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God Is My Refuge and My Strength

by Constance M. Fulmer

As I read and reread the Psalms, I am inspired and comforted by the beautiful metaphors which are used to describe the security, safety and strength I can find in God. The vivid images call to mind actual pictures as well as precious memories that enhance my understanding of my relationship to God and deepen my confidence that all things do work together for good for me because I love the Lord (Rom 8:28).

I have always identified with Timothy (2 Tim 1:5) in that my own faith lived first in my mother Constance and in my grandmother Eunice;¹ my earliest memories are of sitting in their laps or being by their sides and hearing them read or tell me stories from the Bible. I have no doubt that my faith in God and my love for literature grew out of those happy times. My mother and grandmother were constantly talking to one another and to me, and every conversation had a moral lesson, either stated or clearly implied. I learned from them to trust God and to turn to him in times of joy and sorrow, in sickness, and in health—not because they told me to—but because I could see that they trusted God and turned to him for refuge.

As I look back on my adult experience, I am particularly thankful for the inner peace which the Psalms have brought me and for their reminder that my trust in God is the basis of the peace that passes understanding which guards my heart and mind (Phil 4:7). The Psalms also reassure me that God is my protection in the face of any external threat and the source of all the strength I need to deal with any insecurity, uncertainty or threatening circumstance;

with God as my refuge, I can say with the apostle Paul: “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Phil 4:13).

God Is My Shepherd

The Twenty-third Psalm is almost universally recognized as a poem of comfort to be read at funerals, and this is certainly appropriate. However, it also conveys the peace and serenity which is in my heart as I live from day to day—in joy or in sorrow, my shepherd restores my soul. As my shepherd, God ensures that I am safe and protected every minute of my life, and he assures me that he will go with me through the valley of death. God walks by my side wherever I go and extends his helping hand to assist me.

I need not be afraid when God is leading me down the path which he has chosen for me. The psalmist says to the Lord, “I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. . . . As for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge” (Ps 73:23-25, 28). As my shepherd, God nourishes my soul and constantly provides the strength of body and of soul that I need.

I always associate this psalm with my grandmother. At her request, I repeated the Twenty-third Psalm again and again to her in the hospital during the night before her final surgery, and she was saying it aloud herself as they rolled her into the operating room. But long before that she had impressed the meaning of the psalm on my mind by making sheep

and lambs from Styrofoam and using them to tell me stories which illustrated its teaching. When I think of the Lord as my shepherd, I still see the shepherd

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as being like the one Nathan described to David—the shepherd who loved his little ewe lamb like a daughter and allowed it to sleep in his arms (2 Sam 12:3). As my shepherd, God is sensitive to me as an individual; he gives me a peaceful, beautiful natural environment in which to rest and be refreshed and revived.

He not only guides me in the right paths, supplies my every need, and takes away my anxiety; he also is compassionate, ever-aware of my presence, and ever-alert to my call. Isaiah 40:1 portrays this same idea of God: “He tends his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.” These images also convey the comforting message Jesus expressed in John 14:1 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me.” With God as my shepherd, my heart can be untroubled and at peace.

God Is a Loving Mother

In speaking of the total sense of well-being which the innocent child feels in his or her mother’s arms, Psalm 131 sums up many of the most profound and most significant aspects of my relationship to God. I particularly like the way Eugene H. Peterson² paraphrases the Psalm:

Yahweh, I’m not trying to rule the roost,
I don’t want to be king of the mountain.
I haven’t meddled where I have no business
or fantasized grandiose plans.
I’ve kept my feet on the ground,

I’ve cultivated a quiet heart.

Like a baby content in its mother’s arms,
my soul is a baby content.

Wait, Israel, for Yahweh. Wait with hope.
Hope now; hope always!

