

Seeking God's Protection

Seeking God's Wisdom in the Bible 6

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Psalm 91

Today's Psalm is a favorite of many because so much of its imagery reminds us of other keys passages of scripture. While we are not sure who wrote it (unlike other Psalms this is not described as a psalm by David), we know by its language and images that it is someone steeped in the Jewish tradition and writings.

The theme of this psalm is trusting God, and not necessarily in easy times. Along the way, the writer talks about deadly pestilence more than once, and danger in the day. But in the middle of it all, images of protection abound – abiding (staying) in the shadow of the Almighty implies a close relationship, and staying under his wings brings to mind the image of Jesus as a mother bird protecting his people in Jerusalem.

On top of that there is the passage in vs 9-12 about angels bearing one up so that one's foot would not dash against a stone – a miracle setting of protection that, taken to an extreme, later becomes a taunt to Jesus by the devil in the wilderness.

Don't we all seek God's protection, and particularly at a time like this, when so much is uncertain and chaotic? Here's where we have to be mindful – that yes, God's presence protects us and encourages, and allows us to make really good decisions for ourselves. But I have to say, friends, there is no protection from living in a world where we are so interconnected.

All of us have parts to play in making a better world, even when we are dealt a really bad hand. None of that should discourage our faith, because in the worst of situations, God is there with us.

Along those lines, let me tell you about a truly remarkable man, a pastor, theologian, and missionary, who, by the way he lived his life, never stopped proclaiming and witnessing God's kingdom here on earth. He was a national Presbyterian leader who passed a few years ago -- Benjamin Weir.

Let me give you a bit of background on Ben. He was a Presbyterian pastor, mission leader, and seminary professor in Beirut, Lebanon. He worked in the mission field in the

Middle East, in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Lebanon for over 30 years, from the 1950s into the 1980s.

In the early 1980s, Benjamin Weir was living in Beirut, Lebanon as a missionary and a Presbyterian Minister. Fluent in Arabic, he and his wife, Carol, had been working for thirty years to bring a message of peace and faith to the people of the Middle East.

Those of who were around in the 1980s remember a time when seven Americans were kidnapped by Islamic Jihad Shiites – one of them was Ben. This was part of a larger skirmish called the Lebanon hostage crisis, which involved many more Westerners. On one fateful day in 1984, Weir's life was turned upside down when he was literally snatched off the street. Weir disappeared for sixteen months. It was a deeply ironic kidnapping, as Ben had worked for peace and respectful treatment of all people in his time in the Middle East. His wife Carol, present at the kidnapping, worked tirelessly for his release.

On the first night of his kidnapping, he was isolated and kept in the dark. He was scared. He wrote later that he prayed to God that Christ would walk with him on this journey, that he would feel the presence of Christ, so that he could endure what was to come. And he did feel that presence the whole time of his captivity.

For most of his captivity, he was held for periods in isolation, was abused, and was, in every way, treated as a prisoner and a hostage. During this time, he kept engaging his captors, as he was fully fluent in Arabic.

He commented later, "I feel very keenly that I had joined those oppressed by the world, people who are locked into circumstances of many different kinds and who don't find a way out and who don't find a voice."

In the last weeks before he was eventually freed, he met the six other Americans who had been kidnapped as well - among them a journalist and a Catholic priest. While all seven were eventually released, Weir was the first among them and his freedom came years before some of the others. In the time following his release, Weir and his wife wrote a book together, entitled *Hostage Bound, Hostage Free*, chronicling those months of isolation, desperation, and loneliness each of them felt on opposite sides of the world from one another.

Despite the harrowing ordeal, Weir continually stated that he held no resentment, anger, or contempt for those who held him captive; he prayed for them and wanted

only reconciliation to come from any situation of conflict, never revenge or retaliation.

One of his old friends has said that if only one word could be used to describe the Rev. Weir, it would be "conciliator". This is what a witness to Christ's reconciling love looks like – one without enmity and a peacemaker.

Following his release, Weir was elected moderator of the 1986 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. Afterwards, Weir and his family resettled in Northern California and they went on to teach at the San Francisco Theological Seminary, where both Pastor Virginia and I went to school (at separate times).

Ben's wife, Carol, later wrote:

"Mission includes some aspect of consciously chosen struggle. In mission we open ourselves up to the reality of the world and we pray for the grace to enter deeply into human suffering. Someone has said we will not enlarge the old essence of the gospel by adding old and new dogmas. We will enlarge it by adding the world."

For Ben, seeking God's protection was not simply a personal thing – to seek God's protection was to seek it for the whole world.

For us today, I wonder what it means to be sent by Jesus – what is our witness, what is our saving word to this world? What kind of protection for the world are we seeking from God? This is our consciously chosen struggle – to pray for grace, and let ourselves be sent by the one who is known as the Prince of Peace.

Amen.