

## God's Great Ballad | The Flow of the Psalms

### *You Will Not Be Afraid*

Psalm 91 (Maturation)

7.26.20

*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. <sup>2</sup> I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!" <sup>3</sup> For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper and from the deadly pestilence. <sup>4</sup> He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you may seek refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark. <sup>5</sup> You will not be afraid of the terror by night, or of the arrow that flies by day; <sup>6</sup> Of the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or of the destruction that lays waste at noon. <sup>7</sup> A thousand may fall at your side and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not approach you. <sup>8</sup> You will only look on with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. <sup>9</sup> For you have made the LORD, my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place. <sup>10</sup> No evil will befall you, nor will any plague come near your tent.*

*<sup>11</sup> For He will give His angels charge concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. <sup>12</sup> They will bear you up in their hands, that you do not strike your foot against a stone. <sup>13</sup> You will tread upon the lion and cobra, the young lion and the serpent you will trample down.*

*<sup>14</sup> "Because he has loved Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him securely on high, because he has known My name. <sup>15</sup> "He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. <sup>16</sup> "With a long life I will satisfy him and let him see My **salvation.**"*

We're looking at the Book of Psalms...and this time around we're focused on how the whole collection was compiled... and how there seems to be a method to how the five books were curated... five themes.

This psalm comes from Book Four with its topic of MATURATION. Israel was devastated when Babylon came against Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, the walls, the whole city and took some 20,000 people into exile.

We might expect that this would be the END of Israel and Jerusalem and the Temple. BUT rather than destroy the Jewish Church, God used this catastrophe to GROW UP the church... idolatry began to wither...the church... through exile... matured.

Last week, the first psalm in this Book Four (90) was a heavy meditation on time, change and death. Today's is a reflection on life, protection, security and courage.

This 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm is right up there with the 23<sup>rd</sup> as a universal favorite – full of encouragement amidst anxiety. The church was learning: even if God takes us through deep pain, HE CAN BE TRUSTED to use that difficulty to liberate us, no longer to be children, tossed here and there by every wind of teaching (Eph 4.14).

This is a Psalm of orientation. It's giving us a reason to face life in a kind of posture, a perspective, an orientation. It's built on the "grammar of grace"; in other words – FIRST the indicative mood verb (indicating what IS – indicative) and THEN the imperative (a command). Because God has done this (indicative) you're free to do that (the imperative as response).

And the way that grammar plays out in THIS Psalm is basically to say: because God is Protector, you will not be afraid; you don't have to be ruled by anxiety. Verse 5: "You will not be afraid."

How is anxiety converted into maturity/confidence? We have:

- 1) To Recognize the Opposition**
- 2) To Receive the Promise**
- 3) To Navigate the Nuance**

Anxiety is a societal scourge. Maybe one discovery we've made through this current moment in our nation is that modern Americans are anxious and therefore reactive. A book written in 1996 by a rabbi named Edwin H. Friedman called, *A Failure of Nerve*; and in that book (I only learned about it a few weeks ago and I've only read reviews and critiques) in the book, Friedman charges that our society is characterized by Unhealthy Emotional Systems.

And one way we know we're living in this kind of cultural environment is that more and more, instead of pursuing adventure and discovery, our culture is pursuing ever-greater safety and certainty.

And after offering five proofs of this unhealthy emotional environment, Friedman warns that these characteristics of emotional regression pervert growth toward maturity (there's our word, theme of Book 4 of the Psalms). We're not growing in maturity that leads to personal discipline or self-control, the ability to identify and move toward greater character, the ability to embrace challenges and respond constructively, the ability to show patience in allowing time for growth, and the preservation of both individuality and togetherness.

We are, according to Friedman (1996!) we are the anxious society and reactive... playing it safe.

And one wonders... WHY... we're so anxious. Why are we so afraid? And this Psalm will answer: if you could only see the opposition you are facing as a human being – you should be much, MUCH MORE afraid than you are!

