Shadow of the Almighty (Psalm 91)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of abiding in a close relationship with God to navigate life's trials and temptations successfully.

Scripture: Psalm 91:1

Topics: "Abiding in Christ", "Trusting God in Trials"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of abiding under the shadow of the Almighty as depicted in Psalm 91, illustrating how this principle was central to the life of Jesus. He explains that true communion with God is not merely about isolated moments of prayer but maintaining a continuous relationship with the Father amidst life's challenges. The sermon highlights that trials and temptations are part of the believer's journey, yet it is through this abiding relationship that one finds strength and deliverance. Sparks also addresses misconceptions about spiritual life, asserting that true victory comes from a deep love for God rather than the pursuit of visible blessings. Ultimately, he encourages believers to remain steadfast in their love for God, trusting in His promises of vindication and salvation.

Transcript

"He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty" (Psalm 91:1).

It is most instructive and inspiring to read the Psalms, when we remember that they would have formed the main spiritual food for the Lord Jesus, when, as a Man, He walked this earth. So many of them light up with meaning and help if we think of them in that way. In most cases, it is perhaps a matter of guesswork or imagination, but with this Psalm there is a difference. We have excellent reason for believing, not only that it was well and thoroughly absorbed by our Lord in His spiritual reading, but that it must have represented a most important message from God to His heart. Remarkably enough, it is the Devil who helps us in making that discovery, for it was from this Psalm that Satan quoted in one of those great temptations with which he assailed the Lord Jesus. He made it plain that he knew that this was the Word on which the Lord was relying; and he revealed, moreover, the true nature of the Psalm, because it was he who said to the Lord Jesus: 'If Thou be the Son of God... that Psalm applies to You.' Now, no mention is made here of sonship; but I think you will agree that the whole atmosphere of the Psalm speaks of the

relationship between the Father in Heaven, the Most High, spreading out His wings, and the Son, in closest, intimate communion with Him.

The Spirit's Instruction to the Lord Jesus

You will notice that here, unlike what we find in many of the Psalms, there is practically nothing of the Psalmist's personal testimony. Verse 2 reads: "I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress; my God in Whom I trust." But, apart from that, it is not the Psalmist speaking about God or to God; it is a third person speaking to Him as to His relationship with Heaven.

I said 'a third person', but before we get to the end of the Psalm, the Father Himself takes this matter up, and says, 'I will do it'; Thou hast set Thy love upon Me' (v.14), For the rest, I think it is not unreasonable to say that this third Person is the Holy Spirit, encouraging, instructing and exhorting the Son of God, Who has now come to live as a Son of Man. In a world like this, how can a man live and triumph and please God? This Psalm, as our Lord Jesus fed upon it, would be Heaven's instruction, Heaven's setting down of principles, of a basis - a rule of life for the Son of God. If we look at it in that way, it becomes obvious, not only from the first verse, but from the whole of the remainder of the Psalm, that the supremely important factor is that of a close abiding fellowship in the secret place. 'Mark this', says the Divine Wisdom, 'watch for this; herein lies the secret: this will be the focus of all Satanic attack, this abiding in the secret place of the Most High; dwelling under the shadow of the Almighty.'

If now we take our Gospels and read them with this in mind, we find set forth the story of a life proving that success, safety, fruitfulness, and ultimate glory have but one, all-important, secret - that of keeping close to the Father in Heaven, giving absolute priority to this matter of communion in the secret place. Equally, as we read through the Gospel narrative, we shall be impressed by the fact that from a thousand different angles, by a multitude of cunning devices, everything was directed upon this one issue: to get the Son out of relationship with the Father. Thank God it never succeeded! How well our Lord had taken to heart this lesson that it is he who dwells in the secret place who is the true son.

Correction of Our Misconceptions

(1) As to the Nature of 'Abiding'

Now we must use the life of the Lord Jesus always to check up our imaginary, and often distorted, pictures of spiritual things: for we may well begin to think in terms of a life in which prayer is given the supreme place, and other activities of life are made to stand aside, or are neglected. 'I must dwell in the secret place of the Most High'; prayer must be given first place and used instead of activity. You will find no substance in the life of the Lord Jesus to warrant such a reading of this Psalm. Or again, we may say: 'well, of course, we have other things to do, but prayer must be the first thing, and by a long time of prayer we may be assured that the rest of the day will be all right. Prayer, not instead of action, but prayer before action.' Well, of course, far be it from me to counter that! But I would suggest to you that, the more you read the life of the Lord Jesus, impressive though it may be with the reminder of the need for prayer, the more you will realize that it was not only in the prayer chamber, but at every turn in the midst of a busy and active life and ministry, that He dwelt in the secret place of the Most High. Not - an hour alone with the Father, and then the rest of the day out with the world, counting on some magical value of that hour to see Him through the day. Oh, no. Time with the Father alone was but the concentration and special feature of a life in which, all the time, He made it the first thing to keep close to God, to maintain unhindered communion with the Father.

