

AN ANALYSIS OF PSALM 91

By: Scott K. Leafe, M.Div., D.Min.

INTRODUCTION

What advantage might a person have by trusting in God for their salvation? Does God promise to shield “believers” from all of life’s dangers and calamities? These and similar questions are addressed by a psalmist in Psalm 91. Some may read this psalm and scratch their heads in disbelief that anyone could proclaim such absolutes. Others, however, will read this psalm and understand that God’s providence comes with a price, and the wages for unbelief can be catastrophic and certainly empty.

The objective of this paper will be to analyze the literary structure and genre of this psalm, to point out specific literary features such as figures of speech and to provide insight into their possible meanings, to evaluate certain interpretive issues that arise from the metaphors utilized by the psalmist, and finally to assess theological applications of the psalm for a contemporary audience.

GENRE, STRUCTURE, AND OVERVIEW

From the changes in person reflected in the major divisions of the psalm (cf. verses 1, 3, and 14), it is clear this psalm is an individual psalm. While the Septuagint ascribes the psalm to David, the Hebrew has no inscription. Marvin Tate surmises “the momentum of the Davidization of psalms in later scribal interpretations” may have contributed to the Davidic inscription.¹ However, some of the phrases, such as verses 5 and 6, echo the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy

¹ Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 20 (Dallas: Word, Inc., 1998), 451.

32 (cf. Deut. 32:23-24). As such, Jewish tradition links Psalm 91 with Psalm 90 and concludes the speaker is Moses. Nevertheless, whoever the actual anonymous speaker is, some view this psalm as a psalm of lament of the sick and anguished.² Yet the typical structure of a lament psalm is not clearly evident in the three major sections of this psalm. More commonly, this psalm is considered a psalm of trust and confidence, or protection and refuge.³

Structurally, the psalm has three main sections: verses 1-8, 9-13, and 14-16. The first two sections mirror each other with alternating themes of the speaker confessing Yahweh as refuge, Yahweh's promise of protection, and the promise of the speaker's security. The final section is an independent prophetic oracle of assurance on behalf of Yahweh back to faithful believers. Some, such as Tate, suspect this psalm was part of a much larger liturgy of worship for the king delivered by two priests. Yet he acknowledges others see this psalm as a liturgy for any believer in Yahweh.⁴ Of additional interest is the near verse-by-verse similarity with the words of Eliphaz the Temanite in describing the good man's life in the Book of Job (cf. Job 5: 17-23).⁵

In some ways the structure of the psalm is peculiar; that is, an "antiphonal arrangement" is encountered where up to three speakers may actually be present.⁶ The first speaker is heard from in verses 1-2 and 5-8, while an apparent second speaker responds to the first in verses 3-4

² C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms : A Literary and Theological Introduction*, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), 141-42.

³ Leopold Sabourin, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning*, New, enl., updated ed. (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1974), 380. See also Joseph A. Alexander, *Psalms Translated and Explained* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1975), 384. and Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Peabody, MA; Grand Rapids, MI: Hendrickson ; Baker Books, 1999), 361.

⁴ Tate, 452.

⁵ J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1976), 172. See also *Psalms*, ed. H. D. M. Spence-Jones, The Pulpit Commentary, vol. II (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1909), 267-68.

⁶ *Psalms*, 267.

and 9-13. A third speaker appears to speak on behalf of Yahweh in verses 14-16.

The subject of the psalm is the security of the individual that places their full trust and confidence in God. To ensure the reader understands the depth and breadth of the refuge found in trusting in God, he portrays all manner of dangers and fears that would consume the common man in life. Despite these conditions, the psalmist is resolute that his protection from Yahweh will be complete and assured. The psalm closes with God acknowledging the faithfulness of the speaker and promises him protection, rescue, and salvation over a long life.

LITERARY FEATURES

The psalm begins with the first speaker recounting a kind of “motto” in verse 2 – “I will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!’” This is not an imperative; rather, this is an invitation for the reader to find their refuge in God by trusting in Him – it is an obligation if a believer is to experience God’s protection. The one trusting in God dwells in the “protective shadow of the mighty king.”⁷ The psalm then pivots to the second speaker who addresses the first speaker with a portrait of God’s protection in the face of grave danger and fears. The metaphor of God’s protective wings is presented as shelter (v. 4) and may be an allusion to the cherubim in the Jerusalem temple, but is also used elsewhere in a similar refuge context as this psalm (cf. Ex. 19:4; Deut. 32:11; Psa. 5:12-13, 17:8, 64:8).⁸ God’s protective wings serve as a protective shield to those who seek out God as their refuge from destructive forces.

⁷ The divine name used here is "Shaddai" (see also Psa. 68:14). According to the syntactical notes in the New English Translation Bible, “Shaddai (or El Shaddai) is the mighty king (sovereign judge) of the world who grants life/blesses and kills/judges. In Genesis he blesses the patriarchs with fertility and promises numerous descendants. Outside Genesis he both blesses/protects and takes away life/happiness” (Biblical Studies Press., *Net Bible : New English Translation*, 2nd Beta ed. (Spokane, Wash.: Biblical Studies Press, 2003), Psalm 91:1.).

