

I wonder when you read this psalm does a certain thought cross your mind – this is just too good to be true? It doesn't gel with my experience of the Christian life or with the rest of the scriptures? Does it remind you of politicians at election time “over- promising”? I must confess it has to me in the past. Or was I simply misunderstanding it?

I know for believers who are experiencing anxiety it is a wonderful psalm of assurance. I was reading a lecture by a Christian counselor and he said this is the psalm he uses with his anxious clients trying to get them to lay hold of its promises. He said In WW1 Psalm 91 was known as the “Trench Psalm” - men who were terrified in the trenches with “pounding heart, trembling, shortness of breath, choking, chest pain, sweating, dizziness, fear of dying, panic” were encouraged to trust God by mediating on this psalm.

It was the first scripture that many of us turned to in March when we started to hear about Covid-19 and its arrival in Ireland.

And we can easily see why - It has magnificent promises and very relevant - for ex v5, 6 and 7 - ***you will be free from the terror of the pestilence that stalks in the darkness*** (a virus is something you can't see with the human eye) ***or the plague that destroys at midday which claims 1000 at your left hand and 10,000 on the right hand but it will not come anywhere near you.*** People will drop like flies around you but you will be untouched.

Or V10 ***no harm (or evil) will befall you. No disaster will come near your house.***

V14 I will protect him

v16 With long life I will satisfy him.

Many have learned this psalm “off by heart” (which is perfectly right and an excellent thing to do).

I know that many claim this psalm over the lives of others - like a lucky charm.

On the surface psalm 91 seems to promise that nothing bad will ever happen to believers. And that is certainly how many Christians understand the psalm.

Those who trust God won't fall into a hunters trap, won't get a disease, won't get Covid-19, won't experience evil, won't crash against a wall and will always be delivered and protected.

I would like to consider the psalm and see what we can glean from it..

The psalm has three obvious parts.

vv 1 and 2 the psalmist speaks to God.

Vv 3-13 the psalmist speaks to the believer

vv14-16 God intervenes and speaks directly to the believer.

It is in the first 2 verses that we learn who this protection applies to – it is for those who enjoy intimate fellowship with God .

... those ***who dwell in the shelter of the most high, who rest in the shadow of the almighty.***

This is driven home in the rest of the psalm.

V9 if you make the most high your dwelling... then no harm will befall you

V14 the promise of protection is for those who love God and who know God.

CFC 02.09.2020	In the Shadow of the Almighty	Psalm 91 (also read Romans 8:31-39)
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So the protection promised is not for the person who never visits the shelter or is only an occasional visitor but its for a resident. Someone who is at home in God's presence. They live in his shadow. If you rest in the shadow of the Almighty – you must be pretty close to him who is responsible for that shadow.

So the promise can't be applied indiscriminately to all and sundry. It only applies to certain people. That rules out using it as a lucky charm on a unbeliever.

Next - the psalmist tells us 4 things about this God who provides protection.

1 **God is the most high** – Elyon– high above every other power or gods – so that cuts every other threat down to size.

2 **God is almighty** – El shaddai – He is totally self sufficient. He needs no one to help him. There is nothing this God cannot do. This is the One who made the heavens and earth.

Remember the childrens' chorus –

My God is so big, so strong and so mighty

There's nothing my God cannot do

He made the trees

He made the seas

He made the elephants too

The mountains are his

The rivers are his

The skies are his handy works too

3 **God is LORD** – The word LORD in capitals has been supplied by the translators but the original Hebrew word is YHWH – two vowels have been added to give us Yahweh – which is God's personal name – the great I AM – the covenant God of Israel. The covenant he expressed in the language of a wedding – God has made promises to his beloved which he will keep – promises of faithfulness and service.

4 And wonderfully the psalmist knows him as “**My God**” **Elohay**

He is not a far distant divinity but the living God who has made himself known to the Psalmist.

Most High, Almighty, Faithful, Personal.

Such a God is his shelter and of course ours too if we live in his shadow.

In WW2 when London was being bombed by the Luftwaffe the people made their way to the London underground for shelter. It was a dangerous time, the bombs were falling left, right and centre but in the underground the people were sheltered. God is our shelter.

I recall reading Ian Murray's biography of Lloyd Jones and it contained the testimony of an American Army officer visiting Westminster Chapel for the first time during WW2. Lloyd Jones was in the pulpit praying when the sirens went off, the bombs started falling all around Westminster and the Chapel – LJ just kept on praying. That army man never forgot that. LJ was a man who believed that prayer was the safest place for him and the church to be at that critical moment.

