

**THE SERMONS, LECTURES, AND SONGS OF
SIDNEY EDWARD COX**

Psalm 91

Thoughts on Wandering in the Wilderness
(Audio good)

Editorial Note: It is my belief that this series on Psalms was recorded while Sidney and Violet Cox resided in retirement at The Eventide residence in Detroit, Michigan. This was during the period 1962 through 1972. Sidney Cox was 75 years of age in 1962.

At various points in the recordings, he states that he is meeting with this group weekly to lead this series; however, when listening to the recordings, there does not seem to be a live congregation. At another spot in the series, he explains that he has also been taping these messages for further distribution.

During this period in his life, Sidney Cox often preached and taught in various churches around the Detroit area, but for a variety of reasons, including the declining health of his beloved wife, Violet, he was increasingly unable to travel extensively. As a result, he began to experiment with tape-recording his messages and lessons in order to send them to interested groups.

Thus, it is impossible to know if he delivered this series in person to a church group, or whether he recorded the series for them to listen to in their Sunday School or other meetings. It was likely both.

The order in which he presented the weekly series was: Psalm 24, Psalm 40, Psalm 46, Psalm 91 and Psalm 117. In addition, there are two recordings made in two different settings of Psalm 29, which do not seem to be part of the formal series.

The audio quality of these recordings varies a great deal. Some are quite good while others are poor.

J. Douglas Cox, grandson of Sidney Cox. July 30, 2010.

Psalm 91. Now, we have been following a simple pathway in all of our studies. First of all, we have been seeking to take a good look at the writer, and then to discover what was in his mind, what was he describing, what was the incident that was before his eyes, what was the discovery that he made. Now, these are the things that we have been seeking to place before our eyes and before our ears, and our hearts as well. And we shall do exactly the same thing tonight.

Now, the writer of the 91st Psalm is usually considered to be Moses. The general thought is that Psalm 90 and 91 were all at one time one psalm. And then in the arrangement of this book as it was to appear in the canon of the scriptures this long poem, Psalm 90 and 91 was divided into two sections. But I think it is fairly clear, and it is the consensus of opinion, that Moses is the writer of the 91st Psalm.

Now, we have discovered that these men have been writing about something, either an event or a thought or an experience with which they were quite familiar. And if we apply that thought to the 91st Psalm and ask ourselves the question, “What was the event that Moses was so familiar with about which he knew more than anybody else?” And the answer, of course, is quite obvious. Moses was the one who knew more about that forty-year period between Egypt and the Promised Land that we call the wandering in the wilderness. He knew more about it than anybody else. He was there at the beginning. He was there at the end. He carried the burden of it all the way along. And he was the one who knew more about it than anybody else. Now, in this psalm, if we just keep that thought in mind, we shall find that immediately we have some illumination.

Because phrases that are being used in this psalm in which it would appear that Moses is describing some of his experiences as he, with the children of Israel, went through the wilderness wanderings - some of these phrases have meaning when we endeavor to attach them to this thought of a description of the wilderness wanderings. For instance, when you read right at the beginning such phrases as this: “Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day.”¹

When he speaks of the pestilence, when he speaks of the destruction, the attack of the enemy, the plague from which he was to be delivered, about the thousand that would fall at his right hand but should not come nigh him. These phrases, as you begin to think about them, seem to fit into this pattern of a description of a dangerous, dreary, wilderness wandering in which the children of Israel were surrounded by enemies without and enemies within. Things that they could see. Things they could not see at all. Now, let's keep that in mind.

First of all then, let us presume that the writer is Moses. Let us presume also, and this seems to be fairly obvious, that what he is writing about is this wandering in the wilderness period that he knows so much about. And that these unusual phrases seem to fit into that pattern - the terror by night and the arrow by day. Let's keep that in mind, if you please.

Now, throughout this psalm you will find that there are not only descriptions of physical happenings such as arrows that fly by day and the terror by night, and so on. But you will find that the heart of Moses is throbbing with several great thoughts that are not connected necessarily with any incident that may be happening on the outside. For instance, all the way through, you can hear Moses talking about and rejoicing in, the greatness of God. And then you can hear him thanking God for his unfailing provision. You can hear him rejoicing in the protection of God. And you can hear him rejoicing in his privilege of constant communion with God.

May I repeat those things? Would you like to make a note of them? The greatness of God; the provision of God; the protection of God; and the privilege of constant communion with God.

