

BULLETPROOF

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Psalm 16 and I Peter 1:3–9

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It will save you, but it will not protect you.

This was, in essence, the lecture I gave to our youth group every year when we went on the Appalachia Service Project summer mission trips. We would load up all our tools and old clothing and gloves and rakes and shovels and implements of destruction and head south for a week in July or August.

It was hot, of course—blistering, hideously, mind-meltingly hot. And every year, it seemed, we were assigned to replace a roof on a house, sometimes as high as two stories above the ground.

The ASP coordinator would show us how to rig safety lines. Essentially, it was a big rope strung between the chimneys on either end of the house, where it was anchored and secured.

Then each student and adult worker would be issued a harness or rope that went around the waist with a long tether clipped onto the anchor rope. The coordinator would demonstrate how it worked, and then he and I would give this mini-lecture:

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your safety tether. It is meant to save your life if you fall while working on the roof. And it will, in fact, save your life. But it will not protect you from injury. If you fall and this thing catches you, it is going to hurt really bad. You will probably break some bones—hopefully not your back. You will be bruised and burned by the rope, but you will probably survive. Your survival, however, will come at the expense of some pretty severe pain.

“In other words, if I were you, I’d try not to fall off the roof, even though you have a safety harness on. Okay?”

Everyone agreed that this was sound advice, and it must have been, because in six years of attending the Appalachia Service Project and hearing that lecture every year, no one in any of my groups ever fell off a roof. In fact, no one ever received a serious injury of any kind. A smashed finger, of course. A cut that didn’t require stitches, yes. Even a bonked head now and then. But never anything approaching the kind of damage that would have resulted from falling off a roof with the safety harness attached.

No one fell off a roof.

I have come to believe that the ASP coordinator’s admonition — “If I were you, I’d try not to fall off the roof” — is a good metaphor for life in general. There are many things in life that are set up, like that rooftop safety rig, to save us but not necessarily to protect us. And one of the most important of those things is God.

IN THE SCRIPTURES

Anyone who has ever thought or prayed about God's protection has had their doubts. Why wouldn't they? If God protects people, his choices about when and whom to protect seem pretty arbitrary.

A plane crashes and 100 people are killed, but five survive, giving thanks for God's protection. But what about the 100 who were not protected? Were they somehow unworthy? Did God not care about them? Did God have some grand scheme, some design or plan that required them to die a horrible death?

I don't know about you, but I have never been able to accept that kind of theology. There must be something else at work—some explanation that leaves God's grace and God's power intact.

Perhaps we will find it in the Bible.

The word "protect" or "protection" shows up in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible only about 34 times, and nearly half of those (16) are in the Psalms. This includes places where the word itself is not used but is strongly implied. All of these references are in the Old Testament. References to God protecting us do not appear at all in the New Testament.

Most of the time in these Old Testament references, protection comes through people whom God has sent with the commission to protect others. Direct divine intervention is mentioned fewer than half a dozen times in all of Scripture. It is simply not a major biblical theme.

In the Psalm appointed for today, Psalm 16, the psalmist—presumably David—opens with a plea for God's protection: "Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge." There is no assertion that God will protect him. Instead, David spends the next ten verses explaining to his reader and, I imagine, to God as well, why God should protect him. "I have not worshiped false gods. I have not associated with those who do. I have kept the commandments. I have respected the priests and the rabbis. I have done my best to do as God requires of me; therefore, God should protect me." For David, God's protection is part of a *quid pro quo* earned through right behavior.

Peter, in his first letter, which we read this morning, gives us a different and perhaps more helpful slant on the idea of God's protection.

Peter tells his readers that God's protection is not something that happens from time to time. It is already going on. And it is not protection against physical harm; it is protection for something specific. We are being protected by God, who has acted in and through Jesus Christ, in whom we place our faith—and that protection is protection for salvation. Let me put it in more modern terms:

In Jesus Christ, God bridged the separation and estrangement that divide us from each other, from God, and from God's creation. That is to say, God saved us from loneliness and despair. Peter believed that this salvation would be revealed at the end of all time. But Paul knew that

we are saved now and for all time. We need not be separated from God or each other or God's creation. We are saved from that.

But read the next verse, verse 6: "In this [salvation] you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials..." We are saved, he says, but we are not protected. We still suffer. We still feel pain. We still live in an imperfect and evolving universe with all its problems and difficulties.

The pain we suffer in this life, Peter says, is not punishment. We do not feel pain because we did something wrong, but because we are human—and pain is part of what it means to be human.

LIKE GOLD

Peter then offers two ways we can deal with life's pain and suffering.

One way is to identify ourselves as victims and let the pain rule our lives.

We can complain and grouse and whine and blame others for our pain. We can allow it to make us bitter and angry and generally hard to live with.

We've all known people like that, haven't we? My grandmother was like that. For the last twenty years of her life she suffered from severe gallstones that caused her terrible pain, but she refused to have the necessary surgery. She was sure that God had given her gallstones for a reason, and when the reason no longer applied—when God was good and ready—he would relieve her of them through a miracle.

Until that happened, she simply chose to suffer. And, oh my word, suffer she did. She was in terrible pain, and her pain made her short-tempered, angry, and bitter. She blamed God for making her suffer. She blamed us, her grandchildren, for not being better grandchildren and doing as she instructed so God could relieve her pain. She blamed our mother and Richard Nixon and everyone but her pet dachshund, Jake.

She lived through twenty years of bitterness and pain when a thirty-minute surgical procedure could have solved the problem. She chose the sin of separation and estrangement over the gift of grace and reconciliation.

The other way to deal with pain is to allow it to inform our lives but not to rule them—to see it not as punishment or a reason to separate ourselves from others, but as an opportunity for growth that brings us closer to others.