It is the spirit, rather than the activity, of prayer - the spirit of abiding; and it is not without reason and significance that twice over in these early verses we are directed to the thought of being 'under': "under the shadow" (v. 1); "under His wings" (v. 4). And all the work of Satan was to try to get the Son out from that 'under' position, away from that true submissiveness to the Father; if he could do that, then all the rest of his work would succeed. He never did succeed. But we are impressed with this command from Heaven, these directions, these instructions, given to every son of God. This is the way of blessing; this is the way of fruitfulness; this is the way of deliverance; this is the way of victory: to keep that submissive spirit of gentle and yet strong committal to the Father's will.

(2) As to the Incidence of Trial and Affliction

Now, I have said that the life of the Lord Jesus will correct our misconceptions of spiritual things: and that is certainly true with relation to all the troubles and trials which are described in this Psalm. For it is a part of our foolishness that we vainly imagine that the closer a man is to the Lord, the more jealously he guards his place of communion with the Lord, the easier, the smoother, the freer from difficulties and trials will his life be. We are completely mistaken; that is quite a misconception. And so the Psalm will now stress the adversities that beset the path of the man who begins where Psalm 91 begins, "in the secret place of the Most High".

Now it has to be like that; there is a very good reason for it. But without discussing the reason, let us look at the facts. Look down the chapter. What a list is given to us here: "the snare of the fowler... the noisome pestilence... the terror by night... the arrow that flieth by day... the pestilence that walketh in darkness... the destruction that wasteth at noonday..." On and on the story goes. You say, Who is this? And the answer comes back: This is the Son of God. What a long and varied list of every kind of assault upon this Man. We go back to the Gospels, and we have to confess that this is true. Men did not say, 'This is the Son of God', because they saw some majestic person sweeping on easily through life, with no difficulties and no enemies. They found a man in the fires of affliction; they found a man beset - these are figurative descriptions of troubles, but they are very vivid ones if you look at them - by night and by day, with lions in their fierceness and serpents in their subtlety. But the amazing thing about the Psalm is that it is a picture of a man who walks through it all unmoved, unaffected delivered, maintained. And what is the secret? The secret is not because he has ability to deal with these troubles, but because the Lord has said: "I will be with him in trouble". 'He is with Me; I will be with Him.' What a story of triumph, deliverance, and victory - the story of our Saviour's life!

I have said that these afflictions have to be. For still the question is raised, as it was in Job's time, in the counsels of Heaven, as to whether a man will rejoice in God, and enjoy His love, when he has nothing outwardly at all to prove it. Still Satan goes on saying, as he did in those days, 'Of course those people sing; of course they are radiant; of course they are happy: look what You have done for them - miracles, deliverances, blessings, healing, provision, answers to prayer - who would not sing?!' And God has to say, for His own reputation's sake: If I take every one of those things away, and leave that person without a single blessing, visible to himself or to others, I believe he will still say, 'I love the Lord'; because (you notice the expression) he has set his love upon Me - he has set his love upon Me. Hell is answered, and Heaven is vindicated, when God is able to say, I have a son who loves Me, not for what I give him, but just because he loves Me, and I love him. And, in the Person of the Lord Jesus, we know the Satanic lie was answered, and the Divine truth was seen that it is possible, between Heaven and earth, God and man, to have a perfect love relationship. But it needs all the arrows and terrors and trials and testings - it needs them all, to bring out that great truth. So, there is a reason and an explanation.

Satan's Misuse of the Psalm

Now we come to the subtle use by Satan of this very Psalm. He came to the Lord Jesus, as we know, quoting the Word of God; and this was the fact implicit in that quotation - and it is a fact, and it is stated here. It is that Heaven will care for its own sons; that God has undertaken, through all the pestilences and trials and troubles, and everything else that may be sent - He has undertaken to see that no harm comes to them. He will send His angels: 'He will give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee'. It is quite true. The fact was true. But the suggestion that Satan brought along with that fact was this: All right, then: use this truth for Your own ends; use this truth to impress men, to prove to them that You are the Son of God. And since, even with us, crude as we are, Satan usually wraps up his temptations, and makes them look a bit spiritual, how much more with the infinitely sensitive Son of God. He must have argued something with diabolical ingenuity, something that looked right; it must have looked right, or it would have been no temptation.