⁸ Tate, 454.

The dangers described by the first speaker could arise at any time, day or night (v. 5, 6). The dangers include the “snare of the trapper” and “deadly pestilence” (v. 3, 6) – perhaps allusions to all sorts of traps or threats from enemies and natural causes, but in any case, all dangers of any kind. The dangers also include “terror by night” and the “arrow that flies by day” (v. 5). Certainly, in the period of the psalmist, and in his ancient Near East context, there was always fear of disease and attack by an enemy, commonly by night but also by day. Perhaps the language of plague and disease (v. 3, 6) represents the consequences of sustained siege warfare where the city is cut off from the outside world with no food and even perhaps no water. The shadow of the Almighty also protects against the “destruction that lays waste at noon” (v. 6; lit. “from ruin and the demon of the midday”) – a possible allusion to sunstroke (cf. *Psa.* 121:6).⁹ Though thousands may fall in battle or as a consequence of natural catastrophes, believers in Yahweh will not suffer anything themselves but will look upon the retribution of the wicked (v. 8).

The second speaker returns in verse 9 and confirms no harm or illness will come upon the first speaker who has taken refuge in the Lord (v. 9-10). To help deliver the believer from physical dangers and to provide strength to overcome other difficulties in life – in this case moral stumbling blocks (v. 12) and also wild lions and snakes (v. 13; perhaps a cobra, see *Psa.* 58:4) – Yahweh will order his angels to protect him (cf. *Heb.* 1:14). The psalm closes with a third speaker uttering a prophetic oracle on behalf of Jehovah (v. 14-16). God assures believers that he does deliver the faithful (v. 14), that he truly hears and answers their prayers (v. 15), that he will

⁹ *Psalms*, 268.

be with them in times of trouble and will rescue them from peril, and will grant them longevity in life and the experience of salvation (cf. Psa. 50:23).¹⁰

A particularly important literary feature of this psalm is Satan's misapplication of verses 11 and 12 at Jesus' temptation (Matt. 4:6; Luke 4:10, 11). The psalmist is acknowledging God's fatherly care over those who are trusting in him. The psalmist assures us that this protection is in every way (v. 11b). When quoting verses 11 and 12 to Jesus, Satan omitted "in all your ways." The psalmist seems to have taken for granted that "all your ways" are in accordance with God's will and purpose. So, Satan's proposal that Jesus throw himself from the temple in no way resembles the intention of the psalmist.¹¹ Satan misapplied and distorted Scriptures to fit his own agenda.

INTERPRETIVE ISSUES

The metaphorical language employed by the psalmist provides much fruit for interpretive discussions. Beginning with verse 3 and 4, the speaker announces deliverance of the believer from the "snare of the trapper" and from the "deadly pestilence." These metaphors are undefined, but Tate concludes this language is representative of "all kinds of traps from enemies and from natural causes."¹² The pestilence of verses 3 and 6 may have implied serious illness. Bruce Reichenbach suggests that ancient Hebrews viewed serious illness as more than just a physical issue. Instead, they viewed it in "spiritual and moral dimensions that made it appropriate to

¹⁰ Roger Ellsworth, *Opening up Psalms* (Leominster, England: Day One Publications, 2006), 41.

¹¹ Don B. Garlington, "Jesus, the Unique Son of God: Tested and Faithful," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151, no. 603 (1994): 299.

¹² Tate, 454. See also Psa. 124:7; Prov. 6:5.

beseech the Almighty for deliverance.”¹³ Hence, the refuge provided by Yahweh had a much broader meaning for the psalmist than simply that no illnesses would befall him.

Verses 5 and 6 serve up additional interpretive issues as the metaphors are equally vague. The commonality among each of the dangers is the completeness of time – they can occur at any time of day or night. Tate suggests the round robin of day-night/fear-terror has parallels in other places in Scripture. For example, he finds unexpected attacks at night in Exod. 4:24-26; 11:4-5 (the Angel of Death going forth at midnight so the firstborn of Egypt would die), and also Judg. 7:19; 16:2-3; Obad. 5; Neh. 6:10. Similarly, midnight and noonday seem to have been times of special anxiety to the ancient Hebrew world (see Exod. 11:4-5; 12:29-30; Ruth 8:9 for midnight anxiety; for noon time see Deut. 28:29, Jer. 6:4, Isa. 59:10, Amos 8:9). He sees special significance in Jer. 15:8 as it references “destroyer at noonday.”¹⁴

Some interpreters see all four of the dangers in verses 5 and 6 as expressions of demons and/or evil spirits. For example, the “terror by night” finds a companion in the description of Zaqar, a god of dreams, in a Mesopotamian incantation of magic entitled “the terror of the night.”¹⁵ Sabourin also sees a possible demonic expression in verse 6, which is literally translated “the noonday devil” in the Vulgate, being influenced by the Oriental representation of pestilence as a demon “especially active during the night and noon siesta.”¹⁶ That Satan should quote verse

¹³ Bruce R. Reichenbach, "By His Stripes We Are Healed," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 4 (1998): 553.

