Toxic (Fear)

# (Psalm 91:1-16)

Today I want to talk about trusting God in a toxic culture, because if there’s one thing that has infected us today, it’s a poisonous, deadly, toxic fear. It has permeated our homes, the nation, and it has circled the globe. There is no greater, negative toxic influence among friends, family members, and neighbors than fear. And yet we need to remember that during this time of social distancing that even if we’re all quarantined, we have a hope that can’t be quarantined.

In fact, I believe that we’re living at a time when the gospel of Jesus Christ has the potential to spread faster and farther than ever before. When more and more states are taking drastic steps to contain the spread of the Coronavirus, when many people are worried about death and the afterlife, we have a living hope and his name is Jesus Christ. He said,

*"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies” (John 11:25).*

And so, even though we’re living in a strange time and doing all we can to contain the spread of this extremely contagious disease we have to acknowledge that all through history there have been diseases, epidemics, and pandemics that have come and gone. And yet, in spite of the serious concerns affecting our lives, and the loss of so many others, we can find hope in the words of Jesus, in the Word of God.

Psalm chapter 91 is one of those passages of Scripture in which we can find hope and put our trust during a health crisis such as we are facing today. Reading from verse one of chapter 91 the Bible says,

*1 “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High*

*will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.*

*2 I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge*

*and my fortress,*

*my God, in whom I trust."*

*3 Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare*

*and from the deadly pestilence.*

*4 He will cover you with his feathers,*

*and under his wings you will find refuge;*

*his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.*

*5 You will not fear the terror of night,*

*nor the arrow that flies by day,*

*6 nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,*

*nor the plague that destroys at midday.*

*7 A thousand may fall at your side,*

*ten thousand at your right hand,*

*but it will not come near you.*

*8 You will only observe with your eyes*

*and see the punishment of the wicked.*

*9 If you make the Most High your dwelling —*

*even the Lord, who is my refuge —*

*10 then no harm will befall you,*

*no disaster will come near your tent.*

*11 For he will command his angels concerning you*

*to guard you in all your ways;*

*12 they will lift you up in their hands,*

*so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.*

*13 You will tread upon the lion and the cobra;*

*you will trample the great lion and the serpent**” (Psalms 91:1-13).*

Let’s just stop there, because I want to save the best for last, we’ll keep the last three verses for dessert. The emphasis in Psalm chapter 91 is on the many dangers of life and it warns of traps, plagues, terrors at night, arrows by day, stumbling over rocks, lions, and snakes which in all honesty seems far removed from most of us. But in consideration of terrorists, snipers, drunk drivers, and the coronavirus, our contemporary lives may be just as dangerous as the one described here in this Psalm. And so, the message contained within these verses is simply that those who dwell in Christ might not avoid these unknown dangers, but they will certainly escape the harm, the intended evil consequences; because it’s in times like these, when we’re facing a deadly epidemic, that our faith, our personal relationship with Jesus Christ allows us to find peace even as the pestilence stalks in the darkness. And so, it’s not a denial of the facts, but an understanding of the facts, that faith in Jesus Christ transforms us, strengthens us, and protects us because he is our living hope.

On the other hand, in stark contrast, the problem for so many in our culture today is that they’re losing the battle because their minds have been polluted by toxic fear. There is this constant barrage, this assault of toxic thoughts, lies from our spiritual enemy, silently influencing our minds and poisoning our souls. And so, many of our battles are either won or lost in our minds, but verse nine tells us, as you make the Most High your dwelling, as you come face-to-face with your fears, it’s the love of God and the Word of God that builds you up. He is your refuge, encouraging you, inspiring you, and perfecting you. That’s what the Bible tells us in first John, chapter 4,

*“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear: because fear involves torment. He who fears has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18, NKJV).*

And so, there’s this very real struggle, this battle going on in our minds, this inner turmoil that can negatively influence us. And if we yield to these toxic thoughts, obeying our lowly earthly nature, instead of the Spirit of God, our spiritual enemy will keep us from doing what God has called us to do. And so, the love of God casts out all fear, our spiritual nature is connected to God, but we still live in these bodies of flesh being fearful of what might happen, fearful of walking in faith, fearful of doing what God has called us to do. And so, there is this battle going on, this storm in our minds, and so, number one, I want to talk you about surviving the storm.

