

Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 91
ABC 8/8/21

In the gospels we read of Jesus & His disciples sailing across the Sea of Galilee. During the trip a storm blows in & threatens to sink the ship which is taking on water. While the disciples fear for their lives, Jesus is soundly sleeping in the back of the boat. In desperation they wake Him, but He doesn't respond with fear. He simply tells the storm to cease & then rebukes His friends, saying, **Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?** (4:35-40). While we may be tempted to shake our heads at the disciple's lack of faith, most often we act just like them. Some situation overwhelms us & we respond fearfully & wonder if God has forgotten us. Ever been there? We all have. So where can safety be found? The search for security is always a preoccupation of the human heart. Ps 91 is a psalm of confidence that reminds us that God protects & preserves those who are His. Life will bring trouble & we will face danger but as God's children we can live above fear & trust that He'll never let us fall. It's a psalm for those who're surrounded by danger & it tells us how we're to react in the midst of that danger. Spurgeon wasn't overstating it when he wrote, *there is not a more cheering psalm; its tone is elevated & sustained throughout.*¹ This is both a triumphant & a troubling psalm. It's triumphant because it guarantees that God will be our guard & guide throughout this life. But it's troubling because it seems to be based on an unworkable theology. How do suffering & disease & death fit in this? What about when we pray for healing only to hear silence?² Moses, David, Paul, & all servants of God, faced danger in accomplishing God's will, & He always saw them through. However, Heb 11:36 cautions us that **others** were tortured & killed, yet their faith was just as real. The psalmist knows it's absolutely vital we understand how to react to difficult & fear-filled times. We need to believe that we are protected by God, that we're under His care. In the words of Paul in Rom 8:28, **God Himself causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.** We've got to have that as our foundation as we respond to the dangers, difficulties, & hard circumstances of life, or we'll be left vulnerable & scared when those times come. As we abide in Christ (1, 9) we won't avoid facing

¹ *Treasury of David*, Ps 91

² Donald Williams & Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Psalms 73-150*, vol. 14, The Preacher's Commentary Series, p 156

dangers, but we can face them knowing God is with us.³ God intends every Christian to experience a measure of safety & security in an unsafe & insecure world. If we don't rightly understand the security we have in God, we'll look for it elsewhere. God intends us to be safe in Him, not in our circumstances. This Psalm tells us how to trust God in difficult days; how to know safety & security in God when nothing about the situation we're facing is safe or secure. The purpose of this psalm is to bring us to a right trust of God in the midst of danger. As we go through this psalm notice that the psalmist begins in the 1st person, claiming his own trust in God, using the pronoun **I**. In vs 3 there's a shift to the 2nd person as the psalmist tells us that God protects those who are His, using the pronoun **you**. Then, in the final 3 vss we hear God's voice as He restates that He'll protect & care for those who trust Him, once again using the pronoun **I**, but this time in reference to God Himself.

1. The Psalmist Speaks (1-2) Vss 1-2 give the theme that's developed in the rest of the psalm. Vs 1 answers the question, *To whom does this psalm apply?* **1**

It's those who **dwell & abide** in God that this psalm applies to. Before the unknown author tells us how we can experience security in God, he wants us to know he's not telling us about something theoretically, something he doesn't know about. He's found this security, not in his circumstances, but in His God. He knows he's safe in God. As soon as he makes the statement in vs 1 he immediately declares his own faith before exhorting us to do the same. In response to God's promise in vs 1, the psalmist gives his confession in vs **2**.

The psalmist piles up metaphors for security & names of God in order to drive his point home. **Dwells** means to remain, stay, tarry, have as one's abode, to spend the night. **Abide** means to sit, to stay. **Shelter & shadow** suggest the imagery of a bird under whose wings the baby birds find safety (4). **Refuge & fortress** suggest a stronghold or military installation (cf 18:2; 61:3).⁴ All together it's a place of safety & security. More than 100 names for God are used in Scripture. *Each name means something, each reveals an important aspect of His nature or points to one of the*

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Exultant*, 1st ed., "Be" Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2004), 16.