¹⁴ Tate, 454-55.

¹⁵ Ibid., 455.

¹⁶ Sabourin, 380.

11 and 12 at Jesus' temptation may indicate the demonic world, his world, considered the promises of this Psalm a specific threat.¹⁷

Notwithstanding the apparent similar fears found elsewhere in Scripture, perhaps a simple all-encompassing approach would be more memorable here. For example, the "terror by night" in verse 5 could be an allusion to thieves that come by night or by attacks by enemies that commonly occur at night. Perhaps the battle analogy fits best since verse 5b speaks of the arrow that flies by day. Thus, a battle scene is painted, and the man of God will be given special protection by God from the perils of battle. Yet an even broader brush is provided by Tate who also finds "the appearance of a merism" in these metaphors; that is, "dangers may occur at any time, day or night – a comprehensive statement of the perils of life."¹⁸

A further interpretive issue can be found in verse 7. The sheer number of fallen, one thousand at the believer's side and ten thousand at his right hand, could lead a reader to see all of verses 5 and 6 as battle scenes. For example, A. R. Johnson sees all of verses 5 and 6 as the culmination and consequences of war: surprise attacks at night, shots from bows by day, the death and disease that accompany siege and thousands of corpses, and the believer seeing all of the fallen while remaining unscathed because of God's shielding power.¹⁹ Yet the metaphorical language seems too unspecific, and the comprehensive battle analogy seems to stretch the authorial intent. Perhaps the best understanding of verse 7 is simply that many, many people perish for some unspecified reason, but whatever the reason, the faithful of God are unharmed witnesses to the event.

¹⁷ Elmer B. Smick, "Mythpoetic Language in the Psalms," *Westminster Theological Journal* 44, no. 1 (1982): 94.

¹⁸ Tate, 454.

¹⁹ Aubrey R. Johnson, *The Cultic Prophet and Israel's Psalmody* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1979), 188-89.

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATION

Broyles comments that this psalm provides many believers with some of the most comforting promises of the Bible. But he also acknowledges the many others see these promises as the most unrealistic.²⁰ That is, the psalmist is portraying evil and danger and disease from which God will always deliver a believer if he/she fully trusts God for his/her protection. Yet the reality is that believers in God do experience suffering and/or death at the hands of disease and human enemies. So the question arises: what was the psalmist really trying to communicate to his readers?

Several features of this psalm become very important when attempting to understand all the psalmist was proclaiming. First, in verse 15 Yahweh concedes that a believer may be in life situations that are counted as trouble – fearful and even dangerous situations. Therefore, in verses 14-16 God promises to be with the believer in times of trouble, to rescue him and ultimately show him salvation. The point is this: most of the time God does keep believers from calamity. John Calvin once wrote,

When we look back on our life from the perspective of eternity, we are going to see that the power of Satan was so great, that the weakness of our flesh was feeble, and that the hostility of the world was so strong, that every day of our lives – if God had not intervened – we would never have made it through a day.²¹

Second, when verse 8 is closely examined, the punishment of the wicked comes clearly into view. Thus, the believer is never promised that no calamities will befall them in this life; rather, believers are exempt from divine retribution.²² Sometimes God does allow calamities to

²⁰ Broyles, 362.

²¹ Cited by Joel C. Gregory, *Growing Pains of the Soul* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 66.

²² Broyles, 362.

come upon believers for their own good. But when he does allow such things to happen, he is always there to strengthen them and help them bear it.²³

Third, Broyles sees a similar theme in Psalm 91 with that of psalms of temple entry where the righteous are granted refuge with God, but the wicked may never enter into any portion of God's realm of protection.²⁴ For contemporary readers, this provides a warning that God's protection only comes upon those who are trusting in him. There is no provision for refuge in God outside of fully trusting in him for salvation.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 91 may at first blush be confusing to some as the promises to believers seem out of reach of reality. However, God's promises of refuge to those who are trusting in him include deliverance from divine retribution reserved for the wicked. The psalmist is not attempting to portray a care-free life void of calamity; rather, he is portraying a confidence in God's promises to deliver believers from calamities in accordance with his sovereign will. The qualities of a godly life can ultimately yield a longer life and one that includes much more satisfaction.

The objective of this paper was to analyze the structure, literary form, interpretative challenges, and to provide a theological summary and contemporary application of the thematic elements of the psalm. The psalm is a psalm of trust and confidence in the refuge provided to believers by God in the face of any and all of life's calamities. While all the promises provided in this psalm may seem to fall a bit short in practice and the reality of life, they will be perfectly and fully fulfilled at the appearing of Christ Jesus in glory.

²³ Ellsworth, 40-41.

²⁴ Broyles, 362.

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