



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 91

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Introduction

- This Psalm has no title in the Hebrew; nor can it be determined on what occasion or by whom it was composed
- The Jewish commentators consider that when the author's name is not mentioned, the Psalm is ascribed to the previous named author
- According to this principle, this Psalm is written by Moses
- The reason, some claim that it is written by Moses is that it shares some of the themes of Psalm 90
- And others claim it is written by David because it shares some of the themes of Psalm 27 and Psalm 31



Introduction

- The Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament) attributes this Psalm to David, but that remains in question
- Because there are no internal evidence by which we can ascertain when, or by whom, it was written
- Like Psalms 90, this Psalm shows familiarity with the language of Deuteronomy 32
- It is very general in its application, and may have been composed with no particular reference to any event occurring at the time
- This Psalm is often referred to as the "Psalm of Protection"



Introduction

- It expresses confidence that God will protect the righteous from plagues, demons, and wild animals, while allowing the wicked to perish
- Every godly man is always safe under the divine protection
- And some describe it as the most reassuring, uplifting, promising, and most incomparable Psalm in the whole Holy Book of Psalms
- Some of the fathers say it is most suitable to pray it at Compline as a defense against the snares of the night and the various temptations of the evil



Introduction

- St. Athanasius writes to Marcellinus, “If you desire to stablish yourself and others in devotion, to know what confidence is to be reposed in GOD, and what makes the mind fearless, you will praise GOD by reciting the ninetieth (ninety-first) Psalm.”
- Prophetically and spiritually, the Fathers called this Psalm the victory of the Messiah, and of everyone that is perfected by Him
- St. Augustine says, “This Psalm is that from which the Devil dared to tempt our Lord Jesus Christ: let us therefore attend to it, that thus armed, we may be enabled to resist the tempter, not presuming in ourselves, but in Him who before us was tempted, that we might not be overcome when tempted.”



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- The Assurance of God's Protection 91:1-2
- The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10
- The Servants of God 91:11-13
- The Promise of God's Salvation 91:14-16

The Assurance of God's Protection 91:1-2



- The first verse contains a remarkable promise, in which the Holy Spirit assures us that the divine assistance will never be lacking to those who really put their trust in God
- God has a *secret place* for His own (Psalm 27:5,31:20), and it is a place to *live in*
- *the secret place*, does not only indicate its perfect security, but also that it is no visible earthly tower, but an invisible fortress, which faith alone can find and enter
- Those who dwell there *abide under the shadow of the Almighty*, knowing His protection, comfort, and care

The Assurance of God's Protection 91:1-2



- *He*, no matter who he may be, rich or poor, young or old, for God is rich to all that call upon Him
- He who has his thoughts always on God is said to *dwell in Him* - to make his house with him - to *sit down in His secret place*
- *He who dwells*, This liberal promise does not apply to those who put only a certain amount of trust in God, but this trust must be continuous, constant, and firm, so that man may be said to dwell in God, through faith and confidence, and to carry it about with him, like a house

The Assurance of God's Protection 91:1-2



- God's help is not like one of the strongholds of this world, to which people fly for defense, but consists in an invisible and most secret tower that can be found, and entered by faith alone
- *the Most High ...the Almighty* Significant titles, chosen to emphasize the power of the Sovereign Ruler of the world to defend His people
- In Psalm 90:1, Moses spoke of God as the dwelling place of His people
- The psalmist here seems to take that idea further and speak of the most central place of that dwelling-place, referring to it as the *Secret Place*, and describing its complete security

The Assurance of God's Protection 91:1-2



- The psalmist begins with a general reflection on the blessedness of trust in God; and inspired by the thought, applies it personally to his own spiritual needs
- The general view is followed by a personal application
- The psalmist says, that he will take this to himself
- He will endeavor to secure this blessedness and will thus abide with God
- He will address Him as his *refuge* and will regard Him as his *fortress*
- The one who lives intimately with God knows the greatness of His protection

The Assurance of God's Protection 91:1-2



- God Himself becomes like a mighty *refuge* and *fortress* for the believer
- This close relationship with God and all the benefits that come from it are for those who know *God*, and who truly *trust* in Him
- St. Augustine says, “He dwells under the defense of the Most High, who is not proud, like those who ate, that they might become as Gods, and lost the immortality in which they were made. For they chose to dwell under a defense of their own, not under that of the Most High: thus they listened to the suggestions of the serpent, and despised the precept of God: and discovered at last that what God threatened, not what the devil promised, had come to pass in them.”