⁴ Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms*, ed. Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, vol. 5, p 697

*ways in which He relates to us. We don't really know God until we know Him by name.*⁵ The name **Most High** tells us God is higher than all the kings of the earth & all the false gods of the nations. He's the strongest of the strong. He's supreme. Calling Him **Almighty** says He's the all-powerful, all-sufficient God who's adequate for every situation & can do everything He wants to do. He is the **Lord, Yahweh, Jehovah, I am who I am** (Ex 3:14), the covenant-making & keeping God who's always faithful to His promises. & then, **My God, Elohim**, the powerful Creator of all, the personal God whose greatness & glory surpasses anything we can imagine. Using these names of God suggest the power of the Creator-God as well as the loving-kindness of the covenant-keeping God. All of this is brought together in the confession, **He is my refuge & my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.** For this psalm to apply to us, He must be our God & we must be dwelling in Him. Is He your Lord & God? Is He your refuge? This psalm's promises are for you only if He is. Do you live in close fellowship with God? Do you rest in the shadow of the Almighty? Is He your habitual dwelling place? God Himself can be & will be your **shelter** in every danger. He is your **shadow**. Ever been out on a blazing hot afternoon, longing to find a tree to be shaded by? & when you found it you immediately received relief. The psalmist is saying God is our relief & **refuge**. Our safe place is in the intimacy of God's presence. This is a picture of *protection at all times & from all threats.*⁶ It's a total & comprehensive protection. In a world of danger, a promise of safety, is being made. The promise isn't the absence of danger, but of coming through all danger, unscathed, safe in God. There's a great need for us to seriously examine who or what we really trust in. Who or what gives us confidence to go on? What gives us peace? Who or what makes us feel safe? Do we really trust God for these things? David said in Ps 4:8, **in peace I will both lie down & sleep, for You alone, O Lord, make me to dwell in safety.** Maybe you're thinking, *That's what I need. With what I'm facing, I need a fortress around me!* The psalmist says God is your **fortress**. Your security & safety doesn't come from your circumstances, your strength, your position, or your portfolio. It comes from who your God is. He's the **Almighty**, the **Most High**. There's no one greater than He is. Is He yours? We

⁵ Mary Kassian, *Knowing God by Name*, p

⁶ Christopher Ash, *Psalms For You*, p

must go to God as our place of safety. The psalmist isn't calling us to a life of avoiding all risks. It's not that we're to live a life of self-protection. It doesn't counsel us to hide ourselves from all dangers. But it calls for us to take refuge in God, to face life courageously, without fear. With the theme of this psalm clearly established, that God will give security & **shelter** to those who dwell in Him, the author goes on to explain this.

2. The Psalmist Explains In vss 3-13 we have an extended explanation of what God does for the person dwelling in Him. While he'll experience suffering & evil in this fallen world, he'll also know divine protection & deliverance. Vs 3 sets the tone for this section. **3**

God will save the trusting person from 2 kinds of dangers: the subtle snare of enemies & disease or pestilence. But will He really? We've all heard stories like this one:

Lord Craven, a Christian, lived in London when the plague ravaged it in the 15th century. In order to escape the spreading pestilence Craven decided to leave the city for his country home, as many of his social standing did. He ordered his coach & baggage made ready. But as he was walking down one of the halls of his home about to leave, he overheard one of his servants say to another, *I suppose by my Lord's quitting London to avoid the plague that his God lives in the country & not in town.* It was a straightforward & apparently innocent remark. But it struck Lord Craven so deeply he canceled his journey, saying, *My God lives everywhere & can preserve me in town as well as in the country. I will stay where I am.* So he stayed in London. He helped the plague victims, & he didn't catch the disease.⁷

God does protect like that. But does this happen every time? Of course not. The psalmist isn't saying those who trust God never get sick & are spared from all disease. We know better. Christians do get sick & die. So how do we understand this psalm? Hang with me & we'll get there. Vs 3 begins, **For it is He...** which emphasizes & amplifies the care of our God. He gets completely involved in the welfare of His children. If that's not enough, look at **vs 4**.

The one who puts his faith in God is encircled within God's protecting power. 2 pictures are given, a mother bird placing her protective wings over her young & the military metaphor of a protective **shield & bulwark**. God's care combines the warm protectiveness of a bird with the hard, unyielding strength of armor. It all has to do with God's character, described as **faithfulness**. The Hebrew word for **faithfulness** is based on the word for *truth* & what's involved here is God's faithfulness to His promises, that is, to His Word. In other words, it's when we believe God's Word, His truth, & act

⁷ Told by James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42-106: An Expository Commentary*, p 749

upon it that we find Him to be faithful to what He's promised. We learn that He is in truth our **shield** from dangers & our **bulwark** against enemies.⁸ What is the result of resting in God? **5-6**

