

ABIDING IN THE SHADOW OF THE ALMIGHTY

Psalm 91

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The dominant theme of this beautiful psalm is the confidence of those who put their trust in God. In contrast with the somewhat gloomy Psalm 90, which highlights human frailty, this psalm reflects sunlit hills of hope, singing a song of the believer's quiet assurance. J. J. Stewart.

According to *Perowne*, the psalm sounds as if the writer took Paul's words "*If God is for us, who is against us?*" (**Romans 8:31b**) and expressed them in rich, hyperbolic Hebrew poetry. Uniquely, this song switches between first, second, and third person. Because of this characteristic, it has been proposed that the psalm was written for an antiphonal performance. However, this changing of persons could have arisen from the way the writer chose to state the glorious truths filling his mind as he spoke to himself, to others, and to God.

Floating through the psalm is an unstated "*if*"—the only "*if*" that makes any real difference to the servant of God. It points to the condition of fellowship with God. If one walks closely, intimately, and continuously with God, he will be surrounded by His protection and care. When the psalm is read with this understood "*if*" in the reader's mind, the promises of God flow from the song like a stream from the purest of springs.

1. Our Safety Is of the Lord – *Psalm 91:1-4*

He who dwells in the secret place of the Highest Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. ²I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust." ³Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the [a]fowler And from the perilous pestilence. ⁴He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler vs. 1-4.

Verses 1-4 introduce the subject of our safety. The major emphasis of these verses falls upon God Himself. He is our refuge and strength. It is His love and His power which keep us. In verse 1 God is called the "*Most High*" and the "*Almighty*" and both terms stress His position and His limitless power.

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High: God has a *secret place* for His own (**Psalm 27:5, 31:20**), and it is a place to *live in*. Those who dwell there *abide under the shadow of the Almighty*, knowing His protection, comfort, and care. Remember again, the emphasis is on God. God is the one who hides us. It is spiritual

not a physical place. This points to our relationship before the trouble. The name of the Lord is a strong tower (*spiritual*), the righteous (*relationship*) run into it and they are safe.

He is my refuge and my fortress: The one who lives intimately with God knows the greatness of His protection. God Himself becomes like a mighty refuge and fortress for the believer.

Verses 3 and 4 poetically develop the theme which has been introduced in the first two verses. God is our deliverer (v. 3). His keeping power is portrayed using two images, a mother bird and metal armour (v. 4). The mother bird safely tucks her young under her wings. There they are secure. There is a very tender touch here, stressing the warmth of God's love and concern. Not only is there a tenderness in God's care, but there is also a toughness, as is seen in the imagery of the metal armour (v. 4). From the perspective of the protected, God is warm and tender; from the vantage point of the attacker, God is as strong as steel.

The dangers are likened to a trapper's snare and a deadly pestilence (v. 3). We should understand these two figures of speech as highly symbolic, emphasizing the elements of surprise and danger. The trapper's snare is not seen until it is too late. The deadly pestilence is fatal. Whether the danger is invisible or incurable, God's protection is ever adequate.

2. The Implication of God's Protection – Vs 5-10

*⁵You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, Nor of the arrow that flies by day,
⁶Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, Nor of the destruction that lays waste
at noonday. Vs 5-6*

The first four verses have turned our attention to the source of our safety; verses 5-10 urge us to consider the confidence such security inspires. No matter what evil threatens (or appears to), we are safe in the shadow of the Almighty. In these verses the more negative or preventative aspects of our safety are explored. Later, the more positive dimensions are discussed. The results of resting in the shelter of the Most High can be summarized by two expressions: no fear (vv. 5-6) and no fall (vv. 7-10).

Since the source of our safety is God Almighty, no threat or danger, no matter how great, is mightier than God's keeping power. The dangers which we face are in no way minimized by the psalmist. In fact, a broad range of poetic imagery is employed to encompass the entire range of danger which one might dread. The "arrows," "pestilence" and "destruction" are all poetic devices describing danger, rather than specific definitions of the kind of danger we face. In other psalms human opposition is described in terms of "lions," "arrows" and "snares" (cf. *Ps. 57:4-6; 64:1-6*).

