



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – January 24, 2010

“Onward, Christian Soldiers”  
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## Psalm 91

### Assurance of God’s Protection

<sup>1</sup>You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty<sup>a</sup>  
<sup>2</sup>will say to the LORD, ‘My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.’  
<sup>3</sup>For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence;  
<sup>4</sup>he will cover you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.  
<sup>5</sup>You will not fear the terror of the night,  
or the arrow that flies by day,  
<sup>6</sup>or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,  
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.  
<sup>7</sup>A thousand may fall at your side,  
ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near you.  
<sup>8</sup>You will only look with your eyes  
and see the punishment of the wicked.  
<sup>9</sup>Because you have made the LORD your refuge,<sup>b</sup>  
the Most High your dwelling-place,  
<sup>10</sup>no evil shall befall you,  
no scourge come near your tent.  
<sup>11</sup>For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.  
<sup>12</sup>On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.  
<sup>13</sup>You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.  
<sup>14</sup>Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.  
<sup>15</sup>When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble,  
I will rescue them and honor them.

<sup>a</sup> Traditional rendering of Heb *Shaddai*

<sup>b</sup> Cn: Heb *Because you, Lord, are my refuge; you have made*

<sup>16</sup>*With long life I will satisfy them,  
and show them my salvation.*

## Hebrews 11

### The Meaning of Faith

<sup>11</sup>Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. <sup>2</sup>Indeed, by faith<sup>c</sup> our ancestors received approval. <sup>3</sup>By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.<sup>d</sup>

### The Examples of Abel, Enoch, and Noah

<sup>4</sup>By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable<sup>e</sup> sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith<sup>f</sup> he still speaks. <sup>5</sup>By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and ‘he was not found, because God had taken him.’ For it was attested before he was taken away that ‘he had pleased God.’ <sup>6</sup>And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. <sup>7</sup>By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

### The Faith of Abraham

<sup>8</sup>By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup>By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup>For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. <sup>11</sup>By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was

<sup>c</sup> GK *by this*

<sup>d</sup> Or *was not made out of visible things*

<sup>e</sup> Gk *greater*

<sup>f</sup> Gk *through it*

barren — because he considered him faithful who had promised.<sup>8</sup>  
<sup>12</sup>Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead,  
descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as  
the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’

<sup>13</sup>All of these died in faith without having received the promises,  
but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed  
that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, <sup>14</sup>for people  
who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a  
homeland. <sup>15</sup>If they had been thinking of the land that they had  
left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup>But as  
it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.  
Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he  
has prepared a city for them.

<sup>17</sup>By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He  
who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only  
son, <sup>18</sup>of whom he had been told, ‘It is through Isaac that  
descendants shall be named after you.’ <sup>19</sup>He considered the fact  
that God is able even to raise someone from the dead — and  
figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. <sup>20</sup>By faith Isaac  
invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. <sup>21</sup>By faith  
Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, ‘bowing in  
worship over the top of his staff.’ <sup>22</sup>By faith Joseph, at the end of  
his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave  
instructions about his burial.<sup>b</sup>

### The Faith of Moses

<sup>23</sup>By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months  
after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful;  
and they were not afraid of the king’s edict.<sup>i</sup> <sup>24</sup>By faith Moses,  
when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh’s  
daughter, <sup>25</sup>choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people  
of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. <sup>26</sup>He  
considered abuse suffered for the Christ<sup>j</sup> to be greater wealth  
than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the  
reward. <sup>27</sup>By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king’s anger;  
for he persevered as though<sup>k</sup> he saw him who is invisible. <sup>28</sup>By  
faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that  
the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of  
Israel.<sup>l</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Or By faith Sarah herself, though barren, received power to conceive, even  
when she was too old, because she considered him faithful who had promised.

