

## PSALM 91 *ASSURANCE OF GOD'S PROTECTION*

### PSALM OF TRUST

- Expresses
  1. A personal and intimate faith and trust in God.
  2. The blessings and graces that flow from placing one's trust in God
  3. God protecting the individual who trusts from dangers and threats
- Forceful language, strong and gentle illustrations and striking contrasts
- Teaches a certainty of salvation that overcomes all dangers
- Does not promise immunization from trouble, but rather protection is such a way that each trial strengthens and purifies God's servant

### ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION

Among scholars there are differences of opinion as to its specific use in the liturgical life of ancient Israel. Among the proposed possibilities are:

- Royal Psalm in which the king is addressed as one who dwells under the shelter of God's protection by virtue of his office.
- Liturgical Instruction to those admitted into the Temple, either a newly commissioned priest, or a pilgrim come to worship.
- Instructional psalm given by one who has experienced the protection of God, recited to one who has not.

### THE SPEAKER

In the first verse: "You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High," the poet seems to be addressing the king or perhaps a cultic official therefore scholars have suggested the Psalm was --

- composed/recited by a court poet to the king
- composed/recited by a priest to another newly commissioned priest
- composed/recited someone who had experienced the protective love of God

The consensus, however, appears to be that Psalm 91 is a psalm of profound trust in God and the rewards it brings to those who place their trust in God; *possibly* royal. It is followed by an oracle in which God himself affirms the words of the psalmist in the first part of the psalm

## EXEGESIS

### **Divisions:**

1. Two parts: v. 1-13 and 14-16
  - Part one is a promise of divine protection
  - The second part is a confirmation by divine assurance
2. Three parts: vv 1-2, 3-13, and 14-16
  - **1-2** are a call to declare complete trust in God
  - **3-13** is instruction on the depth that the expression of trust involves
  - **14-16** are a divine oracle
3. Third division presented by Bruggemann
  - **1-8** combines the intimacy of personal faith with a metaphor of God's majestic transcendence
  - **9-13** reiterates the first eight verses
    - **11-13** returns to the setting of a journey; God's angels give protection
  - **14-16** is the divine oracle

### Verses

**Verses 1-2** psalmist uses four designations for God (Dahood).

“The Most High,” “The Almighty,” “my refuge,” “my rock” or “fortress.”

Three names for God in progression to the Divien Name used for the God of Israel

*Elyon*, “Most High,”

*Shaddai*, “Almighty” a poetic divine name

*YHWH*, the Divine Name of the God of Israel

**Verse 1:** “You who live in the shelter of the Most High. . .in the shadow of the Almighty”  
“Shelter of the Most High”

- General state of divine protection
- Sanctuary of the Temple
- “Shadow of the Almighty”
- Shadow of the wings of the Almighty; a much more paternal interpretation
  - May be likening one “who dwells” to an eaglet guarded by a Great Eagle
- Wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies
  - Denotes a closeness to God within a religious context
  - Such intimacy with God would be comparable to Moses

**Verse 2:** Divine Name *YHWH* specifically identifies the God of Israel

Translated in different ways.

- In the manner of a command the psalmist tells the one who dwells in God's shelter to “say to the Lord, my refuge” (NAB).
- In the manner of personal testimony of the individual: “I will say”
- *Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament* provides the latter as the appropriate translation

The manner in which God is addressed also varies in different translations

- “Let him say *to* YHWH”(Kraus)
- “Say: ‘O YHWH...’” (Dahood)
- “I will say *of* YHWH...” *Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament*

**Verses 3-6** the psalmist speaks of God protecting the one who trusts from actual threats to physical life. *Pronoun referring to God in these verses is emphatic*

**Verses 3** alludes to *man-made threats*

- “Snare of the fowler” -- man made threat or evil
- “...and from the destroying plague.” -- two different interpretations
  - **Middeber** (‘from the *pestilence* of’) = Natural dangers (Dahood)
  - **Mid<sup>e</sup>bar** (‘from the *word* of’) = ‘Destructive word’ (Weiser)
  - “From pestilence of deadly ones” *Interlinear Hebrew-English OT*

**Verses 5-6** refer to *demonic or pestilential threats*.

“Terror of the night,”

- Demonic powers that strike fear at night
- **Pahad**, a pack of wild dogs (Dahood)
- Mere chance dangers

“Arrow that flies by day”

- Sinister forces that cause illnesses such as sunstroke
- May denote a hunter’s arrow against the eaglet protected by the Eagle
- “Missile” of demonic power

“Pestilence” or “plague.” -- **deber**

- Demonic or magical forces that cause epidemics
- Natural forces that do not refer to demons

