

"The (Spiritual) Battle Belongs to the Lord"

Psalm 91

When we read Psalm 91, my guess is we all feel a little confused. Because the Psalm sounds like I should get through all life's problems with a breeze. That pain and suffering will *'not come nigh thee'*. And that presents a problem. If it's true that no harm should befall me or disaster come near my tent – and then it does – then the logical conclusion is that I am obviously not dwelling with God nor making Him my refuge. And some Christians take it that way. They say that we lack faith if we are experiencing problems in life.

Two major problems we have with that approach to this psalm is 1) Life experience. All believers experience pain and suffering at some level. 2) Scripture. There are many Scriptures that say we will suffer if we want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:12). Or that we should take heart in Jesus that even though we will face many troubles in life, that Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33). Or that we shouldn't be ashamed to suffer for the gospel (2 Tim. 1:8-9) or to follow the example of Jesus' sufferings (1 Pet. 2:20-21).

Okay. Now what? What do we do with Ps. 91? Here's an important point we should never forget. Don't build a theology out of one verse or one chapter or one book or even one Testament. No one verse, one chapter, one book or one Testament is meant to give you a full theology. I can't give you a full theology of suffering or glory or serving or giving in one message. Each verse, chapter, book or Testament focuses on certain issues or ideas. So we need to stay balanced by always keeping in mind all of Scripture.

So here's a question to ask about Psalm 91. Does any one quote or refer to Ps. 91 in the New Testament? Yes. So let's go to Matthew 4 and we will have a better understanding of how to interpret Ps. 91 from Satan. Satan? Yes. Satan quotes Ps. 91:11-12 in tempting Jesus to jump off the highest point of the temple to prove He was the Son of God. *'Because doesn't the Bible say God will send His angels to protect you so that you don't even hurt your foot against a stone?'*

How does Satan misuse the Psalm? As a guarantee from God that no harm should come on God's children. How does Jesus understand the psalm? Is that how He reads it? No. He quotes another verse of Scripture to balance what God says to help us understand Ps. 91. Jesus quotes Deut. 6:16, *'It is also written, Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'*

In Deut. 6 God was reminding Moses and the people when they first began their journey that the first time they had no water, they demanded Moses give them water, for which Moses replied 'Don't put the Lord to the test.' Jesus was saying to Satan, I'm not going to force God's hand or claim God's promise of protection for my own benefit (i.e. just because I don't want to experience pain). By the way, didn't the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness? Of course. Satan used Ps. 91 as a guarantee from God to keep us from pain and essentially to cause us to doubt God if we experience it. How can you be God's Son if you get hurt when Ps. 91 says you shouldn't get hurt? How can you be God's child if you are experiencing pain? Or, where is your faith if you are experiencing trials and difficulties? So let's not interpret Ps. 91 as Satan does and test God who is under no obligation to keep us from pain and suffering. But instead, let's look at the psalm as God's promise to get us through any pain and suffering we might face knowing there is a greater future and promise awaiting us when life is finished.

The psalm begins with a declaration that we can

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. ² I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

The psalmist begins with this great declaration that we need to

Be Assured of God's Powerful Presence in Your Life **(91:1-2)**

It's a great example of Hebrew poetry. Hebrew poetry is primarily parallel ideas through repetition or contrasting ideas. And in Hebrew this is even clearer. The word order is,

*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,
In the shadow of the Almighty will abide.*

'Dwell' and 'abide/rest' begin and end the line. These two thoughts are parallel. Shelter and shadow are parallel, as are Most High and Almighty. The word dwell has the idea of living with or permanent relationship with and 'rest' means a stayover at night where one finds rest and strength. So the psalmist reassures us right off the bat (because when we really read the psalm properly we will experience difficulties) that the assurance of His powerful presence is there when we

Walk with God we will experience His rest (vv.1-2)

Dwelling, remaining, staying faithful to God will result in experiencing His peace and rest in our life. The first line is a statement of truth but the second line is his personal testimony;

² *I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."*

The author found this true in his own life. When we seek to trust God in our difficulties He gives us His peace and rest in them. One of the ways the psalmist shows us that God is fully capable of doing this is by using four key names of God. First he uses 'God Most High' (El Elyon). God is higher than any other God and anything else in life. He has a better perspective than anyone. El Elyon is how God revealed himself to Abraham in Gen. 14:18-20).

