



Psalm 91 - Assurance of God's Protection

Introduction

This tender and intimate psalm describes the confidence that the believer may have through all manner of dangers and challenges. The psalm speaks about the faithful person as 'he', addresses him directly as 'you' singular, and gives him words to say as 'I'. Some have suggested that all of these are Israel speaking as a whole, but the situations in view in the psalm, e.g. pestilence, terrors by night and arrows, and one's fellows falling, are those primarily faced by particular individuals. Of course, Israel as a whole finds refuge in God and is covered by his divine wings, but the nation's members see this in their individual lives as well.

This psalm has no title and therefore the author remains unknown. Because it shares some of the themes of Psalm 90, some think Moses was the author. Because it shares some of the themes and phrases of Psalms 27 and 31, some think the author was David.

Psalm 91:1-2 - God Is My Refuge.

The opening section sets out the basic theme of the whole psalm: the Lord is a secure defence for those who take refuge in him. Several terms for security appear: shelter (that hides one from danger), shadow (e.g. of the wings), refuge (a place of security), and fortress (protecting one from attack). The titles of God support this idea: Most High, Hebrew *'elyon*, means high above every other power, and Almighty, Hebrew *Shadday*; refer to the comment made on Genesis 17:1-2. The term *<<my God, in whom I trust>>* displays the utter reliance that is the ideal of biblical faith. The purpose of this psalm is to instil greater faith in God's people and the first section helps the singers to feel that God is trustworthy.

- ¹ You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,

² will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.’

Psalm 91:1-2

You who live in the shelter of the Most High. God has a secret place for his own: <<*For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock*>> (Psalm 27:5), and: <<*In the shelter of your presence you hide them from human plots; you hold them safe under your shelter from contentious tongues*>> (Psalm 31:20), and it is a place to live in. Those who dwell there abide in the shadow of the Almighty, knowing his protection, comfort, and care. In Psalm 90:1 Moses spoke of God as the dwelling place of his people. The opening lines of Psalm 91 seem to take that idea further.

There are many followers of Jesus Christ who seem to know very little of the shelter of the Most High or what it is to abide in his shadow. Many seem to regard this as only a thing for mystics or the super-spiritual. Yet the David who knew this was a warrior and man well acquainted with the realities of life. It is true that the life of the spirit seems to come more easily for some or others, but there is an aspect of the shelter of the Most High that is for everyone who puts their trust in him. Charles Spurgeon commented, “Every child of God looks towards the inner sanctuary and the mercy-seat, yet all do not dwell in the most holy place; they run to it at times, and enjoy occasional approaches, but they do not habitually reside in the mysterious presence.”

Spurgeon suggested four ways the Scripture speaks of the shadow of the Almighty:

- The shadow of the rock (Isaiah 32:2 NIV).
- The shadow of the tree (Song of Solomon 2:3).
- The shadow of his wings (Psalm 63:7).
- The shadow of his hand (Isaiah 49:2).

These first two verses of Psalm 91 use four wonderful titles or names for God:

- Most High: *Elyon*.
- Almighty: *Shadday*.
- The Lord: *Yahweh*.
- My God: *Elohay*.

My refuge and my fortress. The one who lives intimately in God knows the greatness of his protection. God himself becomes like a mighty refuge and fortress for the believer.

My God, in whom I trust. This close relationship with God and all the benefits that come from it are for those who know Yahweh as God, and who truly trust in him. At the same time, having received his protection, comfort, and care, the believer trusts God all the more, and increasingly knows him as God. Spurgeon noted, “Men are apt enough to proclaim their doubts, and even to boast of them, indeed there is a party nowadays of the most audacious pretenders to culture and thought, who glory in casting suspicion upon everything; hence it becomes the duty of all true believers to speak out and testify with calm courage to their own well-grounded reliance upon their God.”

Spurgeon suggested many different Biblical characters who had their own expression of the phrase **My God**:

- My God is the young convert’s confession - Ruth (Ruth 1:16).
- My God is the individual Christian’s belief - Thomas (John 20:28).
- My God is the declaration of the believer when opposed - Micaiah (2 Chronicles 18:13).
- My God is the secret vow of the believer in consecration - Jacob (Genesis 28:21).
- My God is the deepest comfort to God’s children in great woe - Jesus (John 20:17).
- My God for individual strength, might and salvation - Moses (Exodus 15:2).

