

God Protects His People

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*,
trans. Rev. James Anderson (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1846),
Vol. III, 480-492; Vol. V, 89-93.

Psalms 91:1-4

1. He who dwells in the secret place of the High One shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
2. I will say to the LORD, He is my hope and my fortress: my God; in Him will I hope.
3. Surely He shall deliver You from the snare of the fowler, from the noxious pestilence.
4. He shall protect you with His wings, and under His feathers shall You be safe; His truth shall be your shield and buckler.

1. *He who dwells in the secret place of the High One.* . . . [The] inspired penman of the psalm, whoever he may have been, states two ideas quite distinct, That he who is hid under the Divine protection occupies a safe and secure position, where no hostile weapon can reach him. Or should the verse be read—*He who has God to be the guardian of his safety shall rest under the shadow of God*; still the second clause would retain an emphatic meaning, for the power of God would be contrasted with that weak defense which man is able to extend.

Those, too, who dwell in the secret place of God are here said by the Psalmist to dwell under His shadow, in the sense that they experience to what a rich extent His protection reaches.

Men generally seek out a great-variety of hiding-places, having recourse to one or another, according as the calamities are different which threaten to overtake them; but here we are taught that **the only safe and impregnable fortress to which we can betake ourselves is the protection of God.** He contrasts the security of those who trust in God with the vanity of all other confidences by which we are apt to delude ourselves.

In the second verse he repeats the truth which he had already inculcated, showing at the same time that he speaks from his personal feeling and experience as a believer. This is very necessary in one who would be a teacher; for we cannot communicate true knowledge unless we deliver it not merely with the lips, but as something which God has revealed to our own hearts. The Psalmist accordingly gives evidence, that what he had taught in the preceding verse accorded with his own inward experience. . . .

The believer does more than simply resolve to make God his fortress; he draws near in the trust of the Divine promises, and familiarly addresses God. This confidence in prayer affords an additional proof how securely the people of God can dwell under His shadow. This holy species of boasting constitutes **the very highest triumph of faith, when we betake ourselves to God without fear under our worst trials, and are fully persuaded that he answers all our prayers, even more, that we have in Him a sufficiency and a superabundance of help.**

In the third verse the Psalmist expresses his assurance that the trust of which he had spoken would not be vain and delusory, but that **God would prove at all times the**

deliverer of His people. He is evidently to be considered as addressing himself, and in this way encouraging his own heart to hope in the Lord. Some think that by the *snare of the fowler*, spoken of here in connection with *the pestilence*, is to be understood hidden mischief as distinguished from open aggression, and that the Psalmist declares the Divine protection to be sufficient for him, whether Satan should attack him openly and violently or by more secret and subtle methods. I would not reject this interpretation; for though some may think that the words should be taken in their simpler meaning, the Psalmist most probably intended under these terms to denote all different kinds of evil, and to teach us that God was willing and able to deliver us from any of them.

4. He shall protect you with His wings. This figure, which is employed in other parts of Scripture, is one which **beautifully expresses the singularly tender care with which God watches over our safety.** When we consider the majesty of God, there is nothing which would suggest a likeness such as is here drawn between Him and the hen or other birds, who spread their wings over their young ones to cherish and protect them.

But, in accommodation to our infirmity, He does not scruple to descend, as it were, from the heavenly glory which belongs to Him, and to encourage us to approach Him under so humble a similitude. Since He condescends in such a gracious manner to our weakness, surely there is nothing to prevent us from coming to Him with the greatest freedom.

By *the truth of God*, which, the Psalmist says, would be his *shield* and *buckler*, we must understand God's faithfulness, as never deserting His people in the time of their need; still we cannot doubt that he had in his eye the Divine promises, for it is only by looking to these that any can venture to cast themselves upon the protection of God.

As, apart from the word, we cannot come to the enjoyment of that Divine mercy of which the Psalmist had already spoken, he now comes forward himself to bear witness in behalf of it. Formerly, **under the comparison of a fortress, he had taught that by trusting in God we shall enjoy safety and security; now he compares God to a shield, intimating that he will come between us and all our enemies to preserve us from their attacks.**

Psalm 91:5-8

5. You shall not fear the terror of the night; nor the arrow that flies by day;
6. Nor the destruction that walks in darkness; nor the pestilence which wastes at noon-day.
7. A thousand shall fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand; it shall not come near you.
8. Only with your eyes shall you behold and see the reward of the wicked.

