

Romans 8:31-39

Psalm 91

August 3, 2014

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**A Summer in the Psalms:
IN GOD WE TRUST**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On November 13, 1861, Rev. M.R. Watkinson of Ridleyville, Pennsylvania wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase. In his letter, Rev. Watkinson urged the Secretary to take action to recognize God on United States coins.

One week later, in a letter dated November 20, Secretary Chase directed James Pollock, the director of the Mint at Philadelphia, to prepare a motto to be printed on the coins. However, an 1837 Act of Congress had already prescribed which mottoes should be used on U.S. coins. So, Congress had to act again to make any changes. On April 22, 1864, Congress approved new legislation that changed the motto on the coins to IN GOD WE TRUST, and it first appeared in 1864 on the two-cent coin.

A little less than a year later, another Act of Congress allowed the motto to be placed on all gold and silver coins. The 1873 Coinage Act of Congress caused the motto to be inscribed on all U.S. coins.

In 1957, IN GOD WE TRUST appeared for the first time on paper money when it was printed on one-dollar silver certificates. Later that year, on October 1, the motto appeared on U.S. paper currency.¹

On Wednesday, May 28 of this year, the U.S. Appeals Court for the Second Circuit in New York, New York ruled that the use of the motto “In God We Trust” “does not violate the Establishment Clause or the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment.” The court’s ruling is encouraging to people of faith who try to put our trust in God. However, the court’s opinion included this interesting rationale: “The inclusion of the ‘In God We Trust’ motto on U.S. currency does **‘not have a religious purpose** or advance religion, nor does [it] place a substantial burden on appellants’ religious practices.”²

But what if “In God We Trust” **does** have a religious purpose? Better yet, what if “In God We Trust” serves a greater purpose in your life and mine that just as our nation’s motto or some words printed on our money? What does it mean for us to live as people who say “In God We Trust”?

During the first half of the summer of 1979, before I left for Greek school in Richmond, I worked as a counselor at Atlanta Presbytery’s Camp Calvin. My co-counselor, Margaret, and I worked with the Senior High Challenge Camp, a three-week experience of wilderness camping, backpacking, and canoeing. We had four high

school students in our group. During Week One we built our own campsite out in the Mowchuck area of Camp Calvin. We lived, worked, cooked, worshiped, and played together out in the woods. During Week Three we took some canoe trips and dismantled the campsite we had built. Week Two is the one I remember best.

We hiked the entire Georgia section of the Appalachian Trail, 79 miles in a little less than seven days. We began at Springer Mountain which, depending on your point of view, is either the beginning or the end of the AT. Margaret and I had carefully plotted out our daily hikes. We knew how far we had to walk each day to get to the next shelter before nightfall. Of course, it's always hard to factor in all of the things that can slow you down on the trail. For example, there was the time we met three guys straight out of central casting of "Deliverance." They just appeared out of nowhere, out in the middle of nowhere. They didn't have any backpacks or camping equipment, except for a handax, which one of them kept slapping in his hand. When they asked us where we were headed and we told them the name of the shelter, one of them said, "Not today you ain't!" I was sure we were going to die. It turns out they didn't think we could hike that far before dark. Well, we made it to the shelter with plenty of time to spare. Maybe we had some extra motivation on the trail that afternoon!

All along the trail, Margaret and I would encourage our campers to keep walking and not to be discouraged. We held out in front of them the promise of a shelter at the end of the day — a place to rest, a place to relax, a place where we could get some water, a place of relative security. Of course, a shelter along the Appalachian Trail isn't very fancy. It is usually a three-walled wooden lean-to with a roof and a wooden platform to sleep on. But after walking ten or twelve miles with a full backpack, the shelter looked pretty good at the end of the day. And the next day, as we started out on the trail again, we knew that shelter was waiting for us up ahead.

The psalmist writes, "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.'" The promise of God's shelter has encouraged people to keep walking and not to be discouraged. The promise of God's shelter looks pretty good when you're walking through life with a load of burdens on your back.

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, the actor, Jimmy Stewart, enlisted in the Army Air Corps and prepared to be shipped overseas. His father, Alex, was a veteran of the Spanish-American War and knew well the dangers his son would probably face. When it was time for Jimmy to leave home, his father was so overcome with emotion he was unable to put his love and concern into words. So, he wrote his son a note. After he shipped out, Jimmy Stewart opened the note and read these words from his father:

My dear Jimmy boy. Soon after you read this letter, you will be on your way to the worst sort of danger. Jim, I'm banking on the enclosed copy of the 91st Psalm. The thing that takes the place of fear and worry is the promise of these words. I am staking my faith on these words. I feel sure that God will lead you through this mad

experience. I can say no more. I only continue to pray. Goodbye, my dear. God bless you and keep you. I love you more than I can tell you. Dad.

Jimmy Stewart flew in twenty combat missions. He kept his father's note and the copy of Psalm 91, which soon became tattered and worn, throughout his tour of duty. He said that, during the height of battle, he learned to lean on the psalm, especially verses 1 & 2, where God is described as refuge and a fortress. When he returned home from the war, Jimmy Stewart told his father, "What a promise for an airman. I placed in His hands the squadron I would be leading. And, as the psalmist promised, I felt myself borne up."

