

Psalms 90 and 91 open Book IV with a vivid description of the existential threat facing the people of God. First there is the reality of the human condition: human frailty and depravity parade in lock-step conformity, followed by a fearful vulnerability to a host of life-threatening dangers. Yet the overarching reality is faith, not fear, the faith of those who place their trust in the Lord.

The two psalms run parallel in some key ways. The Lord is our dwelling place (Ps 90:1) and we dwell “in the shelter of the Most High” (Ps 91:1). Wisdom teaches us to number our days (Ps 90:12) and confession inspires us to declare, “The Lord is my refuge” (Ps 91:9). The holy boldness of Psalm 90 belongs to those who are able “to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” (Heb 10:19). Only they have the boldness to render God’s grace an imperative call to action. Seven imperatives satisfy the redemptive revolution and invoke the full range of blessing: teach, turn back, satisfy, make us glad, reveal, bless, and “establish the work of our hands” (Ps 90:17). Only the Lord, who became human and “made his dwelling with us” fulfills the seven-fold pledge: “I will rescue him; I will protect him. . . I will answer him. . . I will answer him. . . I will be with him in trouble. . . I will deliver him and honor him. . . I will satisfy him” and “[I will] show him my salvation” (Ps 91:14-16).

The reality of fear and the conditions that produce it are *not* ignored by the psalmist, but neither are they given first place. The psalmist opens with a faith-filled declaration. Praying the psalms invariably places human matters in the context of God’s sovereign power and purposes. We begin with an affirmation of confidence in God rather than an account of our troubles. The psalmist’s spiritual direction corresponds with the apostle’s encouragement, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Phil 4:6). Begin with God and prayerfully work through the problems. This is what the psalmist did. Before he detailed the dangers he devoted his attention to the truth. He began with four metaphors for security and four names for God.

The Promise

*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and
my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”*
Psalm 91:1-2

Psalm 91 is a psalm about fear, faith and fellowship with God. The psalmist begins with a powerful faith statement, followed by a vow of trust. This eloquent opening is “enriched not only by the four metaphors for security (“shelter,” “shadow,” “refuge,” “fortress,”) but by the four divine names (“Most High,” “Almighty,” “The Lord,” “my God”).¹

¹ Kidner, Psalms, 332.

This is not the kind of counsel that comes to mind when someone says, “Think happy thoughts!” There is not an escapist syllable in the psalm. Nothing is spiritualized and no short-term, quick-fix solutions are suggested. The psalmist insists on a peace that we cannot give to ourselves, no matter how hard we try, whether it be through mind control, mood altering substances, entertainment, or fun company. There is no humanistic solution to the deepest fears we feel and no diversion strong enough to give us peace. This psalm is not a prescription for stress management, but a faith-filled perspective for trusting in the living God. Psalm 91 is about the peace of God, which transcends all understanding. It helps us embrace the peace that will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:7). Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (Jn 14:27). Psalm 91 helps us to explore what Jesus meant when he offered a peace that the world cannot give. It is the peace that transcends our understanding that we seek to know and experience.

The opening statement of Psalm 91 propels the believer’s praying imagination forward to Jesus’ invitation to “remain in me” (John 15:5). The word to *remain* or *abide* or *make our home* with Jesus is used eleven times to emphasize the importance of making our home with Jesus (John 15:4-10).² To make our home with Jesus is to persist in the life of faith. It is a loyal steadfastness to Christ characterized by a continuous openness to all that God in Christ offers us.³ To remain in Jesus is a deeply personal experience but it is far more practical than it is mystical. The disciple’s life is expressed in loving obedience and obedient love. *Abiding* does not mean fleeing the world or disengaging from the world, but rather being like Jesus in the world: faithful to the Father’s will, compassionate to those in need, boldly prophetic to those who seek to manipulate the truth to their sinful advantage, and resting in the salvation that is by God’s grace through faith and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God. Being fruitful is a simple matter of hearing and obeying: “See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us – eternal life” (1 John 2:24).⁴

