

## D. The Ninety-First Psalm – The Triumph of Sonship

The Psalter was central to Israel's worship of Yahweh, which worship reflected and expressed the nation's status as covenant son. Hence the psalms give voice to all of the aspects and dynamics of that sonship relationship, including commemoration, celebration, praise, thanksgiving, supplication, penitence, imprecation, etc. To this point, this study has considered foundational issues, namely the nature, purpose, and blessedness of being children of God.

Psalm 91 builds on this foundation by bringing together the aspects of sonship considered thus far. It celebrates man's unique status as God's image-son and the blessedness that attends it. But rather than simply *declaring* this blessedness, as in the first two psalms, Psalm 91 *uncovers* and *extols* it. It shows that the blessedness the Psalter celebrates consists in the loving care, provision, deliverance and protection that Yahweh gives to His children. Moreover, it underscores that this divine, fatherly care has its counterpart in human *faithfulness* – the sincere love, devotion and steadfast trust that accords with sonship. In a word, Psalm 91 is a tribute to faithful sonship and the rich blessings that follow from it.

1. First and foundationally, faithfulness involves finding one's *refuge* in Yahweh Himself. The psalmist expressed this in terms of the parallel ideas of *dwelling in His shelter* and *abiding in His shadow* (v. 1). This imagery is spatial, but its meaning is relational; *to reside in the place of God's shelter is to live a life characterized by trust in Him* (v. 2). This trust isn't arbitrary or generic, but grounded in true knowledge of God's character and purpose and sure confidence that He watches over and protects His people. He keeps them from harm (vv. 3-11) and also gives them victory over their enemies and assailants, whether actual persons or the adverse circumstances of life (v. 12).
2. Finding refuge in God entails entrusting oneself and life's circumstances to Him with all confidence that He is trustworthy. It is human faithfulness in response to God's own faithfulness (v. 4); more precisely, it is the relationship of children to a father (v. 9), grounded in and ordered by mutual *love* (v. 14). The person who knows God loves Him, even as true knowledge of God is the basis for loving Him in truth. And because love is grounded in true knowledge, the one who loves God has first experienced His love, since God's love is the motive for His self-disclosure – the disclosure and love that have attained their ultimate, full expression in the person of Jesus the Messiah (1 John 4:7-16).

Human faithfulness, then, involves submissive trust, and such trust is grounded in relational knowledge that is itself the outworking of love: God's manifest love for people, and their loving response in kind. And those who take refuge in Him find that He is a fortress and high tower. He delivers and preserves them, and secures their blessedness and well-being in the present as well as the future (vv. 14-16).

3. At the same time, the psalmist's assurances must not be misconstrued as promising a life free of trouble and suffering for those who place their trust in God. The absoluteness of the psalm's language certainly gives that impression (ref. esp. vv. 5-13), but the writer spoke in superlatives to underscore the effectual, all-encompassing, *purposeful* provision God supplies to His children – the provision by which He secures their *true* well-being in this life with a view to their full attainment of all that He has ordained for them.

4. Psalm 91 extols the marvelous, unending blessings God bestows on His faithful children, and thus the satanic adversary recognized its usefulness in his efforts to deceive and compromise the uniquely faithful Son (ref. Matthew 4:5-6; Luke 4:9-11). *If Psalm 91 describes and celebrates Yahweh's faithful sons, Jesus lived out that sort of sonship in a way no other human being ever has*; He embodied Israel in truth as Yahweh's bona fide son, servant, disciple and witness. Hence Psalm 91 was uniquely relevant to Him, poignantly depicting His unique relationship with His Father, the God of Israel.

a. The satanic deceiver understood this, and so drew upon this psalm in his testing of the Son. Many Christians view Jesus' wilderness trial as strictly pertaining to Him, but in fact, He underwent it precisely as the true Israelite – the son of Abraham in whom Israel was to become Israel indeed, and so fulfill its covenant identity and vocation (Isaiah 49:1-6). The *Spirit* drove Jesus into the desert (Matthew 4:1; Luke 4:1-2), and He did so according to Yahweh's plan that this son of Israel should repeat Israel's wilderness ordeal.