My hope is truly based on this simple idea that God holds and protects me in his arms. Knowing this, I do not have to depend on my own limited understanding but can allow my life to be directed by God whose wisdom is infinite and who is omniscient. I can put my life and all of my decisions in his hands. I Peter 5:5-7 expresses these same ideas: “Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” I never have to be embarrassed to show my own weakness because with simple childlike faith I can know that “Whoever trusts in the Lord will be safe” (Prov 29:25). I can remind myself that Jesus said, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:3).

One of my earliest sources of comfort was being held in loving arms, and I am thankful that that refuge is still available to me. The reassuring message of the old hymn accurately describes my own sense of “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.” Deuteronomy 33:27 states: “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” This same idea of the comfort of being tenderly held in loving arms is suggested in the story of the rich man and Lazarus in which “the beggar died and was carried to Abraham’s bosom” (Luke 16:22, KJV) to “Abraham’s lap” (Peterson). I do not have to deal with uncertainty; I can sit in God’s lap and be at peace.

God’s maternal attributes are also expressed graphically in Peterson’s paraphrase of Psalm 22:9-10: “You were midwife at my birth, setting me at my mother’s breasts! When I left the womb you cradled me; since the moment of birth you’ve been my God” and of Psalm 71:5, 6: “You keep me going when times are tough—my bedrock, Yahweh, since my childhood. I’ve hung on you from the day of my birth, the day you took me from the cradle.” And as Isaiah 66:13 says: “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you.”

God Is a Mother Bird

When I was a little girl, my grandmother raised chickens, and I was afraid of the mother hens. I remember my grandmother standing with me beside

the fence explaining that they were not going to attack me. They were upset because I was a threat to their baby chicks; the hens were loving mothers who were protecting their children. Grandmother quoted the passage from Matthew 23:37 which is also in Luke 13:34 where Jesus said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your chicks together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”

This picture of a mother hen protecting her chicks is a beautiful and reassuring way to describe God’s willingness to take care of me and of all of his children. David’s prayer in Psalm 17:6-8 is also my prayer: “I call on you, O God, for you will answer me; give ear to me and hear my prayer. Show the wonder of your great love, you who save by your right hand those who take refuge in you from their foes. Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.” Deuteronomy 32:10-11 describes the way God cared for Jacob and uses the eagle as the sheltering mother: “He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carried them on its pinions.”

In the book of Ruth, Boaz speaks of Ruth’s leaving her home and her people to follow Naomi when he says to her, “May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge” (Ruth 2:12). Peterson’s version of Psalm 36:7 is: “How exquisite your love, O God! How eager we are to run under your wings.”

When he needed God’s protection from the angry Saul, David prayed using the same metaphor in Psalm 57: “Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.” God not only provides for us inner peace and serenity; he also gives us literal physical protection. Peterson’s vivid paraphrase suggests that David’s prayer is for both internal and external protection: “Be good to me, God—and now! I’ve run to you for dear life. I’m hiding out under your wings until the hurricane blows over.” It is extremely reassuring to me to know that as long as I depend totally on him, God is my refuge, whatever my need may be or whatever danger I may face. Throughout the Psalms the image of being sheltered by God’s wings is frequently paired with the need to take refuge from natural disaster or from the threat of enemies.

God Is My City of Refuge

When I think of running to God to hide from

any kind of danger, I think of him as my city of refuge. When God led the children of Israel into the land of Canaan and assigned the territory to the various tribes, he told Moses to designate six cities of refuge “to which a person who has killed someone accidentally may flee” (Num 35:11). The safety and security which these cities of refuge provided for the innocent person symbolize perfectly the safety and security I may find in God. In Psalm 61:1-4 David longs for God’s sanctuary: “Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe. I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.” Peterson conveys the idea in a more modern idiom: “You’ve always given me breathing room, a place to get away from it all, a lifetime pass to your safe-house, an open invitation as your guest. You’ve always taken me seriously, God, made me welcome among those who know and love you.” I sincerely believe that God takes me and my needs seriously, and I find it very reassuring to be able to live in his safe house.