“Shadow of the Almighty,” is the title Elizabeth Elliot chose for her biography of her husband Jim Elliot. What would cause a widow whose missionary husband, along with four other men, died in the jungle of Ecuador, choose a title that celebrates the protection of God? Only the peace that passes all understanding and only the peace that the world cannot give, explains such confidence in God. On the afternoon of January 8, 1956, Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Pete Fleming, Roger Yudarian sang together, “We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender.” Later that day they were killed by the very people they had come to help. “Mission accomplished,” wrote Elizabeth Elliot. “The world called it ‘a nightmare of tragedy.’ The world did not recognize the truth of Jim Elliot’s credo: ‘He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.’” The Elliots believed in a security that the world cannot take away and only God can give. That is what she meant when she spoke of resting in the Shadow of the Almighty.⁵

² In our English translations of John 15:4 the second occurrence of “remain” is implicit in the Greek: “Remain in me, as I also remain in you.”

³ Bultmann, *John*, 535.

⁴ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 96.

⁵ Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, 19 (first published in 1958, Harper, 1989).

The Peril

*Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.
You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.
A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.
If you say, "The Lord is my refuge,"
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.
For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against the stone.
You will tread on the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.*

Psalm 91:3-13

The psalmist brings our fears out into the open and names them: the fowler's snare, the deadly pestilence, the night terror, the arrow that flies by day, the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, the plague that destroys at midday. We are subject to a frightening array of hidden traps and deadly hazards but the psalmist delivers an unqualified message of hope, "Surely he will save you." Danger lurks in the unseen trap laid by the enemy and in the infectious germs of a deadly disease. We are under attack by terrorists at night and by armies during the day. Disease stalks the darkness at midnight and plagues destroy at midday. The dangers are many, deception and disease, hidden evils and public calamities, personal traumas and shared fears. Evil works around the clock. Night serves to heighten fear and intensify terror, and daylight only gives our attackers a better target. We have real fears that attack the soul. Yet no matter how perilous the situation may be the psalmist boldly preaches a no-fear gospel. Although faced by pervasive, persistent and pernicious evil, we are challenged to trust in the Lord.

Throughout the section the reader is addressed personally. "You" singular marks the object of the Lord's affection and protection. The psalmist uses a full range of images from a mother hen collecting her chicks under her wings to a strong military defense that protects with everything in its arsenal from the soldier's shield to ramparts surrounding the fortress. The scale of the

protection is unprecedented, “a thousand my fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you” (Ps 91:7). The promise and the peril could not be greater. The people of God form a minority that is threatened by all types of evil but they can afford to be calm because the Lord is their protection. They are not asked to fight, but to “observe with your eyes” the punishment of the wicked (Ps 91:8).

The counsel of the psalmist corresponds to the spiritual direction of the apostles: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21); “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened. But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord” (1 Pet 3:14). “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution. . . . Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown” (Rev 2:10). It is right and good for Christians to be shocked by evil and to feel the acute jabs of moral pain. Elton Trueblood wrote, “To the one who does not believe that the world was created and is sustained by a loving God the existence of pain and evil must be accepted quite automatically. There is not reason to expect anything else.” If we are Creator-less, a mere product of time and chance in an evolutionary process, then pain and suffering must be accepted as part of nature. C. S. Lewis wrote, “In a sense, [Christianity] creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving.”⁶

We recognize what is ugly, because we compare it to what is beautiful. No matter how twisted and deficient it may be, humankind still has the knowledge of right and wrong. The wisdom and beauty of God’s order stands in stark contrast to a world that willfully deviates from its design, and since Adam’s fall has the God-forsaken freedom to do so. Diseases and illnesses are defined in relationship to health and wholeness. Everything that might be lost through pain and evil, is what God designed and desired for humankind: physical health, emotional well-being, a loving family life, national peace and security, compassion for those in need, spiritual strength, and love for one’s neighbor. The problem of sin and evil is not ignored in the Bible, nor by God today. It remains the burden the Gospel.

You ask, “Where is God in all this pain and suffering and evil?” God’s answer is very straightforward. It is climactically expressed in the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God put himself into the battle against evil, fighting for our salvation, not as we might expect, swooping down and destroying all opposition, because that would have meant destroying us in the process, but by taking upon himself the judgment for our sin. God himself died on the cross for our sins, paying the ultimate price for humanity’s sinful rebellion. Thus, the world’s worse case of terrorism occurred when Jesus was nailed to the Cross, because the worse case is not determined by the number of lives lost, but by the magnitude of the injustice. Christ’s cross is the world’s only hope for salvation.