My friend Dennis was drafted into the army during the Vietnam War and was wounded twice during the Tet Offensive in 1968. He once told me that the war was the lowest time in his life. He felt that God had abandoned him. He hated the war, he hated the army, and he hated Vietnam.

Then he was wounded. He was patched up and sent back to his unit, but he was deemed unable to fight. When they discovered he could type, they put him in the office where military

personnel being sent home were processed out. There he discovered that his combat experience gave him a remarkable affinity for those soldiers, and his ability to type and manage bureaucratic red tape put him in a position to serve them by making the process go smoothly and painlessly — getting them home as quickly as possible.

And later, after he himself came home and became a minister, he realized that while he never would have chosen to go into the military — and hated most of his time in it — it had given him a great gift: a connection, and a deep relationship with other veterans who had shared the same experiences he had.

His pain, instead of separating him from others, actually brought him closer to them and allowed him to serve with more empathy and love than someone like me, who never experienced military service.

Peter points out in his letter that gold is purified by fire—by heat, indeed, by extreme heat.

It is the heat that burns off the impurities and makes gold more valuable. This heat, he says, is a metaphor for the suffering that life brings to us. No, God does not make us suffer in order to purify us. But when suffering comes, it can be a purifying agent if we will allow it to be.

And while God saves us, as we would save the purified gold, God does not protect us from the purifying heat that life brings.

God's grace saves us, but it doesn't protect us.

PROTECTION AS MITIGATION

God's grace does not protect us from all of life's pain. Some of it, maybe. God's grace can protect us from the pain of loneliness and guilt and even from despair, but it does not always do so. And sometimes we need protection from physical, emotional, and mental trauma. In those cases, grace is sometimes like a bulletproof vest. It offers a degree of protection, but if you get shot, it's still going to hurt badly. Experts tell us that if you are shot while wearing a bulletproof vest—and you are lucky enough for the bullet to hit the vest—you will still probably suffer broken ribs and even a bruised lung.

Sometimes God provides us with protections that, while they don't prevent the pain, may mitigate it to some degree. Those mitigating factors include our capacity for rational thinking and our ability to live in community.

Rational thought is one of those things that could save us a lot of pain if we would just employ it more often in our day-to-day lives. I know it sounds complicated and egg-headed, but it's not, really.

Dr. James Ryan, Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, gave a commencement address a few years ago that boiled rational thinking down to five essential questions everyone should ask before acting. They are:

1. Wait. What?

This slows things down and allows us to make sure we understand what is going on—and how and why.

2. I wonder...

This is the “think outside the box” question we should ask when we begin to analyze a situation and consider solutions. It opens up alternatives.

3. Couldn't we at least...

The idea is that if we can find common ground on something, perhaps we can solve problems and enact solutions based on what we agree on, rather than fighting over what we never will.

4. How can I help?

This question helps us know where, when, and how best to use what we have to offer. And it keeps us from wastefully duplicating efforts.

5. What really matters?

There are many things we want, a few things we need, and fewer still that truly matter. Go to those that matter first, and the others will tend to fall into place.

God may not protect us directly from the pains of life, but he does give us the ability to mitigate those pains—and even avoid some of them—through rational thinking.

And finally, he gives us **our capacity to live in community**, specifically the church. He gives us his church to help us, to uphold us, to make us whole, and to protect us so that he can save us.

It was August 3, 2016—an ordinary day in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Angela Martin, mother of two and grandmother of six, was driving east on I-94 when she saw a young woman climbing the fence on the Dale Street overpass, clearly intending to hurl herself into the heavy traffic below. Angela raced up the exit and ran across the overpass to where the young woman was. “Lord, help me,” she said in that moment. “I looked at her as one of my own.”

“No, honey, don't do this!” she pleaded. The young woman kept repeating, “My mom don't love me. My mom don't care for me.”

“But we love you!” Angela cried.

She was not the only one who felt that way. Other motorists stopped on the bridge and approached the fence. The young woman turned toward the traffic and let go of the fence. Just seconds before, Martin had reached through the fence and grabbed the young woman's T-shirt and belt. She hung on desperately, and soon others put their arms through the fence and grabbed the young woman in any way they could.

Angela yelled to a passerby to go down and stop the traffic. The passerby “started to run like she was in a race.” She was a tiny woman, but she grabbed a huge construction drum and rolled it onto the highway, yelling at cars to stop. It worked. Traffic halted. A truck driver backed his truck under the bridge to break the young woman’s fall, if it came to that.

Meanwhile, police officer Vlad Krumgant was heading west on the highway with his partner when he saw a woman dangling from the overpass, “held up by a giant mass of people,” as he put it. He called for backup and raced to the overpass, where he joined the people holding the young woman up.

Lucky Rosenbloom was half a block away and, from a distance, saw what looked like a lone police officer surrounded by a chaotic crowd. He feared the worst and thought he had to help the officer. When he arrived and realized what was happening, he moved in to relieve those who were tired of holding on. He grabbed the woman under her armpit.

“She was sweaty and slippery,” he said. “But everyone was determined they weren’t going to let go of that lady for any reason.”

Finally, another police officer arrived, retrieved a bolt cutter from his car, and began to snip a hole in the fence. Then, said Officer Krumgant, “**We collectively pulled the woman back through.**”

Deborah Ann Organ related this story—first reported by Mary Lynn Smith in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*—in the March issue of *The New Theology Review*. It is, she says, a metaphor for the role of the Church and church people. It is essential that we cling to each other in ways that strengthen and recover durable hope, even and especially in situations that appear hopeless.

It is a vision of how we protect one another and mitigate life’s pain for one another until that day when grace rules our lives, when hope springs eternal, when pain flees away, and all of God’s children stand before his throne, joining hands and singing songs of praise.

AMEN