

Adult Teaching Resources

February 14, 2016



Transfiguration Sunday

Who Needs a King? — Psalm 99

Season of Lent (February 10-March 26)

Who Needs a Rescuer? — Psalm 91 (RCL 91:1-2, 9-16)

Who Needs a Light? — Psalm 27

Who Needs God? — Psalm 63 (RCL 63:1-8)

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Who Needs a Rescuer?

Psalm 91

FIT Teaching Guide

by Rick Jordan

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Before the Lesson: Have blank paper and pens to be used for the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship Question

Use *one* of the following to break the ice, to begin discussion, and lead into the study:

Name one item you use for protection from some harm that could come to you.

Who is someone you are responsible to protect?

Information

We do not have emotional attachments to most things that we rely on for protection — a winter coat, a toothbrush, an insurance policy, etc. We feel more secure if we have them, but if a toothbrush wears out, we do not take it personally.

When our protection is based on persons, however, we do take personally abuse, betrayal, or abandonment. Today's psalmist wants to assure the worshipers that God can be relied upon for protection.

Let's brainstorm things we need protection from. What comes to mind? (disease, harm in an accident, economic crisis, terrorism, etc.)

[Distribute pens and the handout of Psalm 91.]

As we listen to the first six verses of this psalm, listen for the images the psalmist uses to illustrate God as protector. Circle the images and the verbs that signify God as protector.

[Have a class member read Psalm 91:1-6.]

What images did you notice? (shelter, shadow, refuge, fortress, deliver, cover, faithful, shield and buckler)

Think of times you have needed protection. Do any of these images speak to your situation? How? If not these pictures, how would you illustrate God's protection in your situation?

The psalmist is confident that God will protect God's faithful children from most anything, even if others close by are engulfed in troubles.

Information *continued*

[Have a class member read Psalm 91:7-10.]

A popular pastor of the 1960s commented about this passage, “God is not an insurance company...Men and women, it just is not true...No one can blame the psalmist. His thought had not proceeded further, but the modern [person] who has listened to Jesus ought to know better...He supersedes all psalmists and prophets and poets, and He did not say to Peter, ‘Peter, follow me! Your fishing business will prosper. You and your family will be immune from disease.’ ... He said to His men, ‘All the evil things that hurt other people will hurt you, and on top of that, men will persecute you...But if you endure to the end, you will be saved.’” (Leslie D. Weatherhead. *Key Next Door*. Nashville: Abingdon. 1960. p. 103f.)

Does this sentiment ring true for you — “Because you have made the Lord your refuge...no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.” — or is it “just not true”?

We know that good people suffer at times. How then can we interpret what the psalmist is saying? (Is he naive? Overprotected? So entrenched in the theology that “God protects the good and punishes the wicked” that he refuses to see that the opposite seems to be true at times? Etc.)

“Without doubt, the promises of Psalm 91:9-16 cannot be spoken universally, without qualification. The broader witness of the psalms, of scripture, and of Christian experience teach that God’s disciples bear no special immunity to evil. In fact, Christ’s disciples are called to suffer with the world and to pick up their crosses and tread in Christ’s footsteps.” (Rolf Jacobson. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=430)

If we are not comfortable proclaiming what the psalmist proclaims, what can we say with confidence about God’s protection?

Consider the situation of a best friend visiting their bereaved loved one. On seeing their friend, the bereaved weeps in deep sorrow. The friend hugs the bereaved and says, “It’s going to be okay. We are here for you.” How might that relate (or not) to what the psalmist is saying? (Troubles will come to everyone. “It’s going to be okay” does not take away or change the situation, but still gives assurance and hope. Etc.)

[Have a class member read Psalm 91:11-12.]

This is a text that many persons use to proof text “guardian angels.” There is a theology about guardian angels that has little to nothing to do with God. For example, there is a popular website about angels (www.angels-online.com) where one can read testimony after testimony of persons who say they have had personal encounters with angels, but say nary a word about God. What do you think about these stories?

The fact is, we do not know a lot about angels. According to the Bible, angels worship and serve God. God sends angels to deliver messages to certain people. And, angels can provide protection. But we really have more questions than answers about angels.