In Ex. 6:3, God tells Moses, that He revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as God Almighty but that He had not revealed Himself as Yahweh, which He did with Moses. See how the psalmist takes us chronologically starting with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and then the most general term for God (Elohim) but personalized with 'my God'. Our God is all-powerful because He can do the same for us as He did for the patriarchs of our faith.

Now he's going to explain a number of reasons why God is trustworthy and why we can be assured of His presence in our life. With these reasons the psalmist wants us to

Be Encouraged to Continue to Trust God in the **Trouble We See and Never See** **(91:3-11)**

“Surely” or “for” introduces a number of ways God will come through for us when we trust Him. If we approach this psalm from an overall biblical perspective of experiencing God’s peace when we walk with Him, then He will spare us from a number of difficulties that we would find if we fell into sin. He writes,

- ³ Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence.
- ⁴ He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

The fowler’s snare is a hidden trap used to catch an unsuspecting animal. The word for pestilence means a disease brought on by God because of disobedience. But we can be encouraged to continually trust God in the troubles we see or don’t see because our obedience to the Word

Alerts us to fatal attractions and so be protected (vv.3-4)

The enemy is a deceiver who likes nothing more than to trap us into sin (as Satan used this psalm with Jesus). Because Jesus knew the Word He saw the trap. There are many traps we can avoid because we know the Word of God. There are consequences of sin that we can avoid when we obey God’s Word as well. God can discipline us and bring consequences into our life when we disobey Him. ‘Deadly pestilence’ is used many times by God in the Old Testament when He warns Israel that He will send a disease on them if they follow other gods. The whole psalm, I believe is about our spiritual battles with the enemy. A relationship with God results in peace with Him on a day to day basis as we walk with Him. When we stay and grow in His Word His Spirit brings His Word to our minds when there are temptations that will bring us down. The word snare also has the idea of ‘attractive’. It looks good but it will kill you is the idea.

When we walk with Him He protects us like the mother eagle, covering us with His wings. Wings being a metaphor for His faithfulness. He won’t let us go. Stay close to God and you’ll be more alert to harmful (yet attractive) temptations out there.

So vv.3-4 refer to the things we can avoid. Sometimes we can’t avoid temptations or even attacks from the enemy. That’s what vv.5-6 is about.

⁵ *You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,*

⁶ *nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.*

The more we trust God, especially as we see Him cover us with His wings and alert us to potential trouble, the more mature we become. And that prepares us to be

Calm when unannounced attacks happen (vv.5-6)

Notice the parallelism here; night, day, darkness, midday (i.e. at all times). And then the type of potential attacks; terror, arrow, pestilence, plagues. The imagery here is probably war. In war you never know when and where an attack may come. In ancient times plagues and pestilence were real concerns because medicine and supplies is limited. By the way, notice these things will happen. Attacks, problems, temptations will come unannounced but when our trust is in God we do not need to fear.

This is similar to Rom. 8:31-39 where Paul reassured us that if God is for us no one can really be against us? Paul asks can anything separate us from the love of God mentioning ...

“Can trouble, suffering, and hard times, or hunger and nakedness, or danger and death?”

He presumes that we will experience many of these things. So again, the psalmist is talking about when we trust God we will not be afraid long term and experience His calm when we experience difficulties and trials that we had no warning about. And most of you can relate to this at some level. Aside from the virus issue right now, think about your most recent trial, attack, problem that you experienced without warning? How did we respond? Even if we initially were upset and afraid, how long did that last? If we are walking with God consistently most likely His Word came to our mind and we settled down and experienced His peace in the midst of the difficulty knowing He was with us and was going to walk with us through it.

And if we read vv.7-9 as the result of our not being afraid and remaining calm, comforted by God's wings around us we can be encouraged ...