5. You shall not fear the terror of the night. The Psalmist continues to insist on the truth which I have just adverted to, that, if we confide with implicit reliance upon the protection of God, we will be secure from every temptation and assault of Satan. It is of importance to remember, that **those whom God has taken under His care are in a state of the most absolute safety.** Even those who have reached the most advanced experience find nothing more difficult than to rely upon Divine deliverance; and more especially when, overtaken by some of the many forms in which danger and death await us in this world, doubts will insinuate themselves into our hearts, giving rise to fear and disquietude.

There was reason, therefore, why the Psalmist should enter upon a specification of different evils, encouraging the Lord's people to look for more than one mode of deliverance, and to bear up under various and accumulated calamities.

Mention is made of *the fear of the night*, because men are naturally apprehensive in the dark, or because the night exposes us to dangers of different kinds, and our fears are apt at such a season to magnify any sound or disturbance. The *arrow*, rather than another weapon, is instanced as flying by day, for the reason apparently that it shoots to a greater distance, and with such swiftness, that we can with difficulty escape it.

The verse which follows states, though in different words, the same truth, that **there is no kind of calamity which the shield of the Almighty cannot ward off and repel.**

7. A thousand shall fall at your side. He proceeds to show that, though the state of all men may to appearance be alike, the believer has the special privilege of being exempt from evils of an imminent and impending nature; for it might be objected that he was but man, and, as such, exposed with others to death in its thousand different forms. To correct this mistake, the Psalmist does not hesitate to assert that, **when universal ruin prevails around, the Lord's children are the objects of His distinguishing care, and are preserved amidst the general destruction.**

The lesson is one which is needed by us all, that, **though naturally subject to the common evils which are spread around, we are privileged with a special exemption which secures our safety in the midst of dangers.**

In the verse succeeding more is meant than merely that the believer will have personal experience of the truth which the Psalmist had stated, actually feeling and seeing with his own eyes that God manages his defense; a new argument is brought forward in support of the truth, which is this, that **God, as the righteous judge of the world, cannot but punish the wicked according to their sins, and extend protection to His own children.**

There is much that is dark in the aspect of things in this world, yet the Psalmist hints that, amidst all the confusion which reigns, we may collect from what we see of God's judgments, that He does not disappoint the expectations of His believing people. He must be considered, however, as addressing those who have eyes to see, who are privileged with the true light of faith, who are fully awake to the consideration of the Divine judgments, and who wait patiently and quietly till the proper time arrive; for most men stagger and confuse their minds on this subject, by starting to precipitate conclusions, and are prevented from discovering the providence of God by judging according to sense. It becomes us too to be satisfied with apprehending the judgments of God only in some imperfect measure while we remain on earth, and leaving Him to defer the fuller discovery of them to the day of complete revelation.

Psalm 91:9-12

9. Because You, LORD, are my protection; you have made the Most High your refuge.

10. No evil shall befall you, and no plague shall come near your dwelling.

11. For He has given His angels charge concerning you, to keep you in all your ways.

12. They shall bear you on their hands, lest you dash your foot upon a stone.

9. Because you, LORD, are my protection. He dwells at this length in commendation of **the providence of God**, as knowing how slow men naturally are to resort to God in a right manner; and how much they need to be stimulated to this duty, and to be driven from those false and worldly refuges in which they confide. . . .

The true method of testing our faith is to turn our thoughts inward upon ourselves, and, when no human eye sees us, to search our own spirits. If, not content with having to deal with God only, we turn our eyes to men, it is almost impossible to prevent pride from insinuating itself into the room of faith.

He speaks of accounting God to be his *house* or *refuge*, because **He defends us from every evil**, as in Psalm 90:1. This verse may be considered as connected with that which follows, and as stating the cause or reason of what is there asserted; for it is added, *There shall no evil befall you*. **And how are coming evils averted, but just by our resting with confidence in the protection of God?** Troubles, it is true, of various kinds assail the believer as well as others, but the Psalmist means that God stands between him and the violence of every assault, so as to preserve him from being overwhelmed.

The Divine guardianship is represented as extending to the whole *household* of the righteous; and we know that God comprehends under His love the children of such as He has adopted into His fatherly favor. . . .

11. For He has given His angels charge concerning you. This is added by the Psalmist expressly with the view of obviating any fears which might arise from our infirmity; so that we cannot fail to be struck with the benignant condescension of God in thus not only forgiving our diffidence, but proposing the means by which it may be best removed.

Does He exhibit Himself to us as a fortress and shield, set forth the shadow of His protection, make Himself known to us as a habitation in which we may abide, and stretch out His wings for our defense—surely we are chargeable with the worst ingratitude if we are not satisfied with promises so abundantly full and satisfactory? If we tremble to think of His majesty, He presents Himself to us under the lowly figure of the hen; if we are terrified at the power of our enemies and the multitude of dangers by which we are beset, He reminds us of His own invincible power, which extinguishes every opposing force.