Psalm 91:3-8 - He Will Protect You from Danger.

These verses personally address each one who sings this, listing the benefits that come to those who trust in the Lord. The snare of the fowler (v.3) seems to be a metaphor for the schemes of those who hate the pious: <<***The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts***>> (Psalm 119:110), and: <<***Deliver me, O Lord, from evildoers; protect me from those who are violent, who plan evil things in their minds and stir up wars continually. They make their tongue sharp as a snake’s, and under their lips is the venom of vipers. Guard me, O Lord, from the hands of the wicked; protect me from the violent who have planned my downfall. The arrogant have hidden a trap for me, and with cords they have spread a net; along the road they have set snares for me***>> (Psalm 140:1-5). Pestilence and destruction are diseases that God sends on his enemies or his unfaithful people; refer to the plagues described in Exodus 5:3 and 9:15, Leviticus 26:25, and Deuteronomy 32:24. The terror and arrow, together with a thousand may fall, envision God’s people under attack.

If the psalm were describing every situation of danger, it would clearly be untrue: faithful people have fallen prey to these and other perils. It is better to allow v.8 to guide the interpretation, pointing to cases in which these events (plague and battle) are sent as God’s recompense on the wicked (whether Gentile or Israelite); in such cases, the faithful can be sure of God’s protection.

- 3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
- 4 he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

Psalm 91:3-4

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler. Following the general statement of the first two verses, now the psalmist describes the specific ways God protects and cares for his people - beginning with rescue from those who would trap God's people as the fowler snares birds. Spurgeon commented, "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."

The devil and his agents often work as the fowler works.

- The fowler works in secret.
- The fowler changes his trap and methods.
- The fowler often entices with pleasure or profit.
- The fowler often uses a bad example, a decoy.

And from the deadly pestilence. God also protects his people in times of plague and disease. The psalmist (nor the Holy Spirit who inspired him) did not intend this as an absolute promise, that every believer would be delivered from every snare or every pestilence. Instead, the idea is that the psalmist could point to many times when God did just that for his trusting people.

He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge. In a metaphor, God is represented as a bird, sheltering young chicks under his wings - as David previously described in: <<*Let me abide in your tent for ever, find refuge under the shelter of your wings*>> (Psalm 61:4). Other images of God as a protecting bird are: <<*You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself*>> (Exodus 19:4), and: <<*As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him; no foreign god was with him*>> (Deuteronomy 32:11-12). Jesus showed his desire to give just the same protection to his people: <<*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*>> (Luke 13:34).

His faithfulness is a shield and buckler. The images of God’s protection continue with his truth represented as the smaller, often round shield and the larger, often rectangular shield, the buckler. Spurgeon stated, “Double armour has he who relies upon the Lord. He bears a shield and wears an all-surrounding coat of mail – such is the force of the word ‘buckler.’”

- ⁵ You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
⁶ or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

Psalm 91:5-6

You will not fear. Having God as their shelter and refuge provides strength and courage to the people of God. When God’s people are stuck deep in fear it is an indication that they fall short of proper trust in God as protector and comforter. Again Spurgeon has a viewpoint, “Not to be afraid is in itself an unspeakable blessing, since for every suffering which we endure from real injury we are tormented by a thousand griefs which arise from fear only.”

The terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day. The psalmist represented all kinds of destruction that could come in all kinds of circumstances. It could come by night or by day; in darkness or at noonday. It could come as terror or by arrow; as a pestilence or as destruction. Whenever or however it comes, God is able to defend his people.

- ⁷ A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
⁸ You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.

Psalm 91:7-8

A thousand may fall at your side. The psalmist described how God’s protection could conquer any odds or probabilities. God’s protection and care can be so specifically focused it could preserve one in ten thousand. Spurgeon commented, “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 hasten 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.”

See the punishment of the wicked. In contrast to the protection of his chosen, God has also appointed a punishment or a (negative) reward for the wicked. God's people are encouraged to look at this truth and carefully consider it.

Psalm 91:9-13 - His Angels Will Watch over You.