I suppose the argument went like this: You owe it to Yourself, as a servant of God; You owe it to the people, among whom You are to work and minister - You owe it to prove to them, to demonstrate, to show that there is something exceptional about Your life. If You just walk into the Temple courts, as a humble Galilean, what hope have You that they will listen to You? and how can You expect them to believe that God has sent you? No, Your entry must be a dramatic one; Your appearance must have something of the sensational about it. Arrive in their midst with all the outward signs that appeal to carnal man, of something supernatural and wonderful, and they will say, 'You are the Son of God!' And quite likely they would have done. But the snare, the snare of it all, was that the Lord Jesus could not do that without moving out from under the cover of the Father's wings. It would have meant taking things into His own hands - with the best of motive and intention, maybe; nevertheless, while He did not give Satan the reasons for what He did (it is no use arguing with the Devil), He just gave him a sword-thrust with the Word of God. I think if we turn back to the origin from which this quotation came, and read anew the Psalm, we will say, This is where the Lord Jesus found His deliverance. And it is where we will always find ours, if at every point we make the first thing not verse 11, but verse 1. It is not one of the outcomes - it is the basic principle. The basic principle is: You must abide under the shadow of the Almighty. There is a phrase, that we often hear used, about being 'under covering': there is a great deal of spiritual truth in that phrase, and our Lord Jesus is the supreme example of a Man Who always kept under the cover - the 'shadow', as it is called, or the 'wings' - of His Heavenly Father. Thank God that for us also there is deliverance from every temptation, however subtle, as well as from every trial, however bitter; and the deliverance comes by heeding Heaven's reminder: It is he that dwells in the secret place of the Most High who can prove Divine deliverances and Divine vindications.

Correction of Misconceptions

(3) As to Ultimate Vindication

You will notice that this Psalm ends on the note of vindication: 'I will show him', God says, 'I will show him My salvation.' Now that appeals to me, because I want to see, and we all want to see, don't we? We are perhaps wrong in our desires, in some ways; but fundamentally we may expect -and I think it is right that we should expect - that ultimately God will make manifest that we have taken the right course - that this has been right. 'I will show him My salvation'. But, in our desire to see, we want it much too quickly, and we want it our own way. So, once again, we must come back to the Lord Jesus, to have our thoughts checked and measured up against reality and truth as seen in Him.

We see, of course, that God did vindicate Him. All these assertions were fulfilled in His case. 'I will set Him on high... I will be with Him; I will deliver Him; I will honour Him. With long life will I satisfy Him, and show Him My salvation.' That is true. The Father turns to the Son today, and points perhaps to a gathering of His people, and says, Look! I am showing You what has come from Your walk with Me. It was fruitful; it has proved right. Why was all this done? Why is the Lord Jesus so highly exalted, vindicated, justified, satisfied? Well, we do not have to guess, because it is written here: 'Because He has set His love upon Me.' 'Because He has set His love upon Me' - 'Because He hath set His love upon Me' - not upon the vindication, but 'upon Me!' - all this has been made possible. But if you remember, in the case of the Lord Jesus, for quite a time it did not look like it; none of these things was manifest. As a Man here on earth, He did not see a single thing of those mentioned here. He had to wait; He had to keep on setting His love, right through to Calvary, and wait. On the other side of Calvary, in resurrection and ascension, He has been vindicated and justified.

The Lord says to us: 'You have got to abide in the secret place; that is your business. There are troubles all around you: you cannot deal with them, but you keep close to Me, and I will deal with them. There are subtle temptations of Satan, which will catch you, however zealous you are, and desirous of serving Me, but you keep close to Me, and I will deliver you from all the temptations.' And He says to us: 'Are you disappointed? Are you wishing you could see? Are you pained and troubled because you do not see? You must be patient; you must set your love upon Me; you must not be governed, guided, moved from your pathway by what is seen - whether good or apparently evil; you must abide under the shadow of the Almighty.'

In eternity, supremely, God will fulfil this to those who have followed Christ all the way; in time, also, in some very real measure, God does honour these promises and answer them. But they are always, as it were, some resurrection that emerges out of a crucifixion, some Divine reward for sustained faithfulness to Himself. Remember, when the Lord Jesus began to talk to His disciples, one of the matters which He so greatly stressed, which seems to me to emerge immediately from what I have been saying, was: 'Your Father who seeth in secret shall reward you openly!' (Matt. 6:4,6,18). How many times did He say that in the Sermon on the mount? He entered His ministry, He entered His public life, with this conviction: My supreme and only task is to keep close to the Father in secret, and He will reward; in due time He will reward Me openly.

Let us seek grace, then, to abide in the secret place with Him.

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