But whereas the national "son" had failed his testing, this Son, as man of the Spirit, was going to triumph on behalf of Israel and its mission. Thus Satan tested Jesus at points that were central to Israel's failure as covenant son, and He answered those tests in the way Israel should have answered, even as Moses reminded the people as they prepared to enter the land of Canaan (cf. Matthew 4:4, 7, 10, with Deuteronomy 8:1-20, 6:1-19, 5:1-10).

b. Satan had a deceitful and malicious goal in citing the psalm, but he neither misquoted it nor took it out of context. He stated exactly what it says, and then challenged Jesus to take ownership of His Father's promises, just as the psalm challenges every one of its readers.

- Psalm 91 *does* assure that those who place their trust in God will find that He delivers them from harm and grants them victory over every enemy.

- For His part, Jesus didn't deny that the psalm's truths applied to Him, and neither did He accuse Satan of misquoting it. This psalm was penned for the children of Israel, and it spoke to every Israelite in every generation, including Himself. Its assurances are not empty hyperbole, but are true and trustworthy, and the deceiver quoted it accurately.

Jesus questioned neither the citation nor its pertinence to Himself, but rather rebuked Satan's clever misuse of it: Psalm 91 extols and celebrates the blessings of security and victory that Yahweh grants to His faithful children; the deceiver sought to employ it as an inducement to *unfaithfulness*. Satan's ploy was to redefine faith and faithfulness in terms of presumption (putting God to the test), and thereby lead Jesus to effectively doubt His Father and replicate Israel's sin. *In exhorting Jesus to openly demonstrate His faith, the master deceiver was actually tempting Him to be unfaithful*. If he could manage to bring Him under his deception, Satan would have secured Jesus' failure in His messianic mission as the embodiment of Israel and God's true Image-Son.

- c. Drawing on Psalm 91 was an especially clever ploy, because its absoluteness lends itself to the common human error of *misjudging faith and faithfulness*, which results from viewing it with the natural (fallen) human mind. Thus the deceiver sought to test Jesus at the most fundamental point of authentic human existence, namely living a life with God characterized by faith. Again, such faith is impossible for human beings in their fallen condition, for faith is dependent, submissive trust grounded in a true knowledge of God, and all people are born alienated from God, severed from His life and mind (Ephesians 4:17-19; cf. also 2:1-3). Thus the “faith” of the natural man is actually *presumption*: It is expectation regarding future outcomes that derives, not from a living, informed relationship with God, but from one’s self-interest, perceptions, and desires.

In the case of Jesus, the tempter was enticing Him to wrongfully claim God’s promise. In effect, Satan was telling Him that, if He truly believed and trusted His Father, He would demonstrate that faith in His practice. God had pledged in His sacred word to keep His children from harm, and Jesus either believed that or He didn’t. If the Father is true and trustworthy, then He has indeed dispatched His angels to protect His children, and they ought to have no concern about their well-being, whatever their circumstance. So Jesus, if He *truly* was a faithful son, should take His Father at His word. And if He did, then He should be willing to demonstrate His faith by throwing Himself off the temple’s pinnacle, knowing that His Father’s angels would come to His aid and rescue Him from harm.

At bottom, Satan tempted Jesus at the very center of His Adamic nature. Jesus was a son of Adam, just like every other human being (Luke 3:23-38), and so had to deal with the core human temptations of independence and self-seeking (ref. Hebrews 2:14-18, 4:15). Though He was the incarnate son, He needed to learn the obedience of human sonship (Hebrews 5:8) – what it means to walk with God in dependent, steadfast trust, regardless of the circumstance, and without yielding to the temptation to impose on Him one’s own perceptions, expectations and agenda.