The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10



- Now the psalmist began to describe the providential care of God in detail
- Believers will be kept from those harms and malice which they are in near close danger of, and which would be fatal to them
- *from the snare of the fowler*, which is laid unseen and catches the unaware prey or the victim on a sudden
- And *from the noisome pestilence*, which seizes men unexpectedly and against which there is no guard
- Spiritually speaking man is protected by divine grace from the temptations of Satan, which are as the *snare of the fowler*



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- According to St. Jerome and St. Augustine, *the perilous pestilence*, is translated as *the harsh word*
- St. Augustine says, “Deliverance from the hunter’s net is indeed a great blessing: but how is deliverance from a harsh word so? Many have fallen into the hunter’s net through a harsh word. What is it that I say? The devil and his angels spread their snares, as hunters do; and those who walk in Christ tread afar from those snares; for he dares not spread his net in Christ: he sets it on the verge of the way, not in the way. Let then your way be Christ, and you will not fall into the snares of the devil.”

The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10



- Satan's army, the demons, are so numerous
- According to St. Jerome, "they are so powerful and so ferocious as to be compared, in the Scriptures, 'to lions and dragons' and they have no other study but constantly 'going about roaring, seeking whom they may devour.'"
- *the perilous pestilence*, may be literally understood of any fatal disease from which the Lord, by His powerful providence, sometimes protects His people, when in danger of it
- Or, spiritually, of the *pestilence* disease of sin, that deadly one
- The Lord saves His children from the destructive effects and consequences of sin



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- In a metaphor, God is represented as a bird, sheltering young chicks *under His wings*
- According to St. John Chrysostom this same image of the wings is everywhere in the prophets, and in the song of Moses and in the Psalms, indicating His great protection and care
- St. Augustine says, “If the hen defends her chickens beneath her wings; how much more shall you be safe beneath the wings of God, even against the devil and his angels, the powers who fly about in mid air like hawks, to carry off the weak young one?”



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- The verse tells us of the continuation and persistence of the divine protection
- When one is young and cannot defend himself and weaker than his enemies, God *shall cover you with His feathers, And under His wings you shall take refuge*, as the eagle or the hen protects her young
- But when one is grown, and able to fight, God *shall be your shield and buckler*
- God's promise would be unto them as the shield of the soldier is to him in battle
- *His truth* is His Son, who is *Truth* itself, John 14:6



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- Whose blood and salvation, are as *shield and buckler* all around the saints, to protect them from any harm
- Some fathers explain these *wings* in several ways, as the two Testaments, the mercy and justice of God
- And some see in them the arms of Christ extended on the Cross to shelter the nations from the consequences of sin, from the dreadful birds that are hovering in the air
- The word of God also, which is truth, John 17:19, every promise in it, and doctrine of it, is as a *shield and buckler* to strengthen, and secure the faith of His people, "*Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him.*" (Proverbs 30:5)



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- Neither sudden assaults of enemies by night, nor open attacks by day shall have power to harm those who trust in God
- Having God as a shelter and refuge gives strength and courage to His people
- God will not only keep them from evil, but from the fear of evil
- When God's people are stuck deep in fear, it is an indication that they fall short of proper trust in God as protector
- *terror by night*, An unexpected attack of enemies
- 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*

The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10



- 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
- St. Augustine says, “Thus the sins in the night are those of ignorance, those in the day are conscious and willful, and are therefore spoken of in more forcible terms.”
- *That walks in darkness*, Not that it particularly comes in the night, but that is, where one cannot mark its progress, or anticipate when or whom it will strike
- The laws of its movements are unknown, and it comes upon people as an enemy that suddenly attacks us at night



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- God confirms that His eyes are on those who fear Him all the year long; and that His care would not cease day and night
- So, the adversary would use any chance to destroy the children of God; he would terrorize them by night, aim his arrows at them by day, send *pestilences* in the darkness, and *destruction at noonday*
- Some fathers say that the four expressions may also be taken of the varying methods of persecution used against the Church
- From the threats and persuasion used against imperfect Christians, easily diverted from the faith by fear, and not thoroughly knowing the gravity of such a fall, to the actual violence used against fully-matured Christians