## 1. Surviving the Storm

You see, for many of us our spiritual enemy doesn’t even have to fight us in the physical realm, because even the whisper, just the thought of pestilence, trouble, or disaster is enough to cause us to retreat in fear. Just the thought of that experience or the pain of that past memory is enough to keep us from extending ourselves in another relationship or getting involved in this or that. And that’s understandable because it affects us all, once we’ve experienced the rejection, the abuse, the loss, the pain and the fear, once we’ve been through a storm the memory lives on.

When it comes to surviving the storm it’s important to know that you’ve been made perfect in love, but also that you’ve been set free by the love of God. Jesus said clearly,

*“If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).*

And so, there’s this struggle with knowing in our heart that we’ve been set free, and yet in our minds we find ourselves listening to the wrong voices, consulting the wrong sources, and overlooking the fact that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

The Bible says that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of Christ; and so, if we’re going to survive the storm, some of us just need to fire our weatherman. Our spiritual enemy’s been forecasting fear about our future and now we’re paralyzed with fear, we’re staying indoors, peering out the windows, wondering what’s going on out there, and yet the Bible warns us,

*“Whoever watches the wind will not plant…” (Ecclesiastes 11:4).*

In other words, when you’re sowing seed you want the wind to work with you, but some of you have given up planting because you’ve felt like the wind’s been against you your whole life. Others of you feel like everything you do backfires, you know it just blows back in your face, but it wasn’t even the wind that was against you… you felt like it was, but you were listening to voices and looking at evidence that wasn’t accurately reflecting your situation.

In Ecclesiastes chapter 11, Solomon gives us a picture, a metaphor of the wind, because it’s an unseen force like your feelings, your mood or emotions. And so, if you’re always considering or determining what you do based upon your mood or how you feel you’re always going to find a reason to neglect your responsibilities. In verse six Solomon said,

*“Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed…” (Ecclesiastes 11:6).*

In other words, if you want to be free, you’re going to have to go against your feelings. And so, you might have to face some resistance, sowing your seed against the wind, because if you’re watching the wind and waiting to plant, waiting to serve, or waiting to tithe you never will.

You see, when you’re waiting for this or waiting for that, when you’re consulting the forecast instead of consulting your faith, you’ll never plant and you’ll never get the harvest in. I wonder how many of you today are still watching the wind? You know, you haven’t started doing what God told you to do because you’re fearful, just watching and waiting for some imaginary scenario, and it’s keeping you from fulfilling God’s purpose for your life today. But the Bible encourages you to plant and not to miss the opportunities before you because,

*“You don’t know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well” (Ecclesiastes 11:6).*

And sometimes faith requires that we become a little impulsive, you know kind of like the apostle Peter. Sometimes it worked for him, sometimes it didn’t, and other times it worked against him, but he didn’t wait for perfect circumstances. Peter didn’t wait for the winds to stop blowing, he didn’t wait until he’d done all the research before giving his opinion, before doing this or that, but he trusted God in the moment. You see, he’d learned and maybe you’ve noticed that God’s hardly ever early but he’s never late. And so, no matter what the forecast is, surviving the storm, number two, requires that we trust God’s timing.

## 2. Trusting God’s Timing

This is something that’s learned through experience, because when you’re in the middle of the storm you’re going to be struggling with being able to trust when he’s going to bring you through it. Sometimes it’s hard for us to wait, you know faith is hard when you’re waiting, especially when you’re watching the wind and it’s blowing and you can see the effects all around you. It’s hard to trust God’s timing when he doesn’t do something at the moment we want him to, or when he leaves us in the heat for just a few seconds too long, but the Bible tells us that we’re to,

*“Trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5).*

And so, the real test of faith is if we’ll trust him with his timing, trusting him in the meantime, trusting him while we’re waiting, because that’s where genuine faith is developed.

Some of you know that God often does things in our lives at inconvenient times. You know, he does things when you might say, “This isn’t good, or this really is a bad time, or I’m just too young or too old or too busy or don’t have enough money right now.” And yet, as we look to the Word of God we find that God often blesses people at what we would consider a bad time, an inconvenient time, kind of like when he raised Lazarus after he’d been dead four days or just after John the Baptist was executed.