The Bible is utterly realistic. The Bible, this Psalm, is not going to come along and give you a little pep-talk about, “If you just put your mind to it, you’ll succeed and you can do anything you’ve ever dreamed! Just apply yourself! Dig deep! Girl, wash your face! Be optimistic! Winners never quit and quitters never win! The glass is half full! Don’t go to the dark side!

See BEFORE telling us WHY to be optimistic, the Bible and this Psalm is going to have us look hard at the opposition that faces us.

In the 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm there are at least 12 images or metaphors for the deadly forces that threaten us. Most or all of them are the kind of ills that seem to “come out of nowhere” as we’d say. These forces can bring down the strong or the weak, the young or the old.

This is poetic language but it all points to the real dangers that “threaten hard to bring us down” – the snare of the trapper (as if you’re minding your own business – working your job, collecting your pay – and SNAP – you’re trapped, ensnared). What might this poet have in mind? Maybe a person’s out to get you or a life-controlling sin or habit or addiction; he or it comes upon you and you lose your freedom.

v. 3 “deadly pestilence” – I don’t really have to talk about that DO I? We’re all aware of that like we’ve never been aware – there’s a pestilence afoot, a pandemic. But if the trapper’s snare was an image maybe this is too – a spiritual and psychological DIS-ease.

The “terror by night” (v. 5) or the “arrow that flies by day”; or v. 6 “the pestilence that stalks in darkness” or “the destruction that lays waste at noon.”

Again at least twelve separate images or metaphors or symbols of the things that are out to get you. And all this battle imagery – v. 7 “a thousand may fall at your side...and ten-thousand at your right hand” as if that saying is really true: “Be kind to every person you meet because everyone is fighting a hard battle.”

If this picture is accurate – NO WONDER PEOPLE ARE ANXIOUS! And yet this is the Bible’s way – to give us this real and unvarnished view of life on a fallen planet. St Paul says it in Ephesians CH 2, “You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.” (1-2)

It’s a horrible picture of human life! It begins with death – like we’re dead inside until God makes us alive. But we’re the “walking dead” (“in which death you formerly walked”). And we’re surrounded by others who walk this way (Aerosmith!) so we never even question our choices (“everyone else is walking this way...I guess it’s the way to go.”) And then a reference to the “prince of the power of the air” – like this unseen force somehow affecting the public mood (the

air we breathe). And have you ever felt it personally, this cloak seems to descend on you and leaves you inexplicably down?

Did you know that the Greek OT (LXX) translates v. 6 (quote)“and the evil spirit at noon-day.” And did you know the ancient rabbis saw this whole poem as descriptive of the demonic world. They were very imaginative about what the devils looked like, “full of eyes, scales and hair...whoever looks at it falls down dead.” (Midrash Rabbah, VII in Kidner, vol 2, p. 332)

And I always think, my own worst enemy isn't even mentioned among all these evils:

My mother always told me  
No monster lived beneath my bed,  
But she had failed to warn me  
It laid on top of it instead. (Erin Hanson)

We can be the villains in our own story!

And IF we were to see this beautiful poem (Ps 91) as having to do with this unseen world of evil spirits out to get us... even if we discount those ancient rabbis and their overactive imaginations maybe we are still on the right track because this Psalm is quoted in the New Testament by someone we wouldn't expect to be quoting Scripture – it was the devil himself.

When the embodiment of Israel comes personified in ONE PERSON – when a Man comes who is the Obedient Adam and the Perfect Son that Israel never was. When Jesus Christ is baptized and called “the Son in Whom I'm well pleased” by the Father, then the Holy Spirit leads Him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And Jesus, the micro-Israel spends 40 days in the wilderness (a miniature of Israel).

Mark says Jesus Christ was tempted by Satan 40 days and was “with the wild beasts” (1.12-13). Matthew and Luke tell us that the Perfect Son, the True Israel was tempted to turn stones into bread: and Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy (from when Israel was in the wilderness) “man shall not live by bread alone.”