- Thus Satan’s wilderness temptations were first a new testing of *Israel*, as Jesus Himself now embodied Israel as Yahweh’s covenant “son.” The significance of this ordeal, then, was whether Jesus would triumph as faithful Israel, and that for the sake of Israel and its covenant vocation. (Note again that Satan’s tempting of Jesus echoed the primary arenas of testing Israel faced in the wilderness – ref. Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 11:1-6; Exodus 32:1-10 with Deuteronomy 8:1-20.)
- But even more foundationally, these temptations tested Jesus as a son of Adam – as the *Son of Man*. He’d come into the world to fulfill Israel’s identity and calling, so that God’s oath to Abraham would stand that all the earth’s families should be blessed through him and his descendents. Israel’s sonship, then, was to be a representative expression of the sonship God intended for all of Adam’s race. Jesus’ testing as God’s True Israel (seed of Abraham) was equally His testing as True Man (seed of Eve).

5. All of this might seem extraneous to Psalm 91 itself and its relevance to Christians, but it is actually crucial to rightly understanding and applying it. It is precisely Jesus' interaction with the psalm's claims that enables other readers to perceive them properly and not fall into the same trap Satan set for Him. Jesus understood that God wasn't promising His covenant children to reward their faithfulness with earthly safety and security and absolute triumph over everyone and everything that might rise up against them. If that were the case, it would be necessary to ascribe unfaithfulness to either the Father or the Son. For Jesus suffered greatly and His experience didn't at all correspond to the psalm's depiction. Does this mean that Jesus fell short in His faithfulness, thus excluding Himself from the psalm's promises, or that His Father failed to honor His word? *But if both Son and Father were indeed completely faithful, then the provision and blessings held out in Psalm 91 have to be understood in terms of Jesus' life experience as Yahweh's beloved Son. They cannot be interpreted as the language seems to suggest.*

a. What this means is that the way the psalmist's words were true for the faithful Son is the way they are true for all of God's faithful sons and daughters. Jesus enjoyed all that the psalm pledged, but not because His Father granted Him an untroubled life free of pain, suffering and injustice. Quite the opposite, and contrary to the reasonings of the natural human mind, Jesus experienced God's promised triumph (the deliverance and victory celebrated in the psalm) in and through the most profound and agonized suffering.

He knew that His God would indeed deliver, preserve and honor Him and "set Him securely on high" (v. 14) as His faithful son, not by delivering Him from all threats and suffering, but by carrying Him *through* them so that His submissive faith – His authentic sonship – should be nurtured and perfected by them (Hebrews 5:8; cf. also Matthew 3:16-4:2). The Son's unqualified glory, as the consummation of the Father's faithful love to Him, was to come through a life of suffering culminating with death on the cross (Luke 24:25-26; John 12:23-33).

b. So Christians must not misconstrue the psalmist's assurances as somehow promising a trouble-free "victorious" life to those who walk with God in faith. When the psalm is interpreted in that way, it shows that the reader has succumbed to the deception Satan set before Jesus. *He* spotted the deception because He understood that the security, deliverance and triumph God promises are realized through the path of suffering (cf. Matthew 16:21-23). But all who lack that understanding are easy prey for the deceiver. For all people instinctively believe that a good God seeks only happy circumstances and outcomes for them, and so it's not surprising when so many find confirmation of that notion in the psalmist's assurances. "Faith," then, becomes trusting God for those circumstances and outcomes that one deems "good," even to the point of actively putting Him to the test: *God has pledged to secure my good, and thus I'm going to pursue what I believe to be in my best interests and trust Him for it.* But genuine faith recognizes that the glory God intends for His image-children is obtained through *death* – through dying to life and its ideals as we know them, in order to live the authentic human life that consists in sharing in Jesus' own life (ref. Matthew 16:21-25; cf. also Romans 6:1-11; Ephesians 2:1-6, 4:17-24; Colossians 3:1-4).