Having God as our shelter & refuge gives us strength & courage. When we're fearful, it's an indication we fall short of true trust in God as our protector & comforter. To **not be afraid** implies there's something fearful in front of you, sickness, disease, death, or whatever. Trusting in God gives no exemption from life-threatening & destructive forces that are part of life, but it takes the sting out of them & enables them to be faced without fear. This isn't an absolute promise that every believer will be delivered from every problem. God's children aren't immune from physical plague & pestilence, but they're always guarded from destructive spiritual forces as they dwell in the Most High. Ours is a dangerous, sin-filled world. We will experience troubling things. But we don't have to fear them when they come. As Paul puts it in Rom 8:28, **we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God**, through nakedness, peril, pestilence, & all the rest. These words of Ps 91 are striking & could be misread to be saying that those who trust God will never experience troubles in this world, that God will deliver them out of every hard circumstances. But that isn't what the psalmist means. What the psalmist wants us to take comfort in isn't that God will spare us hard circumstances, even though He can & often does. That's not the ultimate reason why the psalmist wants you to be safe & secure. The ultimate reason he wants you to be safe & secure is because God's providence is comprehensive & yet miniscule. It stretches all the way from the big picture of all the universe down to the smallest detail of your life. Not a hair on your head can be touched apart from the sovereign discretion & will of your heavenly Father. Because of His faithfulness, He'll always deliver us or cover us, although it may not be in the way we want or expect. It's not that He'll spare us of all these difficult circumstances, but He will deliver & cover us in these difficult circumstances, enabling us to meet them unafraid. As we abide in God, there's nothing to fear in this world. If you know God, there's nothing in this world that can match His strength & power. If you trust in Him, He'll deliver you, cover you, no matter your circumstance. His protection is 24/7, both day & night, all the time. There is no limit to His

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42–106: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 750.

protection because He has full authority over all things. Stories abound of people who believe that because of their God they've been miraculously protected in desperate circumstances where others have perished. Vs 7 is often given as the basis for this belief. But what of those of equal faith who know no such miraculous protection & suffer & die? There is no answer to this unless we can affirm that even in death God is with us. We must share the faith Paul so challengingly expressed in Rom 8, climaxing with these words: **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, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (38–39). We are secure in Christ no matter our outward circumstances. & we can face them knowing God is in control. Vs 9 repeats the promise & confession of vss 1-2. **9**

Even in the most dire circumstances, we can depend on God's protection, because we know the security which comes from entrusting ourselves to the One who is our **refuge** (2, 9) & **dwelling place** (9; cf 90:1). That's a security which the **wicked** (8) can never know.⁹ It's not a promise that those who trust God will never die of disease or have troubles, but that they'll not suffer those or any other tragedies as God's judgment against them for their sin. Our sins, thankfully, have been atoned for by the blood of Jesus Christ. This is more than merely believing in God or coming to Him occasionally when danger threatens. It means resting in God continually & trusting Him at all times. Martin Luther wrote that this refers to *one who really dwells & does not merely appear to dwell & does not just imagine that he dwells* in God.¹⁰ God must be our dwelling place. We must reside daily with Him. If we've made the Most High our home, then the following is true. **10-13**

God doesn't guarantee that no evil will befall those who trust Him. But all who find **refuge** in Him will rest with the confidence that whatever happens to them is with His knowledge. Nothing happens outside of His will, whether **evil** or **plague**.¹¹ We aren't immune from sickness & tragedy. But knowing God is in control makes a difference as to how we react to everything that touches our lives. We don't have to fear. We know the vengeance of God isn't upon us. Nothing will happen

⁹ Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Theological Commentary, p 305

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms: Psalms 76–126*, vol. 2 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, p 208

¹¹ Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms (Revised Edition)*, ed. Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, vol. 5, p 699

