

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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“A Little Dab’ll Do Ya!”
Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16; Luke 4.1-13
Russ Dean, February 21, 2010

The men’s hair pomade was created in Birmingham, England, in 1928, the wet-hair look having been popularized by icons of the “roaring 20s” such as Rudolph Valentino, the “Latin Lover.” It lost popularity when men shifted to a dry look, but because we live in the age of wear-your-hair-anyway-you-want, Brylcreem made a comeback in the 1990s. And if you “Google” its commercial jingle you’ll find “A Little Dab’ll Do Ya!” listed in the hall of fame.¹ It’s one of those phrases that lives even beyond the product’s popularity. (I remembered the phrase, but had to get on the internet to be reminded a little dab of what will do ya!)

“A Little Dab Will Do Ya!” – Brylcreem. And faith. Apparently.

Faith intimidates a lot of people. Even “people of faith” – because, as we recently discussed,² some of us don’t have it... None of us has enough of it... Or we think we don’t. Such insecurity leads us to incorrectly read a text like today’s Psalm. *God will command the angels to guard...* whom? Whom will the angels “*bear up,*” lest they even stump a toe? Well, Jesus, of course. You know, “He could have called ten thousand angels ...”³ and all that stuff. He, the Son of God, is the one of whom scripture speaks. God will bear him up.

¹ See Brylcreem, <http://www.classicthemes.com/50sTVThemes/thoseOldJingles.html>. “A Little Dab Will Do Ya,” music by John P. Atherton; words by Hanley Norins, (c) 1946 [exact copyright filing date and registration number under investigation]. “Bryl-creem, a little dab’ll do ya, / Use more, only if you dare, / But watch out, /The gals will all pursue ya,-- / They’ll love to put their fingers through your hair. / Bryl-creem, a little dab’ll do ya, / Bryl-creem, you’ll look so debonair. / Bryl-creem, the gals will all pursue ya, / They’ll love to RUN their fingers through your hair.”

² See my sermon from February 10, “I Am, Therefore I Think.”

³ The chorus of the gospel song, “Ten Thousand Angels,” by Ray Overholt, says, “He could have called ten thousand angels, to destroy the world and set him free. He could have called ten thousand angels, but he died alone, for you and me.” Because this represents the Christology of my formative years, the Psalm actually caught me a little off-

But that's not what the Bible says.

The Psalmist says the angels will be there for you. The Oxford Annotated Bible calls Psalm 91 a "Meditation on God as the protector of the faithful."

But the protector of the how-much faithful? Maybe it's human nature, maybe it's life in a super-sized culture, but we seem never satisfied without quantifying things. How much money? How much horsepower? How much faith? Luke reminds us later in his gospel, in an exchange between the disciples and their teacher, that faith is not a quantifiable substance. With faith, it's quality, not quantity. Faith is a discipline, not an acquisition. It is something we practice, not something we claim to have – certainly not something to boast about having a lot of. The more you claim to have of it, the less you probably do. Faith is an attitude. A practice. And a little dab... a little dab'll do ya!⁴

So it's not that Jesus had a truckload of faith when the tempter pushed him to the edge. It's that his little dab had already been forged in the fire of practice when that moment came.⁵ It matters not where you find yourself along the spectrum of theological belief, in the difficult moments of life, every person falls back on something -- and the confidence of scripture is an excellent place to land. In a trifecta of challenge, the temptations to power and popularity and protection, Jesus finds the resolve to resist in a faith forged in the ancient truth of scriptural hope. Maybe you can't quote enough scripture to soften your landings. If not, listening to this ancient hope, truth affirmed by faith-filled believers and faithful doubters for centuries, would be an appropriate discipline for Lent. You might be surprised how listening 28 minutes a day, or

guard – "Oh, yea... the devil wasn't quoting scripture about Jesus; the Psalmist is talking about all/any who are faithful!"

⁴ Quoting from Luke 17.5-6, Bishop James Pike says, "What we need is fewer beliefs and more belief. When the disciples said, 'Lord, increase our faith,' they did not mean, help us to believe more things than we now believe. What they meant was, where our faith is weak, make it strong, or help us to make it stronger."