<sup>h</sup> Gk his bones

<sup>i</sup> Other ancient authorities add By faith Moses, when he was grown up,  
killed the Egyptian, because he observed the humiliation of his people (Gk  
brothers)

<sup>j</sup> Or the Messiah

<sup>k</sup> Or because

<sup>l</sup> Gk would not touch them

### The Faith of Other Israelite Heroes

<sup>29</sup>By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry  
land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were  
drowned. <sup>30</sup>By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been  
encircled for seven days. <sup>31</sup>By faith Rahab the prostitute did not  
perish with those who were disobedient,<sup>m</sup> because she had received  
the spies in peace.

<sup>32</sup>And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of  
Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and  
the prophets — <sup>33</sup>who through faith conquered kingdoms,  
administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,  
<sup>34</sup>quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength  
out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to  
flight. <sup>35</sup>Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were  
tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better  
resurrection. <sup>36</sup>Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even  
chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup>They were stoned to death, they were  
sawn in two,<sup>n</sup> they were killed by the sword; they went about in  
skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented — <sup>38</sup>of  
whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and  
mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

<sup>39</sup>Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did  
not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup>since God had provided  
something better so that they would not, without us, be made  
perfect.

Every so often, someone enters into our lives, shares  
his story, and inspires us in such a way as to make a  
lasting contribution to our lives. In my own life, such a  
person was a man named David Little, and today I’d  
like to tell you his story and how I came first to know  
him. But the story begins in a way with another story  
from long ago.

When I was a young child learning to play the piano, I  
came across an old book of hymns that had belonged to  
my mother. The hymns were easy and meant for the  
beginning pianist. As I sat at the piano, paging through  
the book, I plunked out the notes of “The Doxology,”  
“The Gloria Patri,” and “We Gather Together”.

But then I turned the page on a hymn that ultimately  
became particularly compelling for me. It was a song  
originally written as a marching song for children. After

<sup>m</sup> Or unbelieving

<sup>n</sup> Other ancient authorities add they were tempted

I'd played through it once, I played it again and again. No doubt, some of you will remember it. It goes:

Onward, Christian Soldiers,  
Marching as to war,  
With the cross of Jesus,  
Going on before.

I absolutely loved that hymn. I loved it as a child. I loved it growing up. And when in college and in divinity school I found myself exhausted, I turned it into a little rallying cry and said, "Onward, Kristin the soldier!" - But it was not until I entered the ministry and met David Little that the full significance of the hymn impressed itself upon me.

David Little was a man nearly three times my age. Like me, he associated the hymn with his childhood life of church camps and Sunday School. But like others in his generation he also associated it with the single most pivotal and life-changing time in his life.

As a young man, he had entered Dartmouth College in the fall of 1940. In his sophomore year, Pearl Harbor was attacked. Within 24 hours, it was announced that the college had moved onto wartime footing. School vacations were cancelled. Classes were added in wartime subjects. In the spring of 1943, a full year before their graduation, the class was called to war.

The day before departure, word spread by hearsay through the college that there would be an assembly on the green. So the men came. The Glee Club sang. And when it was done and time began to shift forever from the past into the future, silence descended and no one moved.

Then from somewhere in the assembly, someone began to sing, "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and everyone joined in. And the remarkable thing was that they were not a particularly religious school—they had all of the usual jocks, brains, and popular students—but they all sang with full voice and a great deal of sentiment. And then they left. They all went off to war. And it was the last time that he ever saw some of those men.

But from that time on the hymn, "Onward, Christian Soldiers," was no longer simply a children's song for

him. Rather, it was a hymn that reminded him that somehow and in some way the war to which they were called was not *outside* the scope of God's love, but rather within it. No matter what lay before them, God had called them to fight on behalf of their country and, indeed, on behalf of the world. And God would be with them.