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- The psalmist follows up the description of the victory of the just man who trust in God, and makes proper use of the shield of truth
- Whatever it be, shall not touch him and will be protected from it
- For in this fight, *A thousand may fall at your side, And ten thousand at your right hand; But it shall not come near you*
- Though a thousand, or even ten thousand, should fall beside the believer, in battle, or through *pestilence*, yet it shall not come near him



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- No matter how many fall around those who trust in God, on the right hand and the left, they will have nothing to fear
- Some fathers raise the question of why we find in the first clause only *your side*, and not *at your left hand*
- Some say it indicates the mere human power of resistance, the free-will of man, is unworthy to be specially named, when we are speaking of the grace of God, which guards us on the right
- So that the just man has, mystically, two right sides, and none given over to evil, which the *left* term denotes

The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10



- And this notion is enforced by Eusebius who explains the Psalm of Christ, and says that the word *left* is purposely omitted, lest we should suppose any defect to exist in Him
- Not only will no single one of all those hosts of enemies be able to reach those who trust in God, but they will see their total overthrow, while God Himself fights for them
- God's people, they did not only have been promised a victory, but that they will, furthermore, see their enemies punished according to their deeds, a promise that is sometimes fulfilled even in this world



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- Thus, the children of Israel saw the Egyptians cast dead on the shores of the Red Sea, *“And Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever.’”* (Exodus 14:13)
- Moses and Aaron saw Dathan and Abiron swallowed up alive
- Hezekiah saw the powerless bodies of Sennacherib's army
- The righteous will not look upon it with pleasure, rejoicing in their misery, but it is a manifestation of the glory of divine justice displayed in it, *“The righteous also shall see and fear.”* (Psalm 52:6)



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- But this promise will be completely fulfilled on the day of judgment, when we shall see all God's enemies given to eternal punishment
- St. Augustine says, "All that is wanting is the eye of faith, by which we may see that they are raised for a time only, while they shall mourn for evermore; and to those into whose hands is given temporal power over the servants of God, it shall be said, 'Depart into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.'"



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- These verses include conditional promises
- The promises are that *No evil shall befall you, Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling*
- But those promises are conditional on making God his *refuge* and *the Most High, your dwelling place*
- Verse 9 assumes that the just man has complied with these conditions, so the promises apply
- However, the conditional nature of the promises serve as a warning that the promises will no longer apply if we disassociate ourselves from God



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- So, the psalmist began again to present a renewed assurances of Divine protection, confirmed by a Divine promise
- The first part of verse 9, is the voice of God's people speaking to God; the second part are the words of the Psalmist
- The character of those who shall have the benefit and comfort of these promises; they are such as make *the Most High their dwelling place*
- They are continually with God and rest in Him
- Some interpret these words of the Psalmist himself who had made God his refuge, or his defense



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- The language is an expression of his own feeling - of his own experience - in having made God his refuge, and is intended here to be a ground of encouragement to others to do the same thing
- St. Augustine says, "He has now come to the power Which rescues him from falling by the 'downfall and the devil of the noon-day.' 'For You, Lord, are my hope: You has set Your house of defense very high.'"
- The previous promises (Psalm 91:5-8) of security and safety even in a time of *plague* are repeated
- Whatever happens to them, nothing shall hurt them



The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10

- 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
- Though trouble or affliction befall them, yet there shall be no real evil in it, for it shall come from the love of God
- It shall come, not for their hurt, but for their good
- We have the example of David, we know that the evil of sin did happen to him in most grievous way, and that heavy *plagues* were inflicted on him and his house because of it
- Some fathers ask how this promise can have been fulfilled in his case, or in that of the countless other servants of God who have fallen into sins

The Godly Men's Safety 91:3-10



- The answer is that the promise belongs to the next world, not to this
- The fathers tell us, that although Saints are not promised absolute immunity from sin, yet by Divine Providence their very sins are turned into agencies for their good, to make them humbler, more watchful, more pierced with the love of God
- They will realize and confess that they owe so very much to His grace and mercy, and that the affliction of temporal punishment is hardly felt by them, because they dwell in the tabernacle of devout and repentant contemplation, and accept His fatherly chastisement



The Servants of God 91:11-13

- Verse 11 describes another way God may send His protection and care unto His people – through *His angels*, commanding them to *keep* and *bear...up* His people
- Angels are ministering spirits to God's people
- The faithful is under their constant care (Hebrews 1:14), who guide them and direct them perpetually
- This is a precious promise which offers comfort to God's people
- *Charge*, literally, *He will give 'command' to His angels*
- *Charge* is an order, a firm strict command, more than a simple plain command