Verses 5 and 6 refer to night and day, the darkness of night and the light of day. I understand the psalm to be assuring the saint that God gives us 24-hour protection. There is no threat, whether seen or unseen, anticipated or unexpected, which can catch God unaware and unable to protect us.

Verses 7-10

⁷ A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand; But it shall not come near you. ⁸ Only with your eyes shall you look and see the reward of the wicked. ⁹ Because you have made the Lord, who is my refuge, Even the Most High, your dwelling place, ¹⁰ No evil shall befall you, Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling; Vs 7-10

In verse 7 the security of the saint is portrayed in a different way. Even when men are “*falling about us like flies*” (even if we are outnumbered, consider the servant of Elisha and the men of Syria), God is able to keep us. Insurance companies are very interested in statistics. They want to know if you engage in dangerous activities like skydiving or motorcycle racing. Statistics don’t impress God, nor do they impede His protection. No matter how disproportionate the odds, God’s protection is certain.

There is perhaps no better historical illustration of the truth of verse 7 than the exodus. In **Exodus 7-12** the plagues were poured out upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians. In every case, the Egyptians suffered, but not the Israelites who trusted in God.

“But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing will die of all that belongs to the sons of Israel.” And the Lord set a definite time, saying, “Tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land.” So the Lord did this thing on the morrow, and all the livestock of Egypt died; but of the livestock of the sons of Israel, not one died (Exodus 9:4-6, NASB).

Hail destroyed the crops, the cattle, and the servants of the unbelieving Egyptians, but the Israelites were not harmed (**Exodus 9:18-26**). The first-borns of the Egyptians were all killed by the angel of death, but those who believed God (the Israelites), applying the blood of a lamb to the doorposts and the lintel of their house, were not touched (**Exodus 12**).

This brings us to another aspect of the dangers from which every saint is secure. Not only are we safe from the opposition of wicked men and the forces of evil, we are also protected from the righteous wrath of God. In **Psalms 90:7-10**, Moses saw man’s suffering as a deserved punishment for sin from the righteous hand of God. Those who “ *dwell in the shelter of the Most High*” need not fear God’s wrath, which is the most awesome danger of all.

I think this is the primary thrust of verses 8-10: “*You will only look on with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. For you have made the Lord, my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place. No evil will befall you, nor will any plague come near your tent.*” The wicked will reap divine wrath, which is their recompense (v. 8), but those who have placed their trust in God (v. 9) will never suffer God’s righteous wrath (v. 10).

The protection of those who abide under the shadow of the Almighty should wipe away all unwarranted fear. With God as our shield, we need not dread the opposition of either human or superhuman forces. With God as our refuge, we should not fear, and we cannot fall. We will certainly not fall under God’s wrath, and neither will we fall under the terror of any other. In the words of the New Testament:

*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (**Romans 8:31-39**).*

This does not mean that the saints will never suffer, for **Psalm 90** has already spoken of the condition of man in this present world. In verse 5 we are not told that there is no night terror, but only that we need not fear it when we are under the Divine wings of protection. We are not guaranteed success in every venture nor told that we will never fail, only that we will not fall from God’s purposes and from His protection.

3. God’s Assurance Policy – Verses 11-13

Do you have an insurance policy? They guarantee you with an assurance to provide what is stated on the policy you have purchased if the terms and conditions are realised.

*¹¹ For He will give His angels charge concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. ¹² They will bear you up in their hands, lest you strike your foot against a stone. ¹³ You will tread upon the lion and cobra, The young lion, and the serpent you will trample down. **Verse 11-13.***

Verses 11-13 comfort us by reminding us, that God’s means of protection are greater than Satan’s means of opposing us. God employs His angels to watch over us. They guard us in all our ways (v. 11).