It is not difficult to imagine Jesus praying Psalm 91 when he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Luke 4:1-13). This is a go-to Psalm when the believer is

⁶ Lewis, Problem of Pain, 24.

being tested to the nth degree. In the midst of evil and in the throes of severe trial the psalmist boldly proclaims, “If you say, ‘The Lord is my refuge,’ and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you. . .” (Ps 91:9-10). The promise is strikingly absolute! The assurance is categorical! “No disaster will come near your tent” (Ps 91:10).

It was precisely this absolute promise that the devil sought to use against Jesus. The devil followed Jesus’ “it is written” strategy and quoted from Psalm 91: “For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone’” (Ps 91:11-12). This was a strange text for the devil to choose because it has to do with God commanding the angels to be our guardians. One would think that this must have been one of the devil’s least favorite psalms, because it stands as an indictment against everything the devil stood for. In his role as the great accuser he covertly used this psalm of protection to conceal his demonic purpose. Truth be known, he must have hated this psalm. What God inspired for our confidence the devil twisted for our contempt. The devil quoted the psalm word perfect. He knew *what* he was reading, but he didn’t know *how* to read it. God intended the promise of deliverance for our confidence and assurance, but it was just like the devil “to read this promise as an invitation to arrogance.”⁷

We misconstrue the Lord’s promise of protection if we conclude that believers will never suffer harm, that they will live a trouble free existence, that they will never be attacked by a lion or bitten by a poisonous snake. Believers have been delivered from lions (Daniel 6:16) and saved from snake bits (Acts 28:5), but Christians suffer the ravages of war and violence, death and disease, scarcity and famine right alongside non-Christians. Cyril Okorochoa writes, “The word of the Lord is not ‘I will save them from all trouble,’ but ‘I will be with him in trouble’ (Ps 91:15).”⁸

The promise is not an easy life, but the promise of deliverance. Psalm 91 has nothing to do with a prosperity gospel promising health and wealth. There’s not the slightest hint of a trouble-free existence, but there is the profoundest hope of eternal security. This psalm says so much about fear, that no one could ever surmise that Christ’s followers will have it easy. On the contrary, we encounter trouble from every side and that is why we turn to the Lord to save, cover, protect, shield, rescue, deliver, and satisfy.

The Pledge

“Because he loves me,” says the Lord,
“I will rescue him;
“I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation.”
Psalm 91:14-16

⁷ Kidner, Psalms, 333.

⁸ Okorochoa, Africa Bible Commentary, 699.

Psalm 91 concludes in much the same way that Psalm 90 concludes. The Lord is our dwelling place and the mortality and depravity of the human condition teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom. We need the Lord to turn to us, to show us his compassion, and to satisfy us with his unfailing love. Only the Lord can establish the witness of our lives and the work of our hands (Ps 90:16-17).

Psalm 91 begins with a personal declaration of faith in God and then proceeds to challenge the people of God to trust the Lord. The weight of the psalm stresses God's commitment to us, asking only that we dwell in the shelter of the Most High. Our work is to let God protect us, deliver us, and save us. All that is left for us to do is observe with our eyes the judgment of the wicked and the justice of God. The psalmist does not minimize the hardships that believers will encounter. The dangers described in the psalm cover the full range of fear, but we cannot save ourselves, only God can and he promises to do so. What does the Lord ask in return? Only that we might love him, honor him, and call upon him. "Because he loves me," says the Lord,

"I will rescue him:

I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me,
and I will answer him;

I will be with him in trouble,

I will deliver him and honor him.

With long life will I satisfy him

and show him my salvation."

This sevenfold promise places the entire responsibility for our salvation squarely upon the Lord. Our place is to love the Lord our God and dwell under the shelter of the Most High. Only God can provide our eternal security. A wise believer once said to me, "If you have died on the cross, what can anybody do to you?" He was thinking of the apostle Paul's declaration in Galatians and he was right. If "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me," what exactly do I have to fear? If "the life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" what can destroy me? (Gal 2:20). No wonder Paul wrote, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Who can separate us from the love of Christ? "Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" Paul's answer was emphatic, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom 8:31,35-39). Therefore, we let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts (Col 3:15). There is no better place to be than in the shelter of the Most High and to rest under the shade of the Almighty.