I join the Psalmist in rejoicing that I can turn to God when I am pursued by difficulties of any kind: “I will sing your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble” (Ps 59:16). My confidence in the contentment I will find when I take refuge in God is conveyed in Peterson’s version of Psalm 9:9: “Yahweh’s a safe-house for the battered, a sanctuary during bad times. The moment you arrive, you relax; you’re never sorry you knocked” and of Psalm 16:1: “Keep me safe, O God, I’ve run for dear life to you. I say to Yahweh, ‘Be my Lord! Without you, nothing makes sense.’”

No trouble is too deep or painful for me to find relief from God: “Is anyone crying for help? Yahweh is listening, ready to rescue you. If your heart is broken, you’ll find Yahweh right there” (Peterson); or in the NIV: “The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps 34:17-18). In the city of refuge God wipes away my tears and heals my wounds.

As Psalm 121 so beautifully says, “My help comes from the Lord; . . . The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore” (Ps 121:2, 7-8).

God Is My Protection Against Danger

In describing God in 1996 as my ultimate

protection against attack of any kind, I might think of him as my personal nuclear weapon; when the Psalms were written, the same idea was conveyed by saying that God is my shield, fortress, stronghold, or rock. These military metaphors are frequently used to define the safety which can be found in God, and are far more reassuring to me than any stockpile of weapons. In God I can find protection from invading armies and from personal enemies—from any external attack.

David often uses these images related to military defense to describe God's protection. He says, "My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken. . . . Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people, pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge" (Ps 62:1-2, 7-8). I find great comfort in knowing that God listens to my cries, knows my needs, and triumphs over my enemies. Like David and like Jeremiah I can pray "O Lord, my strength and my fortress, my refuge in time of distress" (Je, r 16:19); "the Lord has become my fortress, and my God the rock in whom I take refuge" (Ps 94:22).

I need not fear personal enemies if I trust in God. In the words of Peterson's version, I can confidently pray, "Give me help for the hard task; human help is worthless" (Ps 108:12), and I can know that it is "far better to take refuge in Yahweh than trust in people" (Ps 118:8).

With God as my refuge, I need not fear natural disasters. I have lived in Malibu, California, for the past five years and have developed a whole new sense of the importance of God's protection against external disasters. I have been evacuated twice to watch major fires threatening to burn down my home, have had friends who were injured by rocks falling on them as they drove along the highway, have observed devastating mudslides, and have survived one major earthquake and numerous minor ones. In all of this, I have taken great comfort in the gospel accounts of Jesus calming the wind and the waves and telling his disciples not to be afraid (Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25). I know that "My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He

alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge" (Ps 61:1-2, 7-8). And again the same passage in Peterson's words: "My help and glory are in God—granite strength and safe-harbor-God—So trust him absolutely, people; lay your lives on the line for him. God is a safe place to be. . . . 'Strength comes straight from God.'"

In many ways Psalm 46 sums up the entire concept of the refuge I find in God. In modern language: "God is a safe place to hide, ready to help when we need him. We stand fearless at the cliff-edge of doom, courageous in seastorm and earthquake, before the rush and roar of oceans, the tremors that shift mountains" (Ps 46:1-2). In Malibu, or wherever I am, I know that "God lives here, the streets are safe, God at your service from crack of dawn. Godless nations rant and rave, kings and kingdoms threaten, but Earth does anything he says" (Ps 46:8-9). And in the equally reassuring language of the NIV: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging."

The God of peace is with me, just as he was with the apostle Paul when he said; "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. . . . I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil 4:4-7, 11-13). With God as my refuge, I have nothing to fear from within myself or from without.

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Notes

¹My grandmother, Eunice Davis Renfro, died in 1959; my mother, Constance Renfro Fulmer, lives in Montgomery, Alabama, on the farm where she grew

up.

²Eugene H. Peterson, **Psalms** (Navpress, 1994).