⁵ I'm sure that some people will brace at my implication that Jesus only had a "little dab" of faith. I am simply trying to reinforce the point that faith is not a quantifiable substance.

reading a few chapters on your own can change your outlook, and strengthen your little dab of faith.⁶

It is ironic that this Psalm is now central to the Jesus story: “*God will command the angels... to guard you in all your ways,*” because in the most trying moment in Jesus’ life, the angels seemed nowhere to be found. So be reminded – it was the devil of Luke’s narrative who quotes that chapter and verse, not Jesus. Jesus knew the power of a faith built on inherited hope, the legacy of generations who dared to affirm a confidence in tomorrow based on the assurance of God’s presence – which is often translated (maybe mistranslated) as God’s protection. Divine protection is a common refrain of the faithful: *Because you have made the Lord your refuge... the angels will bear you up...* But in the very next verse the Psalmist also claims, *The young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.* Really?

Every few years we read of some enthusiastic fool who dies when he encounters the fangs of a rattlesnake in some ill-conceived moment of ecstatic worship, because (you know) he had not enough faith to save him. Everyone in his right mind knows such unfortunate deaths result not from a lack of faith, but a real scarcity of common sense! We don’t tempt fate by testing God’s “protection.” *Treading on serpents* is a hyperbole of confidence, an intentional overstatement that is not meant to be understood literally – as most people know. Why, then, are we so prone to read so many other verses in the same mis-guided way?⁷ As Jesus taught us, the salvation of God has nothing to do with physical/literal protection.⁸

⁶ We are participating during Lent in a program promoted by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship called “You’ve Got the Time.” A digital recording is provided, and at 28 minutes a day the New Testament can be heard during Lent.

⁷ As a liberal interpreter of scripture I have sometimes been accused of “picking and choosing” what I want to believe and what I don’t. I beg to differ. I believe it all – but I believe it all, in the same way. I do not believe much of scripture (if any) was intended to be heard, understood, believed concretely (literally interpreted). Events recorded in scripture, even if they refer to actual, historical occurrences, never intend primarily or only to convey a

The Psalmists words are meant to convey the resolve of a people who dare to hope against hope, to laugh in the face of adversity⁹, to trust in fundamental justice as the movement of this universe¹⁰, to believe in the essential goodness of people. Jesus' faith was built on a realistic resolve wrapped in confident joy. It was not built on wishful thinking. For neither did God protect Jesus from the tempter, nor from the forging fire of he cross. If faith is based in reality, more people than not end up speaking with Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego of the old story, who stood before the fiery furnace of their imminent execution and said, "*We believe God will protect us... but if not... we will remain faithful*" (Daniel 3.18)¹¹. This is resolve! And more than not we stand with Jesus who prayed, "*Lord, please, take this cup from me...*" (Luke 22.42) only to finally cry out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me*" (Matthew 27.46). True faith must be forged in the fire of such cries of perceived abandonment. In test. In temptation.

Religion is for people who are not in touch with these realities of life. Faithful resolve is for the rest of us – who will not give up hope. Faith is about practice, and I hope you do. But you don't need much of it to work with – because A Little Dab'll Do Ya!

May it be so!

story. There is always a larger, non-literal, meaning. The event becomes an allegory or a metaphor with a larger meaning. On the contrary, it is the so-called "literalists" who "pick and choose," and this Psalm is a case in point. Few "literalists" would affirm the instruction to handle snakes, literally– yet they will insist that the "divine protection" (of the very same Psalm) is to be understood literally.

⁸ Psalm 91 ends with these words: *With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.* In the context of this Psalm, "salvation" means a literal, physical salvation (*He will command his angels... [who will] bear you up...*). But Jesus' life indicates that such protection should not be expected, literally. Just as Jesus redefined his followers' understanding of Messiah, his life (and death and resurrection) should redefine our understanding of God's "salvation" as "divine protection."

⁹ I was thinking here of the words of Proverbs 31.25, "*Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.*"

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., quoting from abolitionist, Theodore Parker (c. 1850s), said, "We shall overcome because 'the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice...'"

¹¹ See my sermon from July 27, 2008, "The Most Powerful Words in the Bible."