Now, right from the very beginning you can see that this relationship of God with Moses, and Moses with God, was a very beautiful and intimate thing. It wasn't anything that was spasmodic. It wasn't here today and gone tomorrow. It was not the kind of communion that we sometimes think we enjoy - bright today and dark tomorrow, and so on. But here was something, and the opening words seem to impress us with this - something that was a continuous, constant, abiding thing.

1 Psalm 91:5

Notice two words that appear at once in that first verse. “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”² Dwelleth? Abiding? This is not a casual visit. This is a condition that is permanent. We dwell in a home. We don't just visit. We abide in a home; not just a weekend visit. That's not abiding. That's not dwelling. The relationship between Moses and God, and God and Moses, was not something that came to the surface at certain special occasions. It was there constantly. And Moses had learned to dwell in the secret place of the Most High and to abide under the shadow of the Almighty. This was an unbroken relationship. Now, keep that in mind, too.

Now, we've got several things that we have mentioned. First of all, the writer himself. Second, the fact that he was describing the journey through the wilderness. Again, the peculiar phrases that seem to fit in as part of this pattern of description. And again, the thoughts that you can hear and see throughout the psalm itself of the greatness and provision, and so on, of God. And then, we take a look at a relationship that is unbroken, continuous. There's nothing spasmodic about it. It is a permanent relationship. And the words, dwell and abide seem to give ground for our conclusion in that matter.

Now, let's turn for a moment or two to the psalm itself. We have just been looking at it here and there. Now, let's look at it a little more closely, if you please. There are phrases that we have already mentioned. Now, let's go back and really look at them.

For instance: The secret place of the Most High. The shadow of the Almighty. And the two names of God that appear. Now, all of this is before us in verse one. There you find the secret place of the Most High, the shadow of the Almighty, and the two names of God. Did you notice them? “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” The Most High and the Almighty.

Now, for just a minute or two, let's go back and look at these phrases and see if we can find out something of the meaning of them. Let's see if we can get underneath the surface and down into the heart of them.

I wonder what he was talking about when he mentioned, the secret place of the Most High. Now, if that had been mentioned after the Aaronic priesthood was established and the tabernacle had been given, we would know what he meant by, the secret place of the Most High, for God provided such a secret place in the midst of Israel. It was quite true that the high priest was the only one who was ever allowed to go into it. But there was a Holy of Holies in that tabernacle in the wilderness.

But remember, that we're speaking of a time before the tabernacle was erected at all, and before the Aaronic priesthood was established, before Aaron became priest at all. Now, during that time before the tabernacle appeared, and before the priesthood was established, Moses himself was the priest of God in the midst of Israel. Now, the great business of a priest, regardless of the detail of his obligations, the great business of a priest was this, he was God's representative to the people and he was the people's representative before God. Now, during that first period of wandering in the wilderness, Moses was the man who was God's representative to the people of Israel and he was the people's

2 Psalm 91:1

representative before God.

So many times there would be problems that Moses could not solve. There would be directions that Moses did not know. There would be pathways to travel. There would be choices to be made and Moses did not know. In the midst of a situation like that, what did he do? Just rely on his own judgment or something of the kind? Oh, no, not at all. There was a place and there was a way in which Moses could ascertain the will of God. On the outskirts of the camp, when the children of Israel rested here or there, on the outskirts of the camp there was a little tent that was pitched and it was called the Tent of Meeting. And it was to this tent that Moses would go and no one else.

But Moses would go to this tent and there in the silence of it, in the seclusion of it, he would bring to God the problem that was upon his heart, ask for the solution of it, receive the wisdom that he needed, receive the comfort from a God who thought of him as his friend – this one, this Moses – in the tent that is called the Tent of Meeting. This was the place where God could give instructions to Moses and say, you must do this or you must go there. “This is the way, walk ye in it.”³ And then Moses would know what to do and how to do it.

Now, this is the interesting thing that happened. Whenever Moses went to that little Tent of Meeting, the great pillar of cloud that overshadowed the encampment and which was, to the children of Israel, the visible sign of the presence of God, that pillar of cloud would move over and take up its place by the side of the little Tent of Meeting. Now, you keep it mind. See if you can visualize that scene. The little tent with the man inside, and outside the protecting shadow of the pillar of cloud. Now, let's go one step further.

And I don't think we shall be trespassing at all when we do this. But let's look up into the sky and there the sun is shining. Now, you see, you've got three things now. You have the sun, and the pillar of cloud, and the little tent with the man inside. Now, can't you see, my dear, that with the sun shining on the pillar that the shadow of that great pillar of cloud would be cast over that little Tent of Meeting? And remember, the pillar of cloud is the visible sign of the presence of God. Now, you keep that picture in mind and then we'll read this. “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” Now, when you picture this, two phrases become luminous at once. The two phrases that are so beautiful and so precious that we have been lingering around them, listening to the beauty of them, seeking to visualize the loveliness of this situation, seeking to project ourselves somewhere or other into this place of relationship between God and his servant Moses.