**Verse 4** returns to a metaphorical comparison of God’s protection

May also be a reference to the wings of the cherubim

God’s “faithfulness” -- **soh<sup>e</sup>rah** (protective shield) or **sâhartâ** (walled enclosure)

- **mittô** to refer to the “faithfulness”<sup>\*\*</sup> to the covenant
- **ammâtô** referring to God’s “arm”

**Verses 7:** “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousands fall at your right hand...”

- Unlikely a metaphor for battle
- May have reference to specific aspects of the Exodus
- 2 Kings 19:35 the angel of God slew five thousand in the Assyrian camp with a plague
- May also refer to disasters of day and night as a punishment of the wicked from which the psalmist will be spared

**Verse 8:** Faith reaches its zenith

- Psalmist experiences first hand God’s saving action
- “You will look” or “you need only to look” carries in it a degree of certainty that the psalmist will behold what will surely happen
  - God will manifest his justice against the wicked.
  - The one who trusts in God will be protected

**Verse 9** -- two conflicts in translation among scholars

1. Change in person

- “For you, Lord, are *my* safe retreat,”(Rogerson)
- “Because *You* have made the Lord *your* refuge,”(Anderson)

2. Conflict in statements

- Definitive -- “You, Lord, *are* my safe retreat,” (Rogerson)
- Conditional -- “*If* you consider YHWH himself your refuge...” (Dahood)
- A positive assertion of the previous verses -- “You *have* made the Most High your shelter” (Weiser)

Both interpretations -- “*If* you make the Most High your dwelling -- even the Lord who is *my* refuge...” *Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament*

**Verse 11:** “For he will command his angels concerning you...”

-- The word *mal’āk* (messenger, angel)

- Used in the Old Testament to refer both to human and divine messengers.
- *Mal’āk yhw* -- “angel of the Lord” -- who often appears as a manifestation of God Himself
- Angels are seen as superior to humans; are employed to protect; instruments of God’s love and concern for each person

**Verse 12** -- “Upon their hands they will bear you up”

-- Depiction of God’s care is seen in different lights

- Delicate & childlike
- Royal. Angels act as bodyguards

**Verse 13** -- Image of courage sharply contrasts the childlike security of vv. 11 --12.

-- Lions and serpents may be representative of all dangers

-- Various translations for the dangers

-- *Šahal* and *Kēpîr* = ‘Asp’ and ‘viper,’

- ‘Lion’ and ‘young lion’(RSV)
- “Asp and the serpent, the young lion and the dragon” (NJB)
- “Asp and cobra...snake and serpent” (Rogerson)
- “The lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent” (Stuhlmüller)
- “Lion and cobra....*great* lion and the serpent” -- *Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament*(Kohlenberger)

**Verses 14 - 16** the speaker of Psalm 91 shifts from the psalmist to God

**Verse 14:** Humanity’s faithfulness/intimacy with God is described as ‘cleaving in love’

- *H-š-k* may be a Deuteronomic term indicating one of three things:
  - 1) A person’s love for another person,
  - 2) God’s love for Israel
  - 3) *A person’s devotion to God*\*\*\*
- Loving God = Knowing the Divine Name
  - Only revealed by God
  - Implies an intimate relationship based on obedient loyalty
- Conditional statement:
  - “*If* he clings to me...”(Dahood)
  - “Those who love me, I will deliver,” (RSV)

- “*Because* his love is set on me...”(Rogerson)

**Verse 15** God’s delivery and answer are certain. God rescues the one who trusts in him from the clutches of approaching death

- Distress spoken of may be the anguish (*sârâh*) of approaching death
- Some scholars interpret this verse in a messianic context

**Verse 16:** “Long life” or “length of days” traditionally the outward sign of divine favor

### **Christian use of Psalm 91**

#### **1. New Testament.**

- **Matthew 4:6** and **Luke 4:10-11** -- quotes Psalm 91:11-12
- **Luke 10:19** --“ I have given you power to tread upon snakes and scorpions and all the forces of the enemy”
- **Hebrews 1:14** refers to “ministering spirits sent to serve those who are to inherit salvation.” -- cross-referenced with Psalm 91:11(*NAB*)

**2. St. Augustine** compares the trust and journey of the Christian with that of Christ.

#### **3. Liturgical life** of the Church

- **Mass:** First Sunday of Lent, Year C (verses 1-2, 10-15)  
Monday, Week 9 in Ordinary Time (verses 1-2, 14-16)  
Monday Week 14 in Ordinary Time (verses 1-4, 14-15)  
October 2, the feast of the Guardian Angels (verses 1-6, 10-11).
- **Liturgy of the Hours:** Sunday Night Prayer.