The Servants of God 91:11-13

- Origen observes “Each one of us, even the least in the Church of GOD, has beside him a good angel, an angel of the LORD, to rule, to move, to direct him, and who, to amend our doings, and to ask for mercies on our behalf, daily sees the face of our FATHER which is in heave.”
- *in all your ways*, Those that go out of that way put themselves out of God's protection
- St. Basil the Great says, “The angel of the LORD, will encamp round about each believer in the LORD, unless we put him to flight by our evil deeds. For as smoke drives bees away, and a bad fetid smell banishes doves, so lamentable and fetid sin repels the angel of our life.”



The Servants of God 91:11-13

- According to our Lord Jesus Christ, every one of us have a guardian Angel; for He says, *“their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.”* (Matthew 18:10)
- Satan made a crafty use of this promise when he tempted our Lord, (Matthew 4:6; Luke 4:10-11) and used it wrongly because it was used and intended to deceive
- St. Augustine comments on this and says, “by Christ’s temptation the Christian might be taught. What then is written? ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’ Let us not then tempt the Lord, so as to say, If we belong to You, let us work a miracle.”



The Servants of God 91:11-13

- Angels have many duties, they remove obstacles out of our way: *“I will send My Angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanite and the Amorite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite.”* (Exodus 33:2)
- They ease our trials: *“The angel of the Lord descended with Azariah and his companions into the furnace; and he cast the flame of the fire out of the furnace.”* (Daniel 3:49)
- They help us against visible enemies: *“the angel of the LORD went out, and killed in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand;”* (Isaiah 37:36)



The Servants of God 91:11-13

- They present our prayers and alms before God: *“I offered your prayer to the lord”* (Tobit 12:12)
- They guide us in the way: *“May His angel accompany you”* (Tobit 5:21)
- They guard us from sin: *“the angels urged Lot to hurry, saying, ‘Arise, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be consumed in the punishment of the city.’”* (Genesis 19:15)
- *In their hands they shall bear you up*, Which symbolizes both their great ability and their great affection
- It signifies the strength and power of angels to carry the saints in their hands and their tender care of them



The Servants of God 91:11-13

- *Lest you dash your foot against a stone*, lest they stumble and fall into sin and into trouble
- *The stones*, may mean all the obstacles that we meet in this life, either temporal or spiritual
- St. Augustine, comments on this verse and says, “Our feet are two affections, fear and love; and, whenever man proceeds in his actions, words, or desires, he is carried by one or the other, or by the desire of acquiring one thing or losing something else, or by a desire of avoiding evil, or the fear of falling into it; we then knock our foot against the stone, when we fall into sin, on an occasion offering of acquiring some temporal good, or of avoiding some temporal evil, whence we lose eternal happiness, and incur eternal punishment.”



The Servants of God 91:11-13

- He continues and says, “but they ‘who dwell in the aid of the Most High’ are so assisted by the Angel guardian, that the occasion is altogether removed; that is, the stone is taken out of the way, or the mind is so enlightened as to distinguish good from evil; that the feet, that is, the affections are so raised from the earth that the temporal advantage, that could not be had without sin, is easily despised; and the temporal evil, that could not be avoided without sin, is most patiently endured.”
- 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 cobra*



The Servants of God 91:11-13

- Defeated armies bow down before their conquerors, who, to mark the completeness of the subjection, placed a foot upon them as a sign of subjection
- From this practice the metaphor of "treading under foot" for conquering became known and common
- The *lion* here represents all open and violent enemies; *the cobra* all secret and evil ones
- St. Augustine says, "The lion openly rages, the dragon lies secretly in covert: the devil has each of these forces and powers. When the Martyrs were being slain, it was the raging lion: when heretics are plotting, it is the dragon creeping beneath us."