When even all these attempts to encourage us have been tried, and He finds that we still linger and hesitate to approach Him, or cast ourselves upon His sole and exclusive protection, He next makes mention of the angels, and puts forward them as **guardians of our safety**. As an additional illustration of His indulgent mercy and compassion for our weakness, He represents those whom He has ready for our defense as being **a numerous host; He does not assign one solitary angel to each saint, but commissions the whole armies of heaven to keep watch over every individual believer**. It is the individual believer whom the Psalmist addresses, as we read also Psalm 34:7—that “angels encamp round about them that fear Him.”

We may learn from this that **there is no truth in the idea that each saint has his own peculiar guardian angel**; and it is of no little consequence to consider, that as our enemies are numerous, so also are the friends to whom our defense is entrusted. It

were something, no doubt, to know that even one angel was set over us with this commission, but it adds weight to the promise when we are informed that the charge of our safety is committed to a numerous host, as **Elisha** was enabled, by a like consideration, to despise the great army of adversaries which was arrayed against him (2 Kings 6:16). Nor is this inconsistent with passages of Scripture, which seem to speak as if a distinct angel were assigned to each individual. It is evident that God employs His angels in different ways, setting one angel over several whole nations, and again several angels over one man. There is no necessity that we should be nice and scrupulous in inquiring into the exact manner in which they minister together for our safety; it is enough that, knowing from the authority of an apostle the fact of their being appointed ministers to us, we should rest satisfied of their being always intent on their commission. We read elsewhere of their readiness to obey and execute the commands of God; and this must go to strengthen our faith, since their exertions are made use of by God for our defense.

The Psalmist, in the passage now before us, speaks of members of the Church generally; and yet the devil did not wrest the words when, in his temptation in the wilderness, he applied them particularly to Christ. It is true that he is constantly seeking to pervert and corrupt the truth of God; but, so far as general principles are concerned, he can put a specious gloss upon things, and is a sufficiently acute theologian. It is to be considered that when our whole human family were banished from the Divine favor, we ceased to have anything in common with the angels, and they to have any communication with us. **It was Christ, and He only, who, by removing the ground of separation, reconciled the angels to us;** this being His proper office, as the apostle observes (Ephesians 1:10) to gather together in one what had been dispersed both in heaven and on earth. This was represented to the holy patriarch Jacob under the figure of a ladder (Genesis 28:12); and, in allusion to our being united into one collective body with the angels, Christ said, "Afterwards you shall see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending" (John 1:51).

The Psalmist adds, *all your ways* in the plural number, to convey to us more distinctly that **wherever we go we may expect that the angels shall always extend their guardianship to us.** The course of our life is subject to many windings and changes, and who can tell all the storms by which we are liable to be tossed? It was necessary, therefore, to know that the angels preside over all our particular actions and purposes, and thus to be assured of their safe-conduct in whatever quarter we might be called to move.

This expression, however, *your ways*, was, in all likelihood, intended to enjoin on us a due consideration and modesty, to warn us against tempting God by any rash step, and admonish us to confine ourselves within the bounds of our proper calling. For should we commit ourselves recklessly, and attempt things which the promise of God does not warrant us to undertake, aspiring at what is presumptuous, and opposed to the Divine will, we are not to expect that the angels will become ministers and helps to our temerity. Satan would appear to have craftily omitted this clause when he tempted Christ rashly to throw Himself down from the temple.

12. They shall bear you upon their hands. He gives us a still higher idea of **the guardianship of the angels**, informing us, that they not only watch lest any evil should befall us, and are on the alert to extend assistance, but bear up our steps with their hands, so as to prevent us from stumbling in our course.

Were we to judge indeed by mere appearances, the children of God are far from being thus borne up aloft in their career; often they labor and pant with exertion, occasionally they stagger and fall, and it is with a struggle that they advance in their course; but as in the midst of all this weakness it is only by the singular help of God that they are preserved every moment from falling and from being destroyed, we need not wonder that the Psalmist should speak in such exalted terms of the assistance which they receive through the ministrations of angels.

Never, besides, could we surmount the serious obstacles which Satan opposes to our prayers, unless God should bear us up in the manner here described. Let any one combine together the two considerations which have been mentioned—our own utter weakness on the one hand, and on the other the roughness, the difficulties, the thorns which beset our way, the stupidity besides which characterizes our hearts, and the subtlety of the evil one in laying snares for our destruction—and he will see that the language of the Psalmist is not that of hyperbole (exaggeration), that we could not proceed one step did not the angels bear us up in their hands in a manner beyond the ordinary course of nature.