Information *continued*

Billy Collins, America's Poet Laureate (2001-2003) wrote a poem called, "Questions About Angels."

[Play the video of Collins reading his poem. <http://bigthink.com/videos/questions-about-angels>. The poem may be found here: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176044#poem>.]

Although we do not know a lot about angels, according to the gospels, both Jesus and Satan believed in them. Satan even used this very passage in his infamous temptations of Jesus.

[Have a class member read Luke 4:9-13.]

Satan quoted this psalm, but Jesus refuses to fall to Satan's temptation. What was the temptation Jesus was offered in this story?

"The very fact that the promises of Psalm 91:11 find themselves on the lips of Satan in Luke 4:10, shows rather definitively that promises that may be true in one context can be patently untrue in another context." (Rolf Jacobson. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=430)

How could truths from this psalm be taken out of context from the whole of Scripture?

The psalmist concludes this song with more words of confidence, this time from the mouth of God.

[Have a class member read Psalm 91:14-16.]

These are words that can give us comfort without laying on us the expectation that we must be perfect before God will protect us. If the earlier words are overconfident, these are more realistic. Where do you see phrases that indicate that even good people may have problems?

We are not told who the audience of this psalm is. Is it a select group — "those who dwell in the shelter of the most high" — some scholars say that means those few persons who live in the Temple. It is directed to saints, priests, maybe even the king? Or, is the psalm written to a broader audience — anyone who happens to be worshipping in the Temple? We are not told, precisely. However, THE BIBLE LESSON writer notes, "The psalm is not addressed to part-time believers, to persons who pray only when in trouble, read scripture when fearful, or practice ritual aspects of religion with little reference to faith in their daily life. Rather, it concerns those who consciously seek God's presence all day, every day."

Transformational Exercise

[Distribute paper and pens.]

Jesus knew this psalm and had pondered its meaning before his wilderness temptations. More than likely, his parents had read this to him and explained its meaning. Imagine you are Joseph or Mary, teaching your son about this psalm. How would you explain to him what this psalm means in a way that would guide him in difficult times? Write out a paragraph or put in bullet points what it is you would want Jesus to know.

[After some time for reflection and writing, ask if anyone would like to share what they would have said to Jesus. Close in a prayer something like this: *We trust in you, O God. When trouble comes, we hide ourselves in you. Give us the confidence in you that this psalmist, and our Lord Jesus, had. Amen.*]

Comments or Questions for Rick Jordan? You may send comments to the lesson plan author at rjordan@cbfnc.org. Rick is also available to lead workshops and conferences on Christian Education, with particular emphasis on how best to use the FIT Faith model.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

He, or Me? — The Hebrew text of v. 2 begins with a first person verb: “I will say to Yahweh,” or “I say (this) concerning Yahweh” The early Greek translation called the Septuagint translated the verb as third person, “he will say ... ,” and this is followed by the NRSV, while NET begins with a first person verb, as do NIV11, HCSB, and NAS95. Note that the remainder of the verse is also in first person: “My refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.”

Following the Hebrew text gives us a first person speech in response to v. 1. This might have been spoken by an individual worshiper, or through another priest or singer representing the one who trusts in God.

Old names for God — When Melchizedek encountered Abraham in Gen. 14:18, he was identified as “priest of *’El ’Elyon*,” or “priest of God Most High.” In God’s appearances to Abraham in Gen. 17:1, 28:3, and 35:11, we read “I am *’El Shaddai*,” usually translated as “I am God Almighty (*’El* is a generic word meaning God: the plural form *’Elohim* was used as a standalone name for Israel’s God). The names were not always preceded by *’El*: In today’s text, the text speaks of “One who dwells in the shelter of *’Elyon*, who abides in the shadow of *Shaddai*.”

A hapax what? — The term translated as “buckler” in v. 4 is a *hapax legomenon*, meaning that it occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible, making it difficult to translate. Because it appears to be related to the root concept of a circle, it is often taken to describe a round shield, or buckler.