The Servants of God 91:11-13

- Having made mention of the good Angels who have charge of the just man that trusts in God, he now points to the bad angels, and says that they are far from harming the just man, that he, on the contrary, will trample on and crush them, as the Apostle says,,
“And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly.”
(Romans 16:20)
- God’s people will be safe among dangers, as if the rage of the lion were restrained, and he became like a lamb, and as if the venomous tooth of the serpent were removed



The Servants of God 91:11-13

- Christ has broken the serpent's head, *“Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.”* (Colossians 2:15)
- Jesus Christ gave us this promise, *“Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you.”* (Luke 10:19)
- This is not the only passage in which the devil is called a serpent and a lion; he is called *a roaring lion, the old serpent, the red dragon*

The Promise of God's Salvation

91:14-16



- The conclusion of the Psalm comes as a Divine confirmation of the psalmist's expression of confidence
- God Himself now speaks by the mouth of the psalmist, makes promises, and counts up the blessings He has in store for His faithful servants who love Him
- He speaks specifically over those who *set their love upon* Him
- *set his love* Indicates the strength of his affection to God, and its sincerity
- God is speaking about those who attach themselves to Him—bind themselves to Him—love Him—take delight in Him
- God will deliver those people

The Promise of God's Salvation

91:14-16



- The deliverance here promised may be said to mean deliverance from the domination, power, and authority of sin
- *“If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”* (John 8:36); such liberty is not granted unto all, but to those that hope in God and to those who *set his love upon Me*
- The word *set him on high* in Hebrews means to raise, exalt, or defend; God is promising to exalt the person who knows His name
- We cannot fully know God's nature; but it is an intimate kind of knowledge that goes beyond intellectual knowledge to heart-knowledge, having a real relationship with Him

The Promise of God's Salvation

91:14-16



- Knowing God as shepherd, friend, and Father; a knowledge of which the Gospel speaks, *“I am the Good Shepherd, and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.”* (John 10:14)
- God is promising to bless the person who knows Him in this intimate way
- God promises are to such as *call upon* Him, as by prayer
- *He shall call upon Me*, Implies a fervent desire, springing from confidence and love
- He promises to answer the prayer of the one who loves Him, and the one who genuinely knows Him

The Promise of God's Salvation

91:14-16



- God is to be called upon in every time of trouble, in faith and with fervency, in truth and uprightness, and sincerity of soul
- How could any be heard that did not call, or how could he call, if he did not know the Name of God?
- God spoke personal and wonderful blessings over the one who loves and knows Him
- The blessing of His presence: *I will be with him in trouble*; the blessing of His protection: *I will deliver him* and the blessing of His promotion: *I will...honor him*
- *in trouble*, Makes us understand that, however great the consolations bestowed by God upon His people, they are not without tribulation

The Promise of God's Salvation

91:14-16



- St. Augustine says, “Fear not when you are in trouble... God is with you in your trouble... Christ slept in the ship, while the men were perishing. If your faith sleep in your heart, Christ is as it were sleeping in your ship: because Christ dwells in you through faith, when you begin to be tossed, awake Christ sleeping: rouse up your faith, and you shall be assured that He deserts you not.”
- *With long life I will satisfy him*, The blessing of His prosperity
- *show him My salvation*, The blessing of His preservation
- Length of days is always viewed in the Old Testament as a blessing, (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16; 2 Kings 20:6; 2 Chronicles 1:11; Psalm 21:4; Proverbs 3:2,16)

The Promise of God's Salvation

91:14-16



- It is only in the New Testament that we learn how much *better* it is "*to depart, and be with Christ*" (Philippians 1:23)
- According to St. Augustine, length of days is the eternal life
- And according to him also, *show him My salvation*, means, *I will show him Christ Himself*
- He says, “we see through faith, not by sight. When will it be sight? When shall we, as the Apostle says, see Him ‘face to face’? which God promises us as the high reward of all our toils. Whatever you toil in, you toil for this purpose, that you may see Him.”



Discussion

- What does it mean to *dwells in the secret place of the Most High*?
- In what way is God our refuge?
- What does this Psalm teach us about God?
- What kind of situation may the author have been facing when he wrote this Psalm?
- Will a believer never suffer disease, death, or danger? Explain



Discussion

- If faithful followers of God may still become infected or be injured or fall in war, then is this Psalm still comforting? How?
- Who does God send on our behalf (11-12)?
- Who quoted this passage in the New Testament?
- What wrong application did Satan encourage Jesus to make based on this verse?



Discussion

- How can one take hope in Jesus passing this test temptation from Satan where Adam (and all of us) have failed? How can one follow Jesus' model next time he is tempted?
- Who does the "he" and the "I" and the "him" refer to in verse 14?
- What does this verse show us about who God extends His protection to?
- Does God always deliver? Does God guarantee long life?