In 1854, Rev. Charles Haddon Spurgeon was called to be the pastor of a church in London. Shortly after he became pastor, London experienced a major cholera epidemic. So many people were dying, Rev. Spurgeon was conducting funerals on a daily basis. Exhausted from grieving and overwork, discouraged by the extent of the epidemic, he soon became frightened, weakened, and vulnerable to the disease. He said, "I became weary in body and sick at heart. My friends seemed to be falling one by one, and I felt that I was sickening like those around me."

One day, as Rev. Spurgeon was going home after yet another funeral, he walked by a shoemaker's shop. He noticed in the shop window a flyer with these words from Psalm 91: "You will not fear the terror of the night... nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your die, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you."

The sign in the shop window made a difference for the disheartened minister. He wrote, "The effect upon my heart was immediate. I felt secure, refreshed, girt with immortality. I went on with my visitation of the dying in a calm and peaceful spirit; I felt no fear of evil and I suffered no harm. The providence which moved the tradesman to place those verses in his window I gratefully acknowledge, and in the remembrance of its marvelous power, I adore the Lord, my God."³

Rip Psalm 91:9-10 out of context — "Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent" — and God's promise becomes nothing more than a good luck charm or, even worse, a denial of the way life is, even for people of faith.

Jimmy Stewart carried his dad's note and a copy of Psalm 91 with him, but he still had to fly twenty dangerous combat missions. The war didn't miraculously end. The anti-aircraft flak didn't stop threatening his plane. Still, he said, "I felt myself borne up."

Rev. Spurgeon saw a sign with Psalm 91:1-2 printed on it. The cholera epidemic didn't miraculously end. His friends and church members didn't suddenly quit dying from the disease. But he was able to keep on visiting his dying parishioners "in a calm and peaceful spirit."

"Just put your faith in Jesus Christ and nothing bad will ever happen in your life again!" Sometimes you hear that message, either directly or implied. But it's bad

theology and not biblical at all. I have never been able to find in the Bible — Old or New Testament — any place where God promises that, if we have faith in him through Jesus Christ, all of our problems will magically disappear. That's not the gospel. Instead, listen to what Jesus asked of our heavenly Father when he prayed for his disciples (which includes you and me): "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." (John 17:15)

Sickness and suffering and war and terror and sorrow are not evidence of God's absence from our lives or God's weakness in the world. On the contrary, they are evidence of the presence of sin and the brokenness of the world in which we live. To claim God is our shelter from the stormy blast is not to be naive in the face of the nitty-gritty realities of life. It is a statement of faith and of trust that, in spite of "the terror of the night, the arrow that flies by day, the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday," we believe in God's promises of shelter, of protection, and of rescue. Perhaps the most powerful "YES" of God's promise is not God delivering us **from** the storm, but giving us shelter and being with us **through** the storm, whatever form that storm may take in our lives. Psalm 91:15 says, "I will be with them in trouble."

There may be no more soaring, life-giving, and comforting words in the Bible than Romans 8:31-39. They could be called the apostle Paul's commentary on Psalm 91. In the same way, we might say that the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ are God's commentary on and "YES" to Psalm 91 and our lives. "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?"

These words of encouragement do not turn a blind eye to the way life is. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"

"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:31-32, 35, 37-39)

Martin Luther wrote thirty-six hymns. Our opening hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," is his most well-known. The hymn is based on Psalm 46, not Psalm 91. However, the two hymns are almost twins in the way they affirm God's promised shelter and protection. It is said that Luther sang his hymn every day. According to one history of hymns, there are at least seven theories on the time and circumstances in which Luther wrote the hymn. A number of historians have concluded Luther wrote the hymn in October 1527, as the plague was approaching.⁴

Martin Luther's great hymn and his great faith in God did not stop "the flood of mortal ills prevailing." But, in the spirit of Psalm 91 and Paul's words from Romans 8, and as something of a commentary on Psalm 91, Luther's majestic words of hope and encouragement and comfort can hardly be improved upon:

*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill, God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.*

“In God We Trust”

It's more than a motto.

It's more than words printed on our money.

It's a way of life, even and especially when life is so very hard.

Let us pray: Almighty God, we need your protective help. Be to us a refuge and a fortress. Help us to trust that no tribulations we face can separate us from your love. Help us to be more trusting in your loving care than fearful of the dangers of evil. We thank you for your victory in Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “History of ‘In God We Trust,’” at www.treasury.gov.

² Benjamin Fearnow, “US Appeals Court: ‘In God We Trust’ On Currency Not a Violation of First Amendment,” May 29, 2014 at www.washington.cbs.local.com

³Both stories are taken from an online article by Victor Parachin, “God’s 911: In trouble? Remember this emergency number,” at www.christianitytoday.com.

⁴Tim Challies, “Hymn Stories: A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” at www.challies.com.