To stand in victory while the enemy is defeated (vv.7-10)

- 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 observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.*
⁹ *If you make the Most High your dwelling— even the LORD, who is my refuge—*
¹⁰ *then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent.*

If the imagery here is of spiritual warfare – and Matt. 4 again helps us see that as will vv.11-13 – then the psalmist is relating these verses to what God does for His people in comparison to those who don't know God. If God is our dwelling and refuge then we will not fall. The word often translated 'harm' in v.10 is actually the Hebrew word for evil. Now that makes more sense. Because v.8 contrasts believers from the wicked. We who have trusted in God as our refuge will be ultimately protected from evil. Satan is a defeated foe. Col. 2:15 says God *“disarmed the powers and authorities and made a public spectacle over them by the cross.”*

Rom. 5:9 assures us, *“Since we have been justified by His blood how much more will we be saved from God's wrath through Him?”*

We have power over the enemy through the use of Jesus' name. Because at the name of Jesus *“every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God.”* And we have His Word which we are to take up against the enemy to expose his lies and snares.

And when we consistently trust God as our refuge, we can be encouraged that He will deal with the trouble we never see as He

Helps us supernaturally when needed (vv.11-13)

- 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.*
¹³ *You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.*

It appears here that God sometimes sends angels to keep us out of trouble or protect us physically (foot against a stone) and spiritually (serpent and lion are spiritual metaphors for the enemy). These are the troubles we never see. God is working all around us. Jesus said at His arrest,

Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? (Matt. 26:53)

We are totally unaware of the spiritual battles taking place all around us and unaware of the dangers we have been spared from. Sometimes we are but mostly we are not. Praise the Lord!

As he wraps his song up here, I believe we see even more clearly that he is speaking about spiritual battles. Listen to the last three verses:

- ¹⁴ *“Because he loves me,” says the LORD, “I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.*
- ¹⁵ *He will call upon me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him.*
- ¹⁶ *With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation.”*

The salvation God ultimately wants to show us is our final deliverance in His presence when this life ends. Notice v. 15 says He will be with us in trouble. A few times in the psalm we have been told that we will have troubles yet not to be afraid because He is with us. The psalm ends on a great note to

Live Confidently Knowing God’s Promises Won’t Fail **(91:14-16)**

He promises us here that we’ll be rescued, protected, have our prayers answered. Be assured of His powerful presence, be delivered, given long life and see His salvation. The long life God wants to give us isn’t this one, it’s the next one. The one that won’t end. That’s where He will show us His salvation, His presence, the reality of His promises. Remember how Jesus prayed for the night before He died,

John 17:24 “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

Because God secures our future, He also has our present under control. The snares of temptation are there but staying in His Word helps us be alert to them. The Word also warns us about the ramifications of sin. Don’t go there. Trials and problems will come without warning. Stay calm. Make God your refuge. He wasn’t caught off guard. When we understand the Bible we understand everything passes through His sovereign permission. The enemy is a defeated foe already. It’s like watching these great game reruns they are showing on TV. We already know what team will come from behind or score that buzzer beater or sink that putt. And thank God for the many dangers He spares us from. A few we know, most we never see.

Perhaps one of these specific promises are more relevant to you than others. The key to experiencing any of them is to dwell in the shelter of the Most High and rest in the shadow of the Almighty. Perhaps you’ve never made God your refuge. You can do that today. God sent Jesus to die for your sins because we can’t pay for them ourselves. Our good works can’t save us. We all fall short of God’s glory. We need to believe by faith that God accepted Jesus’ payment for our sins and to confess our need for forgiveness. The apostle Paul said

⁹ *That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. ¹¹ As the Scripture says, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”*

If you want to make God your refuge today, believe in your heart God raised Jesus, confess your sins and need for forgiveness then profess that to someone today. Tell someone.

May we who know Jesus continually make God our refuge. Keep walking with Him by reading and listening to His Word, applying it and talking with Him in prayer. Encourage one another to do the same. And then we will be prepared for anything that comes our way. *"I will be with you in trouble."*

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at oliviet@rideau.net