to you that comes from His wrath. The theme of God's caring protection is further developed with the picture of God's **angels** accompanying the worshipper in all the circumstances of life, supporting & defending from harm, & enabling dangers to be overcome. It's hard to read vss 11-12 without thinking of the temptation of Jesus in Mt 4 & Lk 4 where the devil quotes these words to Jesus in order to tempt Him into a dramatic demonstration of His faith in God. Satan says jump & God's angels will save you. Jesus declines. If God had commanded Jesus to jump from the temple then the angels would have cared for Jesus, but to jump without the Father's command would have been presumption, not faith, & that would be tempting the Father.¹² & so Jesus responds with the words of Dt 6:16, **You shall not put the LORD your God to the test** (Mt 4:7; Dt 6:16). The security which God brings is something to be accepted in humble trust, not something to be used for personal glory. It's the security which enabled Jesus in the agony of the cross to say, **Father, into your hands I commit My spirit** (Lk 23:46; Ps 31:5).¹³ But notice that these vss weren't fully quoted by Satan. While this is the only vs of Scripture quoted by the devil, at least that we have record of, he misquoted it. He left out **in all your ways**, meaning in the ways marked out for us by God & not our own willful & sinful ways. That was the very nature of Christ's temptation. Satan wanted Jesus to go His own way rather than trusting God & being content with God's way, even if it meant going to the cross. The devil wanted Jesus to test God by jumping off the temple, trusting His Father to send angels to rescue Him & thus impress the people. Jesus wouldn't do it. Testing God by jumping off the temple wouldn't be going in the way God had given Him. It would be the very opposite of trusting God; it would be baiting or putting Him to the test. Jesus' trust in His Father also resulted in Satan's defeat, another part of the psalm the devil omitted. **13**

If we go in God's way, trusting Him to uphold us, then we will **tread upon the lion & the cobra**; we will **trample the young lion & the serpent**. Personally, I don't look forward to stepping on lions or snakes. The Bible describes Satan as **a roaring lion** (1 Pt 5:8) & the **serpent of old** (Rev 12:9; 20:2). Jesus triumphed over him by trusting God. Likewise, in Christ the righteous will be victorious over

¹² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Exultant*, 1st ed., "Be" Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2004), 18.

¹³ Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Theological Commentary, p 305

Satan too. Paul tells us, **The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet** (Rom 16:20). Here's another thought: When Jesus replied to Satan, He rejected the temptation to jump from the temple, trusting the angels of God to keep Him from being killed. But the angels were there anyway. After Satan was done we're told God's **angels came & began to minister to** Jesus (Mt 4:11). In other words, God was upholding Jesus even in the temptation.¹⁴ Later, God sent His angels to guard & keep & protect His Son. He didn't do it to spare Him from the cross. Where'd He do it? He sent an angel to minister to Him in the garden (Lk 22:43), to prepare Him for the cross. God didn't deliver Him from His troubles, but He covered Him in His troubles, & enabled Him to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. God permits terrible things to happen to His children: fires, pandemics, diseases, & death, just as He did to His own Son. But as His children, we know that nothing is out of His control. We trust our heavenly Father, while acting responsibly, living according to His will. We don't test the Lord to see to what extent He'll deliver us from troubles. We trust Him in the midst of our troubles.

While these aren't absolute promises for every believer in every circumstance, they're beautiful promises of God's protection, comfort, & care that are received & applied in us by the Holy Spirit. God will see us through every trial, sometimes by life & sometimes by death. But He's there every step of the way & we have nothing to fear.

3. God Speaks (14-16) The last 3 vss are set in the 1st person as God speaks promises & blessings over His people. He speaks specifically over those who love Him. It's been wonderfully noted that the last words of this psalm aren't spoken by God's people, but to God's people by God Himself.

14-16

The word translated **loved** isn't the common word for *love*. It indicates a strong desire, rooted in the attractive qualities of another person (cf Gen 34:8; Dt 21:11). There's a passion implicit in this word, a passion for God. It's a deep longing or desire. It's to cling, to cleave, & be passionate by choice. Don't wait for the feeling of love to come, but choose to think & act toward God in ways that express & build your love. This would include:

¹⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42–106: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 751.

- Spending time with God.
- Listening to Him.
- Reading what He's written to us.
- Speaking with Him.
- Thinking of & meditating on Him.
- Adoring & worshiping Him.
- Telling others of Him.
- Giving to God & making joyful sacrifices to Him & for Him.