This section continues the description of safety, adding the involvement of God's angels to watch over those who make the Most High their refuge (vv.1-2). The mention of a plague (v.10) is reminiscent of the plagues that fell on Egypt: <<**But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife**>> (Genesis 12:17), and: <<**The Lord said to Moses, 'I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you away'**>> (Exodus 11:1), again clarifying that this is describing the safety of the faithful in a time of God's judgement.

- 9 Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling-place,
10 no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.
11 For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
12 On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
13 You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

Psalm 91:9-13

Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling-place. The following principles and promises are suited for those who trust in the Lord, making him their dwelling-place - their source of life and satisfaction.

No evil shall befall you. The previous promises (vv.5-8) of security and safety even in a time of plague are repeated. Again, this is not regarded as an absolute promise for every believer in every circumstance, because beloved people of God have fallen to evil or died in plague. It is the happy observation of the psalmist and a general expression of God's protection, comfort, and care for his people. Martin Luther wrote that this refers to 'one who really dwells and does not merely appear to dwell and does not just imagine that he dwells' in God.

No scourge come near your tent. Charles Spurgeon gave remarkable testimony to a specific fulfilment of this promise: “In the year 1854, 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. 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. 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. The providence which moved the tradesman to place those verses in his window I gratefully acknowledge, and in the remembrance of its marvellous power I adore the Lord my God.”

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. In Matthew 4:5-7 and Luke 4:9-12, the devil quotes these verses in a ploy to get Jesus to seek a demonstration of the angels’ care for all the Jews to see (throwing himself down from the pinnacle of the temple), which would no doubt win Jesus a great following among the people. Jesus denounces the idea as testing God; it is certainly a wilful misuse of the psalm passage, which does not encourage the faithful to put themselves in unnecessary danger.

This text is wrongly applied by Satan, because it was not used to teach or encourage, but intended instead to deceive. In a strange way Christians can be grateful for Satan’s attempt in Matthew Chapter 4, because it helps them to better understand Psalm 91. They see that it does not give absolute promises for every believer in every circumstance, but beautiful promises of God’s protection, comfort, and care that are specifically received and applied in the believer by the Holy Spirit.

The lion and the adder are probably images for people bent on harming the faithful: <<*Their vine comes from the vine-stock of Sodom, from the vineyards of Gomorrah; their grapes are grapes of poison, their clusters are bitter; their*

wine is the poison of serpents, the cruel venom of asps>> (Deuteronomy 32:32-33), and: <<*The wicked go astray from the womb; they err from their birth, speaking lies. They have venom like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ear, so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter. O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord!*>> (Psalm 58:3-6), or perhaps the demonic agents that inspire the harm. The protection of God to his people extends beyond the general deliverance from harm; it also speaks of a general granting of victory to his people, even over opponents as strong as the young lion and the serpent.

Psalm 91:14-16 - Because He Loves Me, I Will Deliver Him.

The psalm closes by laying out what the ideal of trust looks like and repeating God's pledge to care for his faithful ones. Such a person will have long life, Hebrew *'orek yamim*, literally 'length of days,' probably implying eternal life (refer to the comment made on Psalm 23:5-6), and will enjoy God's salvation; refer to the comment made on Psalm 3:2.

- 14 Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
- 15 When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honour them.
- 16 With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

Psalm 91:14-16

Those who love me, I will deliver. These last three verses are set in the first person as God speaks promise and blessing over his people. He speaks specifically over those who set their love upon him. It has been wonderfully noted that the last word of this psalm is not spoken by God's people, but to God's people.

I will deliver. The promises and principles stated previously in this psalm are repeated again, but this time as being in the mouth of God himself. God will protect his beloved and do it because he has known my name, having a real relationship with God.

When they call to me, I will answer them. God promises to answer the prayer of the one who loves him, and the one who genuinely knows him.

I will be with them. In the last lines of the psalm God spoke personal and wonderful blessing over the one who loves and knows him:

- The blessing of his presence: I will be with them in trouble.
- The blessing of his protection: I will rescue them.
- The blessing of his promotion: I will honour them.
- The blessing of his prosperity: With long life I will satisfy them.
- The blessing of his preservation: And show them my salvation.