LJ was clearly right to do that – only minimal damage was caused to the chapel's surrounding buildings. I must confess I don't have the great faith of LJ - I probably would have joined the rest of London in the underground.

The psalmist uses two images to get across the idea of God's protection.
God will defend him as a mother bird gathering her brood underneath her wings.
Or he will be wrapped around by a castle with shields and parapets.

The Eagle mother shelters her young with her wings. She shelters them from the burning heat or from the rain and cold by absorbing these things herself.
The castle or fortress has walls that are impregnable. Spears and arrows bounce off such a wall.

And from what does the LORD protect those who trust him?

The psalmist mentions 4 threats and 4 beasts.

In other words God protects from everything.

As an aside - we help ourselves by doing the obvious -

We lock the doors of our houses and cars. Eat a balanced diet. Exercise to keep ourselves healthy. And in times of pandemic, hand washing, social distancing, face coverings.

He mentions the unseen and seen things that God protects us from.

V3 ***the fowler's snare*** – the only fowler I know of is Robbie Fowler the one time professional footballer. A fowler is someone who sets traps to catch birds.

We are foolish and weak as poor little birds, and are very apt to be lured to our destruction by cunning foes, but if we dwell near to God, he will see to it that the most skilful deceiver shall not entrap us.”
(Spurgeon)

He also protects from -

V3 ***from the deadly pestilence*** – a plague. The OT world was no stranger to plagues.

Neither is our world - The Black plague (Bubonic) in Europe in the mid 1300's wiped out 1/3rd of the pop and that happened twice. 75m-200m died. Spanish flu in 1918 - 50m deaths.

Scientists warn us to expect such events in the future. Not wanting to be a scare monger Rev 9:18 – speaks of 1/3rd of the earth's population dying from plagues at a particular time.

V5 the terror of night

v5 the arrow that flies by day

v6 the plague that stalks in the darkness

v6 the plague that destroys at midday

v13 You will walk unharmed among **the lion and cobra, and kick out of your way the great lion and the serpent.**

Some of these enemies are spiritual – so the fight is not only against flesh and blood but against P and P

These are all very powerful images because the psalmist is saying we are surrounded by enemies – Yet there is the promise of protection.

God sends his angels to provide protection.

11 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;

12 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

On the surface verses 11 and 12 seem to mean that those who trust God won't crash against a wall and will always be delivered and protected – God's angels will see to that.

You recall the conversation between Jesus and the devil in the wilderness in Matt 4? At one stage the devil took him to highest point of the temple and suggested that he throw himself down – quoting v11 and 12 from Psalm 91.

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, “he will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone”

The devil was telling Jesus - Count on the deliverance promised to the godly in these verses.

But Jesus didn't follow Satan's use of this psalm because he was using it without any qualifications or exceptions at all.

Indeed God does send his angels to help when it is most needed but not needlessly or for personal advantage or simply showing off or to prove a point.

Jesus knew to throw himself down was to create a needless crisis. And as he says in Matt 4 – that is to tempt God.

Angels often ministered to Jesus (Mark 1:13). They will turn up in this scene in a few minutes time but not to minister in the way the devil suggested. ~~Their job was to encourage Jesus so that he would get to the cross. (In Gethsemane – “an angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him” Lk 22:43 – to drink the cup which he was praying about)~~
When the devil left him, the angels came and attended to him. 4:11

The devil was saying to Jesus: "This promise of protection is absolute. There are no qualifications. Use it. Prove the promise of God in your life! If it applies to anyone, it surely applies to you, since you are the Son of God."

But Jesus rejects the devils use of the psalm - and will prove that the psalm *does* have a qualification.

He dies at a *young* age; he feels his flesh ripped from his body. The nails pierced his hands and feet. The sword was plunged into his side. He was killed by his enemies.

So on the face of it the surface meaning of Psalm 91 didn't come true for the most godliest person who ever lived.

Neither did that meaning come true for Jim Elliot and his 4 friends who were martyred in Ecuador in 1956 when working as missionaries. Elizabeth Elliot called her book about her husband Jim “Shadow of the Almighty” - obviously referring to v1 of this psalm. Jim and his 4 friends lived in the Shadow of the Almighty but the five were slaughtered.