God will be with the believer **in trouble** (15), which is a way of acknowledging that God doesn't always lift us out of troubles. Sometimes it's His will we endure them & learn & profit from them. We're told in Romans that we gain hope, develop character, & learn perseverance from what we suffer (5:3-4). But when we go through such circumstances, God goes through them with us. He sustains us in our sufferings. The promises & principles stated previously are repeated again, but this time from the perspective of God Himself. God will deliver His beloved & **set him securely on high**. Why? **Because he has known My name**. He knows His God & abides with & dwells in Him, having a real relationship with God. The essence of the security of which this psalm speaks lies in a relationship with God. The 2-way nature of this relationship is stressed in vs 14 & in the 1st line of vs 15. God's assuring words, **I will deliver, I will protect, & I will answer**, find their counterpart in the words, **he has loved Me, he knows My name, & He will call upon Me**. Those who know His name are those who worship Him because they're gripped by what He's revealed of Himself. God promises His care in many different ways: **I will deliver, I will set him securely, I will answer, I will be with him, I will rescue & honor him, I will satisfy him, I will let him see My salvation**. The point is clear: God offers safety & rescue for those who are His. But these promises aren't universal, they're reserved for the people of God, those who know Him, hold fast to Him, & call on Him. This is a relationship that's made possible only through repentance & trust in Jesus Christ, whom God sent to be our Savior. God will satisfy us, satiate us with life. As Jesus put it, **I came that they might have life, & might have *it* abundantly** (Jn 10:10). God will ensure that His people experience all that's indicated by the word **salvation**. This **salvation** may mean help & deliverance during life, as in 50:23, or the joy of beholding the glory of God after a satisfied, abundant life.

Because the security of which this psalm speaks is based upon a relationship with God, it finds its NT counterpart in the lives of those who are **in Christ**. As 1 Jn 5:4-5 puts it, **this is the victory that**

has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? Such belief, of course, is never just intellectual assent. It involves commitment & trust. It offers a security which the world can neither give nor take away.¹⁵ God tells us that we're safe, not in being rescued from every evil circumstance in life, but we're secure in faith in Him, a faith that is evidenced & manifested by our love for God, our knowledge of God, & our dwelling with God. Those who trust in Him will know His covering & His care, whether He delivers us from our circumstances or whether He covers us in our circumstances. This is the God's response to the person who dwells & lives in intimacy with Him. He will know God's presence, God's power, God's protection, & God's provision. That's **salvation**. In these last 3 vss God speaks personal & wonderful blessings over those who love & know Him. God doesn't promise that you'll escape from suffering, but He does promise that He'll use the suffering which He's appointed for His own purposes & that He'll cover you, even though He may not always deliver you.

We know the psalmist didn't always trust God, none of us do. The only One who ever fully trusted God is King David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus. When we recognize that Ps 91 is fulfilled in Jesus, we can see the full truth of the final verses: intimate & committed love from God the Son to God the Father. These promises are His. The psalm is promising safety to God's King, security & victory are His. In a world of danger, God's Son will be safe, safe from suffering & safe from the wicked. & yet, instead of being saved from the wicked, the Lord Jesus dies in their place. These promises of safety seem to be disproven, because Jesus suffered immensely. It isn't until we realize that it was through His death, resurrection, & ascension that Jesus ultimately came to experience these promises in their fullness. Jesus experienced suffering in order to achieve our salvation & is now eternally secure & victorious. He is God's King, who now rules & reigns in perfect safety. Through faith in Him, we can come into God's eternal security. This promise of safety is ours in Christ. Does this mean total security & prosperity in this life? Of course not. It didn't mean that for the Lord Jesus, & it doesn't mean that for us. The fact that these promises are for us doesn't guarantee

¹⁵ Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Edinburgh: W.B. Eerdmans; Handsel Press, 1998), 306.

freedom from pain, illness, or suffering in this life. It doesn't mean we won't experience violence or plagues. & it doesn't mean we're promised immunity from viruses or going through disasters. But it does mean, in the final analysis, we are safe. Genuinely safe. Like Jesus, we too will experience a resurrection. A final rescue from all danger. & we'll be with Him & we'll be safe, eternally safe. This means that when danger comes or when pestilence strikes, we can face the threats realistically, knowing that ultimate safety is still ours. We can face risks sensibly, with both courage & composure, being prayerful & practical. This psalm helps us live wisely now, in the midst of a dangerous world. Because, no matter what happens to us, we know we're safe in the shadow of the Almighty. When we make God our refuge then He has us. Cancer, Covid, car accidents, enemies, & opponents don't have charge over us. God does. We're in His hands & we're completely safe there. If we choose God as our shelter we know nothing can affect our eternal safety in God. We know that trouble, famine, danger, nothing present or in the future, not even death, can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. To be safe in Christ is ultimate & eternal safety. It's this truth that allows us to be safe & secure, & brave & courageous in a world that's anything but safe & secure. May God grant that we would believe His Word & that He would enable us to abide in Him & know that He is with us in the spiritual battle of life & that, in Christ, God gives us eternal life with Him & we'll be dwelling in His house forever (Jn 14:2-3).