Treading on lions? — Some ancient and modern interpreters have found the image of treading upon lions problematic, and have sought to emend the text so that the words translated “lion” and “young lion” could indicate other small but dangerous reptiles that could easily be stepped on. The Greek Septuagint, for examples, translates them as “asp” and “basilisk” (a mythical reptile hatched by a snake from a chicken’s egg). The two terms are good Hebrew words for “lion,” however, so stretching them to give a reptilian sense is unnecessary. The point of the passage is that one who trusts in God can step on dangerous creatures without fear — including, perhaps, a resting lion lying across the pathway.

Fire insurance — We noted in the Bible study that “loving” God in hopes of receiving divine protection on earth is based on a selfish motivation. This leads us to ask if further if “trusting in Jesus” primarily to escape the threat of hell and find the hope of eternal life is not likewise based on selfish motives. Would we still serve Jesus, believing it is the right and loving thing to do, if the hope of heaven were not part of the bargain? That’s a question worth asking.

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

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What does Psalm 91 really promise?

Although we've addressed the problem of interpretation in the Bible study, persons who are teaching this lesson or simply seeking additional insight might profit from the following quotations from scholars who have wrestled with the same question.

Marvin Tate, in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, doesn't really confront the conundrum. He speaks of Psalm 91 as "an enduring encouragement of faith, which asks us to respond to its affirmations ... we are challenged to ground our endeavors in trust in Yahweh, a trust which will not fail and which leads us along a way where we will see more and more of the saving work of God until finally our knowledge will be complete" (*Psalms 51-100*, *Word Biblical Commentary* [Waco: Word Books, 1990], 459).

Tate then cites Artur Weiser as offering a "fine summary" of the psalm. Writing when "man" was still considered to be gender-inclusive language, Weiser emphasized the psalm's encouraging aspects: "The hymn is a sturdy comrade; its boldness and unbroken courageous testimony to God has already enabled many a man to overcome all sorts of temptations. By virtue of the soaring energy of its trust in God it leaves behind every earthly fear, every human doubt and all inhibiting considerations, and lifts man up above the depressing realities of life to the hopeful certitude of a faith which is able to endure and to master it."

Weiser goes on, however, to offer a qualification that Tate did not include in his citation, acknowledging that the perfect protection we might seek is not guaranteed: "True, the Christian's trust in God requires a further readiness to submit to God's will, even when he has resolved to deal with us in ways other than those we expected the venture of faith to take" (*The Psalms: A Commentary*, *Old Testament Library* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962], 613).

John I. Durham, writing in the *Broadman Bible Commentary*, points to the importance of perspective when considering the bounty of blessing the psalm seems to promise. "It is just here that the difficulty resides," he writes, "in the psalmist's day as in our own. For the trust the psalmist had in mind demands a perspective different from the one most men have. It demands a belief in God's Presence which is sufficiently strong to alter priorities. It is the faith which our Lord so often commended (cf. Mark 11:22-24; Luke 12:22-31), and the faith which will change even one's view of what the benefits of trust really are. For the poet of Psalm 91, these benefits were bound up in deliverance and security. For our Lord, they were bound up in the will of the Father. For the Christian, they are the profit of self-forgetful discipleship (Matt. 16:24-25)" ("Psalms," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 4 [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971], 360).

The Hardest Question *continued*

Finally, Bernard W. Anderson and Stephen Bishop, in a brief but helpful volume on the psalms, observe: “The danger of this psalm is that it may encourage a one-sided and immature view of what divine protection means. In too much popular piety, faith in God offers an insurance against trouble, and prayer is a form of magic.” Anderson and Bishop go on to note the New Testament claims that Satan cited precisely this psalm to tempt Jesus to call on angelic protection. “Satan’s test is insidious,” they comment, “because it is based on a truth, not a falsehood: God’s ‘faithfulness’ is indeed ‘a shield and a rampart’ (v. 4c). But this truth can easily be distorted, even by people of religious faith. It must be read in the larger theological context of Scripture which shows that, in ways past our understanding, God’s purpose embraces all the ups and downs of human life and that ‘in everything God works for good with those who love him’ (Rom. 8:28)” (Bernard W. Anderson, with Stephen Bishop, *Out of the Depths: the Psalms Speak for Us Today*, 3rd ed., rev. [Westminster John Knox Press, 2000], 186-87).