Now, there's one other thing that we need to notice in this first verse. And we have already mentioned it. And that is that in that verse there are two names of God. Notice them again. “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” The Most High. The Almighty. Now, let's stop a moment and remember that in the Hebrew language these names of God appear to us and with some familiarity.

It's not difficult to find out what the Hebrew words are, meaning the Most High and the Almighty. The words in the Hebrew language for the Almighty or the Most High are these: El Elyon. And for the Almighty: El Shaddai. The Most High: El Elyon. The Almighty: El Shaddai. Now, let's seek to find

³ Isaiah 30:21

out the meaning of those two words.

For El Elyon means, The God who controls. The God who holds the wind in his fists. The God who's laws control the universe. The God who speaks and it's so. The God who is all powerful. That's the meaning of El Elyon. The God who controls.

But when you turn to the other word, El Shaddai, you have a different picture of God all together. This is a picture of the God who provides. The God of tenderness and care. The God who constantly provides. As a matter of fact, in the intimacy of the Hebrew language those words El Shaddai point to the picture of a mother with a little child in her arms, and she holds the baby to her breast and there does for that baby that only the mother can. The tenderness and beauty of a mother's provision for her child. Now, that's very lovely. But let's see if it says something to us.

El Shaddai – The God who provides. El Elyon – The God who controls. Now, we know quite well that there are any number of folks who claim to be the children of God who like to take advantage of God's provision. They like the God who provides. They like the God who holds them tenderly in his arms. They like the God who provides bread and water and milk and manna and protection. Oh yes. But remember, that the other side of the character of God is seen in God's control. And there are, alas, fewer of the children of God who appreciate that picture of him. We like his provision, but we're not so keen about his control.

But remember, dear, that you can't have half a God. There are lots of folks who wish they could. They like the God who provides. They're not so keen about the God who controls. But if we're to have God at all, we're not only to have his provision, but his control as well. And we have no claim to God's provision unless we are willing to place ourselves under the control of God.

Now, out of this first verse of the 91st Psalm these things appear. The man who is writing; the psalm itself with its very beautiful, description almost certainly of the journey through the wilderness; the rather strange phrases that suddenly become luminous when we connect them with this story of the travel through the wilderness. We think of the man upon whose shoulders the major responsibility rested. How often he would come to the end of his own resources. And how gracious God had been to provide a way and a means by which this man could enter into his presence and there spread out before him the needs and difficulties of this tragic and terrible journey through the wilderness. The secret place. We have watched a little bit as a shadow fell over the little tent.

And we have dared to look at two names of God that appear in that verse and to listen, I trust, as the two names of God remind us of the two sides of the character of God - the God who controls; the God who provides.

Now, this is what we've been looking at. And in the midst of it we have reminded ourselves of this, we cannot have half a God. We cannot have a God who provides for us unless we are willing to come under the shadow of his control.

Now, do you remember that the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans gives a phrase that shows these two sides of the character of God. In Romans 11:22 you will find this. "Behold the goodness (El

Shaddai) and the severity (El Elyon) of God.” The goodness and the severity of God.

Now we will not go any further tonight in our study, or in our thinking, regarding the 91st Psalm. But if we keep these things in our hearts, I'm quite sure that it will be of help and blessing to us as we step out of the blessedness of verse one and proceed down through the triumph and tragedy of the verses that follow in the lovely thing that Moses is writing when he is glorying in the greatness of God and in the provision of God and in the protection of God and in the privilege of his constant communion with God.

Now, it's been nice to be with you tonight. That's just a little simple outline there of the first verse of the 91st Psalm. And I hope it will whet our appetites to go further down through the psalm and notice some of the blessed stopping places as we go along. God be with you and bless you and I hope we'll see you again before too long.

Prayer:

Our Father, let Thy blessing be upon this dear company of Thy children. We thank Thee for this quiet place where we can meet and for the loveliness of our thought about this psalm that comes from this ancient background. This psalm holy with age and yet filled with a loveliness that is come to our hearts tonight and some of it, we trust, has been released in this room where we have been gathering. Bless these dear friends we pray Thee, in their own personal lives, in their family relationship, in their church responsibility, in the great job that we have of living the Christian life. In Jesus precious name we pray, Amen.

(audio ends)