And yet the writer of Psalm 91 was not simply feeling especially perky the day he wrote the psalm so was overly generous in what he promised God would do, neither was he mistaken, or naive. These promises of protection have literally come true for believers over and over again,.

We would be doing the writer of psalm 91 a disservice if we thought he wasn't aware of other psalms which point to the sufferings of the people of God – such as

"many are the afflictions of the righteous" (34:19). And though the Lord delivers us **"out of them all,"** yet we *do* go into them and may come out only in heaven.

Psalm 44:22– of those who have been faithful to God **"For your sake we are slain all day long and are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."**

That is why this verse was quoted by Paul in Roms 8: when dealing with Christian **martyrs** and then Paul says, **"But in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us"** (8:37, NIV).. Not even death can separate us from the love of God.

The writer of psalm 91 reminds me of what Jesus said on one occasion when he spoke about the paradox of God's care – a paradox is a statement that seems to contradict itself but when investigated proves to be true.

He said to his disciples Luke 21:16

not a hair on your head will perish and in the same breath says **they will put some of you to death.** Luke 21:18

The only way to explain these verses – is that the only things Christians loose in suffering are things that will vanish anyway – things that are expendable.

The **real** you cannot be harmed. That is the promise.

PS 91 means two things about the suffering of believers -

God often wonderfully delivers them physically when others around them fall.

The other is that God often allows his children to suffer but will not allow the suffering to harm them in the end. It will **hurt** them but not **harm** them. Such evil will never befall them.

Look at that promise **"Ten thousand may fall at your right hand, but it will not come near you"** (v7), There is an **unspoken qualification** here: "It will not approach you **without my permission and intention.** My intention for those in my care is always good - even if I allow the arrow to take their life."

The brilliant Derek Kidner says in his commentary, "This is a statement of exact, sweeping providence, not a charm against adversity...What it does assure us is that nothing can touch God's servant but by God's leave" (*Psalms 73-150*)

v15 is very important in our understanding of this psalm - God clarifies what he means by saving us when it comes to trouble. .

God saves us not **from** trouble but **in** trouble.

He will call upon me, and I will answer him; - so the person clearly has a need to cry out to God for help. So it is not all plain sailing.

I will be with him in trouble, - so it is not a case of if but when the believer ends up in trouble – and when that happens I will be with him in the trouble.

I will deliver him..... - so the believer is in a pit of some sort requiring God to lift him out.

So the psalmist is not saying "come and join me in cloud cuckoo land where everything works out just beautifully in this life. Where everything we want just falls into our lap".

What he is saying is even if these bad things happen they are not the final word.

God will have the final word.

Even if you have been caught in a hunters trap - that is not the end of the matter – you can be set free and live a normal life again. God can get you to rejoice in the truth there ***is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.***

Lets look at another promise v10 ***No disaster will come near your dwelling.***

This can't mean without qualification. Why? The writer of this psalm knew about Joseph in the book of Genesis (39-41). Joseph was betrayed and imprisoned and spent the best years of his life either as a slave or in prison between the ages of 17-30 and yet he says afterwards ***God meant it for good.*** He wasn't kept out of prison. But God was overruling everything.

Rom 8:28 He causes all things to work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purposes.

He causes all things - The evil, the bad, the obnoxious that he allows to happen to us he ultimately will turn it all into good.

In the 3rd part of the psalm - In the last 3 verses (14, 15, 16) God says - ***Yes – Indeed what the psalmist said earlier was correct - I want to repeat those promises to you.***

V14 (1) ***Those who love me and know me*** I promise the following 7 blessings

I will rescue him,

I will protect him,

I will answer him when he calls

I will be with him in trouble

I will deliver him

I will honour him with long life and

I will show him my salvation.

Notice the progression in these 7 blessings from the earlier stages of deliverance to God crowning the believer with glory and salvation. A salvation he will see with his own eyes.

There are many promises of long life in the OT – even Paul refers to such in Eph 6:3 and all things being equal many believers will experience long life but we also know that many godly believers don't.

In these last 3 verses I think the psalmist knew more than he thought he knew.

What is Salvation ultimately? It is not just long life but eternal life.

Ultimate security is eternal life and salvation which are found in Jesus alone.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon loved Psalm 91 because of how the Lord used it to comfort him during a cholera epidemic.