That we frequently stumble is owing to our own fault in departing from Him who is our head and leader. And though God suffers us to stumble and fall in this manner that He may convince us how weak we are in ourselves, yet, inasmuch as He does not permit us to be crushed or altogether overwhelmed, it is virtually even then as if He put His hand under us and bore us up.

Psalm 91:15-16

15. He shall call upon me, and I shall answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and glorify him.

16. With length of days will I satisfy him, and I will show him My salvation.

15. *He shall call upon me.* He now shows more clearly what was meant by trusting in God, or placing our love and delight in Him. For that affection and desire which is produced by faith, prompts us to call upon His name. This is another proof in support of the truth, which I had occasion to touch upon formerly, that **prayer is properly grounded upon the word of God.**

We are not at liberty in this matter, to follow the suggestions of our own mind or will, but must seek God only in so far as He has in the first place invited us to approach Him. The context, too, may teach us, that faith is not idle or inoperative, and that one test, by which we ought to try those who look for Divine deliverances, is, whether they have recourse to God in a right manner.

The true gospel does not promise good health and wealth to all faithful believers.

We are taught the additional lesson, that believers will never be exempt from troubles and embarrassments. **God does not promise them a life of ease and luxury, but deliverance from their tribulations.** Mention is made of His *glorifying* them, meaning that the deliverance which God extends, and which has been spoken of in this psalm, is not of a mere temporary nature, but will issue at last in their being advanced to perfect happiness. He puts much honor on them in the world, and glorifies Himself in them conspicuously, but it is not till the completion of their course that He affords them ground for triumph.

It may seem strange that *length of days* should be mentioned in the last verse as promised to them, since many of the Lord's people are soon taken out of the world. But I may repeat an observation which has been elsewhere made, that those Divine blessings which are promised in relation to the present perishing world, are not to be considered as made good in a universal and absolute sense, or fulfilled in all according to one set and equal rule.

Wealth may sometimes be a sign of God's favor or goodness, but poverty is not necessarily a sign of God's displeasure or judgment. Good health is a blessing from God, but this does not mean that God disapproves of those who are weak and ill.

Wealth and other worldly comforts must be looked upon as affording some experience of the Divine favor or goodness, but it does not follow that the poor are objects of the Divine displeasure; soundness of body and good health are blessings from God, but we must not conceive on this account that He regards with disapprobation the weak and the infirm.

Long life is a blessing; but eternal life is of eternally greater reward and value.

Long life is to be classed among benefits of this kind, and would be bestowed by God upon all His children, were it not for their advantage that they should be taken early out of the world. They are more satisfied with the short period during which they live than the wicked, though their life should be extended for thousands of years.

The expression cannot apply to the wicked, that they are *satisfied with length of days*; for however long they live, the thirst of their desires continues to be unquenched. It is life, and nothing more, which they riot in with such eagerness; nor can they be said to have had one moment's enjoyment of that Divine favor and goodness which alone can communicate true satisfaction.

The Psalmist might therefore with propriety state it as a privilege peculiarly belonging to the Lord's people, that they are *satisfied with life*. The brief appointed term is reckoned by them to be sufficient, abundantly sufficient. Besides, longevity is never to be compared with eternity. **The salvation of God extends far beyond the narrow boundary of earthly existence; and it is to this, whether we live or come to die, that we should principally look.** It is with such a view that the Psalmist, after stating all the other benefits which God bestows, adds this as a last clause, that when He has followed them with His fatherly goodness throughout their lives, He at last shows them His salvation.

Psalm 125:1-2

1. They who confide in the LORD are as mount Zion, which shall not be removed, but shall abide for ever.
2. As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the LORD is round about His people, henceforth and forever.

1. *They who confide in the LORD are as mount Zion.* [This Psalm] teaches that *in the time to come* [the Church] shall always continue in *perfect* safety, because she is defended by the invincible power of God.

When the Church is emblematically described by the situation of the city of Jerusalem, the design of the Prophet is to encourage each of the faithful to believe, that the safety promised in common to all the chosen people belongs to him. But in exhibiting to the eyes a visible image of the Church, he accommodates himself to the rudeness of those who, detained by the dullness of the flesh, still continue settled down in the earth. It ought then, in the first place, to be noticed, that to those who may not sufficiently apprehend by faith the secret protection of God, the mountains which surround Jerusalem are exhibited as a mirror, in which they may see, beyond all doubt, that the Church is as well defended from all perils, as if it were surrounded on all sides with like walls and bulwarks. . . .

