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Pentecost 2 – Psalm 91 – Lock Shields Against Temptation  
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“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Every week we pray it here in church. But let’s just come out and say it: does the Lord actually follow through on this prayer? I mean, an honest look at our lives tells us that not only have we been subject to temptation, but very often we’ve succumbed to temptation as well. And evils are all around us – the devil attacks us with them, the world bombards us with them, and our own sinful flesh ambushes us with them. Does our Lord really hold up his end of the deal in the prayer that *he* taught us to pray?

Well as you might expect me to say, I believe the answer is a resounding *yes* – and our Psalm makes that clear for us today. See, it’s kind of like how the old Romans used to do it when they went into battles or put cities under siege. They had a special formation called *testudo*, the Latin word for “Tortoise.” Rows of soldiers would huddle together and totally enclose themselves behind a large shield wall all around the outsides and even over the top of the formation. When all the men were in place and their shields were locked tightly together, swords couldn’t get through, and neither could spears or arrows or just about anything else. In the *testudo* formation, the defenses of the Roman army were very nearly unbreakable. One ancient writer even said that “it is so marvelously strong that men can walk upon it and whenever they come to a narrow ravine, even horses and vehicles can be driven over it.”

In just the same way, our Psalm for today gives us a picture of the different godly forces that work together in our lives to multiply our strength to fend off temptation and deliver us from evil. In fact, it says our Lord protects us against temptation and evil in four important ways, and when we lock shields together against the attacks of the devil, we can have every confidence that God will not only answer our prayers but he will without a doubt also finally deliver us safely to his heavenly kingdom.

Now make no mistake about it, this world is a battlefield and we are involved in a life or death struggle. The devil wants nothing more than to hurt us and cut us off from God, because that’s the way that he can do the most harm and damage God’s intentions for his people. But in this war

against such a dangerous enemy, we fight as the army of Christ – and we have powerful weapons and powerful allies on our side. The first way our Lord protects us against temptation and evil is when we lock shields under the refuge of God’s faithful promises. “*I will say of the LORD, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust’ ... He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.*”

Here are two things I know for sure: my God never lies to me, never lets me down, always keeps his promises; and the devil only ever does exactly the opposite of that so that the Scriptures call him a murderer and the father of lies. I mean, when the unbelieving world, secular news outlets, godless internet posters, or whoever else drag God’s Word through the mud, who does that really sound like? It sounds like the devil, because that’s the devil’s work. He did it in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, he did it in with Jesus during his ministry, and he still does it in lots of ways today with us, too. He tries to discredit and distort God’s Word so that we lose our confidence and begin to doubt the Scriptures, because if he can get us to do that, then he knows we have no foundation to stand on, he can come at us with both barrels blazing, and it’s only a matter of time before he takes us down.

It can be pretty disheartening and disconcerting to think about how the devil and his evil forces can use God’s Word against us if we’re not ready for it. Just love each other and don’t judge me, they say; it’s in the Bible! And so all too often they twist and abuse God’s Word in order to condone sinfulness that leads only down the road to hell. But Christian friends, just know that the devil is no match for the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God in all its fullness, truth, and purity.

You know, I’ve sensed in the time I’ve been your pastor that sometimes people are surprised at how insistent we are about being in God’s house to worship and hear God’s Word regularly and often. Well this is the reason – it’s because you’re leaving yourself open to be a prime target for the devil if you’re not, and you’re shielded against his attacks and growing in God’s greatest spiritual gifts of faith and fellowship and service if you are. This is a high-stakes game we’re involved in! But when you know the Lord’s promises and cling to them for dear life, you stand on a solid foundation that can never be shaken. When you trust that our God is always watching over you and protecting you, you have a

mighty fortress that can never crumble. When God's Word and promises guide your life every day from morning till night, you can fight off the devil's temptations the same way Jesus did in his day, because for every lie the devil throws at you, there is a promise of God that exposes it, destroys it, and confirms your faith that much more that the Lord is faithful and his words are true and in every way trustworthy.

But as powerful as the Sword of the Spirit is in our fight against the devil, that's not all the help our Lord promises us. No, the next way our Lord protects us against temptation and evil is when we lock shields with his holy angels. *"For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."* In this sinful, broken world, bad things are bound to happen – whether they're directly the work of the devil or not. Things can hurt us, people can take advantage of us or harm us, the spiritual forces of evil in this world can try to overwhelm us – and if we're not careful, any and all of them can be damaging to our faith. But thanks be to God, we have guardians to escort us and take care of us on our way toward heaven.

Yes, as we walk the path of faith here in this world, there are many things that can trip us up. So God sends his angels to protect us on our paths, to clear our paths, and to strengthen us for the journey. The singular purpose of God's angels in this world is to serve those who will inherit salvation, and they are supernaturally strong, lightning fast, and solely dedicated to carrying out that purpose for our eternal good. These angels will not fail us, God himself promises it; and the devil and his demons aren't strong enough to stand against them. So in the fight against temptation, people of God, always remember that those who are with us are greater than those who are with them.

And as if that weren't enough, we have even greater assurances yet in our fight against temptation and evil. When you lock shields with a God who loves you, there can be no doubt that the battle is ours. *"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."* You can't help but notice that authority and certainty. *I will, I will, I will* – no doubt about it. There is nothing in this world stronger than love, and there is no love

stronger than God's. We belong to him; he claimed us as his own in Holy Baptism and he renews that covenant with us again and again in Holy Communion; we are his children and heirs of his heavenly kingdom, and there is no way anything will keep him from bringing us to eternal salvation and life. The devil's hatred for us is nothing compared to our God's love for us, and no matter what happens in this world – no matter how much it might seem like temptations win out and evil runs rampant – that's your answer to whether God hears your prayers and is faithful to his promises. Because our God loves us *that* much, he sees to it that even the worst things in this world ultimately serve a greater spiritual purpose for us, and even if the devil's schemes and sin's consequences should take our lives, they can never take our souls. They can only send us home to heaven forever.

So why can we be so confident in this fight against temptation and evil? It's because as great as everything we've already talked about is, here's the best part: we lock shields with a Savior who's already won the victory for us. Our Savior Jesus Christ not only had the power to crush the legion of evil spirits in our Gospel lesson today, just with his Word; no, he even went toe-to-toe with the devil in an all-out war for humanity, and he came out triumphant with a flawless victory. He lived the perfect life we needed in our place and then marched on to death for us – but even that *death* crushed the devil's head once and for all and won for us life and forgiveness. Forgiveness for every time we don't stand up to temptation and evil like we should. Forgiveness for when the devil's lies trick us yet again. Forgiveness that always trumps the devil's accusations. And forgiveness and justification that are God's final word and undeniable answer to our prayer, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." So that means that now, even if the devil makes us stumble and fall, we know that the ultimate victory Jesus won over him is so much greater than the little skirmishes he might ever win over us. After all, by faith, we've got a spiritual *testudo* formation all around us every day to protect us from temptation and deliver us from evil. And with God's Word guiding us, God's angels guarding us, God's love surrounding us, and God's Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, leading the charge for us, who can possibly stand against us? When we lock shields together against temptation and evil, that's a war we cannot lose. God grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.