Verse 12 dramatically describes the extent of God’s care through His angels. Even in minimal danger (“*Lest you strike your foot against a stone*”), God’s servants, the angels, could bear us up to avoid it. The promise of protection is stated in a figure

of speech to emphasize the minute matters to which God's care extends. While God's protection extends to the smallest matters, His prevention may include trials both great and small.

In verses 5-10 we saw that God's protection was intended to put away unhealthy fears and to prevent us from fallings. These were primarily negative benefits: no fear and no fall. In verse 13 we observe the positive results of the safety that God provides through His angels. Here we find much more than a passive protection. We are told that we will kill cobras and trample down lions.

Now this is something entirely new and exciting. Fear is a paralysing force. It causes us to become passive, rather than to be aggressive. Fear keeps us from taking initiative and doing anything which is not "safe." Once our inhibiting fears are swept aside by an appreciation of our safety in God's care, we need not be reticent and retiring. We can boldly confront and even defeat the most fearful opponent. We will take on "lions and cobras" because we know we are safe in God's keeping, even in the midst of danger.

4. God's Promise of Protection – Verses 14-16

14 "Because he has loved Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him securely on high, because he has known My name. 15 He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him, and honor him. 16 With a long life I will satisfy him, And let him behold My salvation." (NASB)

Our safety is only as certain as the guarantee of the God who promises it. We are not safe because we hope so, but because God says so. Just as a buyer is assured by a written guarantee from the manufacturer, so we are assured by God's personal promise to protect us in verses 14-16. This is the "last word" in terms of our safety.

We must be able to answer two questions before we can appreciate the promises found in these verses: "What exactly is God promising to do?" "On what basis does God promise to do it?"

Let us consider what it is that God has promised in verses 14-16. Two terms, "deliver" (v. 14) and "rescue" (v. 15), indicate that God has promised to deliver those who are in danger or great peril. Either God will spare us from a dangerous circumstance, or he will bring us safely through the danger. God's promise is that we should not fear for we cannot fall (vv. 5-10), and He cannot fail (vv. 1-4).

More than just to help us, God has promised to honour us. God says of the one who knows His name, "I will set him on high" (v. 14, KJV). In verse 15 He promises to honour him. This means that God will do far more than merely "save us by the skin of our teeth"; He will deliver us with dignity and glory. God's deliverance of Israel at the exodus was glorious. In verses 14-16 God promises deliverance and honour.

God promises not only His protection from disaster, but His presence in danger. This is the assurance of the words, “*I will be with him in trouble*” (v. 15). At times He will pluck us from danger, but when He chooses to preserve us through it, He does not abandon us. The three young Hebrew men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, were not alone in Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace (***Daniel 3:25***), nor was Daniel alone in the lion’s den (***Daniel 6:22***). Our Lord personally appeared to Paul during the night as he was imprisoned, threatened by an angry mob (***Acts 23:11***). Verse 16 takes God’s deliverance one step further. God will not only save us from death, but He will also give us long life. This promise should be understood in the light of the Mosaic Covenant (e.g. ***Deuteronomy 28:1-14, Ephesians 6:13***).

This, however, was not a guarantee nor a simple formula for success. I understand the term “salvation” to cover a very broad range of meaning, from deliverance out of danger, to long life, to the eternal life which the saint has by faith in God (even though the Old Testament saint did not understand this as fully as we do today). God therefore promises help, honour and a hope for eternal life.

Conclusion

Man’s most urgent need is deliverance from the ultimate danger—eternal judgment and separation from God’s presence forever (***2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 20:12-15***). If you have never come to a personal faith in God, you must first recognize your sinful condition and the danger which this creates, repent from your sins, confess Christ and be baptise for the remission of your sins and be added to Christ, then and then alone can you enjoy the promises of Psalm 91. For the erring child of God, you will need to return as the prodigal son, and He is faithful and just to forgive.

This is the terms and conditions of Psalm 91, faithfulness to our relationship with God, that is the unspoken if. May God bless us always and protect us from the evils around us in Jesus’ name, amen.

References

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