In fact, speaking of John the Baptist, the Bible tells us that when John’s disciples told Jesus about his death in Matthew chapter 14,

*“Jesus withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place...” (Matthew 14:13).*

And so, this was a bad time, Jesus just wanted to get away, he was looking for a solitary place, and he crossed over by boat to the other side. But hearing this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns, and so when he got there a crowd was already waiting. Verse 14 says,

*“When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick” (Matthew 14:14).*

It wasn’t really a good time, but regardless, Jesus had compassion and healed their sick. Now the disciples also recognized that this wasn’t a good time and in verse 15 they said,

*“This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food" (Matthew 14:15).*

But Jesus was up to something, he was about to do a greater miracle. You see, he was going to teach them not to lean on their own understanding, but to trust him even when it’s too late, even when it’s inconvenient or it’s just not enough. And so, he was about to teach them to consult their faith instead of counting loaves of bread or looking at their watches. Jesus replied in verse 16,

*“They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered. "Bring them here to me," he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves…” (Matthew 14:16-19).*

Some of you may be in a similar kind of situation, it’s already getting late, maybe you’ve wasted a lot of time, many years have passed, you’ve made some bad decisions, and you feel like it’s just a bad time to begin trusting God now. But I want you to know that it’s the perfect place for God to show up, because Jesus was setting the stage, it was a bad time, they were in a remote place, it was already getting late, but it was a perfect set up for a miracle. It was just the right time, because number three, they were prepared for a miracle.

## 3. Prepared for A Miracle

The stage was set, they were in a remote place, it was already late, there were too many people and not enough food to feed them all. Everything was prepared for a miracle and verse 19 says that Jesus… gave thanks and broke the loaves…

*“Gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children” (Matthew 14:19-21).*

It was a great miracle, five loaves of bread and two fish miraculously translated into 12 baskets of leftovers after everyone ate and was satisfied.

Today, there are some of you, you’re thinking it’s too late now, because you’ve been watching the wind and you’ve been listening to the wrong weatherman. You’re considering everything that’s happened, worried about what could happen, or what might happen, because you’ve been listening to the wrong voices. And the weather was meant to be checked, not watched, and so you’ve created your own toxic environment, but the Word of God tells us,

*“Surely, he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence” (Psalms 91:3).*

And so, it’s definitely good to check the weather, it’s good to make plans, but as long as you’re watching the weather, listening to the weatherman, you’re never going to plant, you’ll never reap a harvest, eat or be satisfied. If you’re watching the weather, you’re living according to your feelings instead of living by faith. You see, the problem with the wind is that it’ll work against you, contradicting the Word that God spoke to you, and this is what Solomon was talking about when he said,

*“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5).*

You see, God is intent on fulfilling his purpose in us, he wants to see us trusting him like never before, resting in the shadow of the Almighty, and so he pursues us, chasing after us, never giving up on us, wanting to be our refuge and fortress. And he’s persistent in his desire, hoping that we’ll open ourselves up to his plan, and so he simply allows us to come to the end of our own resources so that we’re prepared to receive our miracle from his gracious hand.

In spite of the toxic environment in which we live and the fear which is so pervasive, God has set the stage and prepared us for a miracle. The question for you today is, are you prepared for a miracle? You know, can you say with the psalmist?

*“I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust" (Psalms 91:2).*

Today, no matter where you are, I want to encourage you not to give up, but to hold on because wherever you are is not your destination, God sees something in your future that your current situation is keeping you from seeing. You may be fearful because you’ve been watching the wind, listening to the wrong voices, but it’s only as you trust him to bring you through this storm that your life will emulate the miracle that’s in you.

And while there may be so much that’s toxic in the world around us, times are difficult, and there are a lot of voices, a lot of opposition in the world, but God is doing something in us, not to crush us or destroy us, but because he has something better in store for you and I. Therefore, we can be confident, trusting that we will overcome this season, because we are the church, we are the blood bought bride of Christ, and Jesus said in Matthew chapter 16,

*“I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18, KJV).*

And so, we will overcome evil with good, not grieving like those that have no hope, but we’re going to keep on worshiping together, serving together, giving together, and praying together because we live by faith and not by fear. No matter how toxic the environment around us is, God’s perfect love casts out fear, and because of the presence of the living God within us we will not afraid.

No matter what we go through in the coming weeks, we can have confidence knowing that God loves us, he hasn’t forsaken us, and he’ll never leave us. In fact, God has said, and this is the icing on the cake, verse 14,

*"Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation” (Psalm 91:14-16).*

Therefore, we can replace the toxins of our culture, replacing fear with truth, surviving the storm, trusting God’s timing, and being prepared for a miracle because God, our God… *“has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7, NKJV).*

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