Then Jesus was tempted to get all the kingdoms of the world if He would just worship the devil (a shortcut to the crown without the cross) and Jesus quoted Deuteronomy again, “You shall only worship the LORD your God.”

And finally the devil takes Jesus Christ to Jerusalem to the Temple and says throw Yourself down so everyone can see and You'll win (another shortcut) and the devil quotes Psalm 91, vv. 11-12: “He will command His angels concerning You to guard You,' and, 'on their hands they will bear You up, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone.'” (Luk 4.10-11)

And quoting from the wilderness wanderings again, Jesus says, "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test..."

"And when the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time. "And of course that time DID come when Jesus hung on the Cursed Tree... and it was as if Jesus Christ was saying to our enemy through His parched lips, "Well, you didn't quote the next verse, devil, (see it, v. 13) 'You will tread upon the lion and cobra, the young lion and the serpent you will trample down.'"

Satan goes about like a roaring lion (1 Pet 5.8); he's called the serpent and the dragon and here from the Cross, Jesus Christ tramples him down...

And in that act, Jesus Christ, the True and Perfect Son and the True Israel – He opens His wings over us and becomes our refuge and fortress. It says (as the Greek version has it) He shall overshadow you with His shoulders, and you shalt trust under His wings: His truth shall cover you as a shield. (91.4 LXX)

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!" For it is He who delivers you..."

You know there's this strange/wonderful place in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings CH 6 where the Prophet Elisha is looking out over the plains and this immense army of the Arameans is circling an Israelite town ready to crush it ...and Elisha's servant says, "Sir... we're toast!"

So Elisha answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." (And you can imagine the servant saying, "Sir, you've been too long in the sun – we got NO ARMY – we got nothing!")

Then the next verse: Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, I pray, open my servant's eyes that he may see." And the LORD opened the servant's eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Elisha saw into the spiritual world. He saw that when God is called "Lord Sabbaot" – i.e. Lord of Hosts, really LORD of Heaven's Armies... Elisha could actually see the armies...of angels.

There's "war in the heavenlies" ... and Jesus Christ IS the LORD of hosts. It says that on the Cross He made an open display of the unseen powers of evil and triumphed over them FOR US on the Cross.

You may wonder... does this wonderful Psalm really guarantee that Christians won't get the Corona Virus and that we'll never get in auto accidents and won't get cancer and all live to be really old?

And of course – we also know that “He causes it to rain on the just and the unjust” (Mat 5.45)

And remember when Jesus Christ told His followers to expect persecution? In Luke CH 21 v. 16 it says, "But you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, and you will be hated by all because of My name."

Then the very next verse says, "Yet not a hair of your head will perish" (Luke 21.16-18). How are we going to be executed without a hair perishing? See the nuance we have to navigate...this isn't a promise of a pain-free life of unbroken success!

Well, isn't Jesus really saying, “Even if you die... the real YOU belongs to Me... I am your Defender and the New Person I'm making you to be...the True You will never be harmed. In fact YOU ARE SO SECURE that in a very real sense, you're already seated with Me at the Table in the everlasting celebration! (Eph 2.5-7)

The key for us is to see that if we could see the spiritual opposition that faces us each day... we'd never get out of bed... Cheer up! It's much worse than you thought! And the key is not to ignore it (close your eyes and say “Puppies and Kittens”3x) but to have our eyes open with Elisha's servant.

It's what St. Paul prayed for the young Christians, “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling...and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. ...and Christ seated in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.” (Eph 1.18-21)

What turns anxiety into maturity, stability, courage and joy is not to close our eyes but to open them: to see this world with devils filled and the Right Man on our side...the Man of God's own choosing...LORD Sabbaot”

His very name is literally the final word of today's Psalm... “I will satisfy him with long life and let him see My Salvation (Heb: 'My YESHUA')...”

See? If I'm seeing Him, the One who saves us from evil... It leads me to abide in Him... to hide myself in Him... To know that I have something far better than positive thinking or willpower... I have a Champion who holds me... and that turns anxiety into adventure...and maturity and joy.