In his 7 volumes on the psalms “The Treasury of David”, vol 4 p235 he wrote this -

Before expounding these verses [verses 9 and 10] I cannot refrain from recording a personal incident illustrating their power to soothe the heart, when they are applied by the Holy Spirit.

In the year 1854, (1834-1892) **(he was 19-20 and pastor of New Street Baptist church in London)** when I had scarcely been in London twelve months, the neighbourhood in which I laboured was visited by Asiatic cholera, and my congregation suffered from its inroads.

Family after family summoned me to the bedside of the smitten, and almost every day I was

called to visit the grave. **(many of his flock died from the Cholera)** I gave myself up with youthful ardour to the visitation of the sick, and was sent for from all corners of the district by persons of all ranks and religions. I became weary in body and sick at heart. My friends seemed falling one by one, and I felt or fancied that I was sickening like those around me. A little more work and weeping would have laid me low among the rest; I felt that my burden was heavier than I could bear, and I was ready to sink under it.

(He felt that he himself was probably next to die)

As God would have it, I was returning mournfully home from a funeral, when my curiosity led me to read a paper which was wafered up in a shoemaker's window in the Dover Road. It did not look like a trade announcement, nor was it, for it bore in a good bold handwriting these words:

Because thou hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.

The effect upon my heart was immediate. Faith appropriated the passage as her own. I felt secure, refreshed, girt with immortality. I went on with my visitation of the dying in a calm and peaceful spirit; I felt no fear of evil, and I suffered no harm.

If you ask me why Spurgeon was anointed of God to appropriate this promise while others in his flock died? – I can only point to the fact that God is sovereign. That is He is in control of all things the flying arrows, the spread of diseases and the length of life. Not that the others were lacking in faith – if you read some of the descriptions of their deathbed scenes – the sense of God they experienced was extraordinary.

Spurgeon goes on to say in his exposition

It is impossible that any ill should happen to the man who is beloved of the Lord: the most crushing calamities can only shorten his journey and haste him to his reward. Ill to him is no ill, but only good in a mysterious form. Losses enrich him, sickness is his medicine, reproach is his honour, death is his gain. No evil in the strict sense of the word can happen to him, for everything is overruled for good.

That was 1854. I would like you to hear that last paragraph in modern language.

Tony Evans, Lois Evans and their 4 adult children are well known in Christian circles in the US. Lois went to be with the Lord in March this year (2020)– she was 70. .

I was listening to Jonathan (her son) give the eulogy at his mother's funeral.

He said for days leading up to the funeral he was wrestling with God.

God if we have victory in your name didn't you hear us when we were praying? Didn't you see the people walking around my Mum and Dad's house like Jericho to make sure they would knock down the walls of this cancer. Didn't you hear all the prayers of nationally known people? Didn't you hear us? Where are you? Why didn't you do what we were asking of you because your word says -

“If we abide in you and your word abides in us we could ask whatever we will and it will be given to us. Your word says if we ask according to your will you will hear us. Pray believing you will receive. Be anxious for nothing but through prayer and supplication make your requests known – where are you?

This was a great opportunity – to tangibly see your glory. Everybody was praying not only in Dallas and the country but around the world. People were watching. Where are you? This was an opportunity for us to see your glory.

And as I was wrestling with God he answered. He said ~~No~~ - You don't understand the nature of my victory.

Just because I didn't answer your prayer your way doesn't mean I haven't already answered your prayer anyway.

Because victory was already given to your mum. - you don't understand.

Because of the victory I have given to you there was always only two answers to your prayers

either she was going to be healed or she was going to be healed.

Either she was going to live or she was going to live.

Either she was going to be with family or she was going to be with family.

Either she was going to be well taken care of or she was going to be well taken cared of.

Victory belongs to me because of this victory the answer to your prayers is Yes and Yes.

You need to understand that I am God, that I am Sovereign and that my game plan is bigger than any one player on my field. So you need to trust in the Lord with all of your heart and lean on me because I have the ability to make this crooked situation straight.

As high as the heavens are above the earth are my ways higher than your ways. My thoughts from your thoughts. We don't think the same. PS Don't tell me how to get my glory.

Lesson to be learned from this study? We should follow Jesus' interpretation of Psalm 91, not Satan's. These promises come with qualifications and exceptions.

In we have to go through our own Gethsemane of suffering we should (indeed) pray for deliverance and then pray "**Not my will be done but your will.**" Knowing that whatever happens in the end it will not mean evil for us but will be for our good (Romans 8:28). Our Eventual good.