As Winston Churchill once said after a worship service that included President Roosevelt and a large assembly of soldiers, "[When we] sang 'Onward, Christian Soldiers,' I felt that this was no vain presumption, but that we ... were serving a cause for the sake of which a trumpet had sounded from on high." (Collins, 53-54)

He, Roosevelt, and all of the soldiers knew that the power of evil had grown strong within the world and God needed people to fight against it. And so they set off. They set off from military bases, from colleges, from small towns, and from farms. As they did, they went by faith, not knowing where they were going, but trusting that God would be with them. And he was.

Somehow, in the midst of that horrible horrific war, God was with them. And while I can't even begin to imagine what that experience must have been like for them, I know that there are no atheists in foxholes. Precisely in our times of greatest trial or danger, it is almost impossible *not* to pray. And so we *do* pray. We cannot *help* ourselves. The prayers just *pour* out of us. And somehow, in some way, the prayers *calm* us.

As Rabbi Harold Kushner suggests, "Prayer is one of the most [powerful] ways of alleviating our sense of helplessness." (Kushner, 16) It makes us feel more hopeful. It relaxes us. It clears our minds. And it helps us to know that we are not alone and that God is there.

Similarly, the *Psalms* have this power. If all we do is simply to recite phrases of them over and over again, we discover that they calm us. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Simply saying the words relaxes us. As we pray the Psalm, it is almost as if those words become a conduit for God's presence descending upon us.

But there are other Psalms that have this power... the 91<sup>st</sup> and the 121<sup>st</sup>. Over and over they deliver to us a message from God that says,

Do not fear...  
Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.  
When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble.  
I will rescue them and honor them.

(Psalm 91:5 paraphrase & 14-15)

And God does. It may not always seem so. It may not be as fast as we might like. But God does come to save us. By his grace, he gives us the strength and courage that we in faith need to soldier on.

And so eventually, but not without great loss of life, World War II drew to its conclusion and thousands of soldiers began returning home. But for my friend David Little the greatest battle still loomed.

He'd just taken command of a gun boat on the Chinese coast. His ship was included in a group headed back to Saipan in the Marianas. Before long, he and his men found themselves in the midst of a typhoon.

Quickly, he and his men went through everything they had been taught to do. They offloaded cargo, adjusted the weight of equipment, strapped the guns to the bottom of the hull. They did everything they could think of. But it wasn't enough. They were losing headway. More frighteningly, the ship was beginning to roll dangerously from side to side. David knew that with more than a 30 degree roll, they'd likely capsized.

For 3-4 days, he stood on the bridge. He ate two tropical chocolate bars and never left to go to the john. He prayed the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. As the storm grew worse, at times he felt the ship tilt 27 degrees.

By the third day, a sense of futility was nearly overwhelming. The waves were coming directly upon them. Some of them were so high that you couldn't see the masthead. It was clear that after the next two to three major waves they'd go under.

But then suddenly and inexplicably, for a period of 1½ minutes, there was a gap between the waves. In that short amount of time, he was able to adjust the rudder and the engines and move the heading of the

ship up enough that they wouldn't be caught broadside by one of the breakers. Because of that adjustment, ultimately they were able to out-sail the storm.

In retrospect, David said, "The Lord [must have] decided that we needed help or it would [have been] the end." And I am certain that was right.

But whether it was the case that God calmed the *storm* and gave him those 90 seconds, or that God strengthened and calmed *him* so that he could take advantage of those 90 seconds... I am less certain, for sometimes God calms the storm and sometimes God calms us.

Either way, God does not *abandon* us. In times of greatest trial, our God stands with us. He sends people to help us. And as we pray and recite the Psalms, he gives us the strength and courage that we need to meet whatever the challenges that lie before us.

And so I say:

Onward, Christian soldiers! Onward, soldiers all!  
Step out now with courage, following God's call.  
God has called us forward to the task at hand.  
In God's time we'll triumph, by his almighty hand.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

### **Bibliography**

- Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Hymns That Inspire America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003)
- Harold S. Kushner, *Conquering Fear: Living Boldly In an Uncertain World*, (New York: Random House, 2009)