The rule here prescribed must therefore be observed, which is, that each apply to himself whatever God promises to His Church in common. Nor does the Psalmist without cause make Jerusalem a representation of the Church, for the sanctuary of God and the ark of the covenant were there. . . .

We now perceive the meaning of the Prophet, which is, that although the world is subject to so many and so sudden changes as almost to put on a new face every moment, and although **the faithful** are mingled with and placed in the same external condition as others, yet **their safety continues steadfast under the invincible protection of God**. Not that they are permitted to dwell undisturbed and at ease; but because their safety being under the guardianship of God is assaulted in vain; at least they can never altogether fall, although they may stumble. . . .

Whoever, then, desires to be sustained by the hand of God, let him constantly lean upon it; and whoever would be defended by it, let him patiently repose himself under it. When God suffers us to be often carried here and there, or driven about like chaff by the wind, this comes to pass through our own inconstancy—because we prefer fluttering in the air to fixing our minds on the rock of His help.

The similitude employed in the second verse is abundantly plain, teaching us, that as the continuous chain of mountains round about Jerusalem exhibits the appearance of walls, so God encompasses the faithful by His power, to ward off from them all harm.

Similar forms of expression are frequently to be met with in the Scriptures; God often promises to be a wall and a fore-wall to His people. But David, or whoever was the author of the psalm, proceeds still farther, showing under the figure of mountains the secret protection with which God defends His own people, to the end that the ignorant and feeble-minded who are still held down to the earth by their own dullness of understanding, aided by the sight of the mountains, may raise their minds upwards to the conception and contemplation of heavenly things.

The Christian life is not to be viewed as a life of ease.

Psalm 125:3. For the scepter of the wicked shall not rest upon the lot of the just, lest the just should put forth their hands to iniquity.

4. Do good, O LORD to the good, and to those who are upright in their hearts.

3. *For the scepter of the wicked shall not rest upon the lot of the just.* This is, as it were, a correction of the preceding sentence. The Psalmist had said that **the hand of God was extended on all sides to defend His Church**. But as we are disposed to draw the

divine promises to our own advantage, in the way of interpreting them as securing our exemption from all trouble, we are here warned that the guardianship of God does not secure us from being sometimes exercised with the cross and afflictions, and that therefore **the faithful ought not to promise themselves a delicate and easy life in this world**, it being enough for them not to be abandoned of God when they stand in need of His help.

Their heavenly Father, it is true, loves them most tenderly, but He will have them awakened by the cross, lest they should give themselves too much to the pleasures of the flesh. If, therefore, we embrace this doctrine, although we may happen to be oppressed by the tyranny of the wicked, we will wait patiently till God either break their scepter, or shake it out of their hands. It is a sore temptation, I admit, to see the wicked exercising cruelty in the heritage of the Lord, and the faithful lying extended beneath their feet; but as God does not without just reason thus humble His people, they should comfort themselves from the consideration suggested in the text.

The reason is added why God will not suffer the wicked always to triumph over the righteous—namely, lest the just, overcome by temptation, abandon themselves wholly to sinning, a reason which ought to be carefully marked. Hence we gather that God, from His willingness to bear with our weakness, moderates our adversities. Although, then, we may not possess in ourselves a sufficient amount of fortitude and constancy to enable us to persevere in our duty for a single moment, yet let this sentiment be present to our minds, That God will take care that, broken as we may be by afflictions, we shall not forsake His service.

Suffering and afflictions are for the good of God's people.

Were He even to afflict us without intermission during the whole course of our life, **the cross is doubtless always profitable to us**; for we see how indomitable is the rebellion of our flesh, and with what vehement impetuosity it is continually boiling up; yes rather how it ceases not to kick amidst the very afflictions by which it ought to be reduced to obedience. So much the more necessary then is this lesson of instruction—that the Lord seasonably sets limits to our temptations, because He knows that we are too feeble to withstand them. Nor does the Prophet merely say, that the weak are in danger of failing, but that even the just, who serve God in truth and from the heart, and who are devoted to the cultivation of a holy life, are in danger of sinking under the load.

However vigorous, then, the fear of God may be in our hearts, let us remember that we are not endowed with adequate strength for enduring to the end, unless the Lord have a regard to our infirmity. If the Holy Spirit makes this declaration concerning the best champions, what will be the case as to tyroes [beginners], who are as yet but imperfectly trained for the combat? . . .