

Psalms for people under pressure:

Psalm 91, 11.00am, 19 February 2017

The Psalms express all kinds of emotion, for all kinds of occasions, which is why there are plenty for this sermon series of Psalms for people under pressure.

When that's us – when we're feeling a bit frazzled and under pressure, we can often find a psalm which particularly expresses how we're feeling. Maybe you have a favourite psalm that you turn to, perhaps for comfort, or to express anger, or to give you hope at a time of sadness. The psalms can do all of that.

But if we read the psalms in a wider context, we can see them not just as abstract expressions of emotion, or prayers and praises out of the blue. No, when we read them in the context of each other or of the wider Bible, what happens is: the feelings they express take on a more specific meaning, and that extra layer of meaning then gives us a deeper understanding of the psalm. That in turn, can lead us to a deeper recognition of what's going on with us – why we sometimes feel the way we do, or how we can respond to events around us.

So first let's look at the context of Psalm 91. Looking particularly at two contexts for it:

- 1) firstly where it sits in the book of psalms – what's before and after it there?
- 2) And secondly how it pops up in the New Testament – Matthew tells us how Satan used Psalm 91 in his temptation of Jesus and that event gives it another context.

When I started to read this psalm with Jesus' temptation in mind, it took on a whole new depth of meaning. It became not just a psalm for when we're under pressure, but specifically how God can help us when we're under the pressure of temptation.

And that layer of meaning is borne out by its position in the book of Psalms.

The whole book of Psalms is divided into 5 "books", and Psalm 91 comes near the beginning of book 4. Book 4 is made up of Psalms 90 to 106 – which is seventeen of them, arranged in a kind of pattern.

The pattern is a bit like a conversation back and forth.

- It starts with Ps 90 which is a cry for mercy from people who are suffering under God's anger. They recognise his power, and they're asking him to have compassion, and end their suffering.
- Then as if in response to that, we have this one, ps 91, which says that there *is* protection available for us, if we turn to God for refuge.
- The next three psalms (92 to 94) respond with praise - praising God for his blessings, and for his greatness and they ask God to use that greatness to bring judgement on oppression.
- The book builds to a crescendo with a middle section of 7 psalms inspiring us in different ways to worship God.

Then the last part of book 4 comes back down in a kind of mirror image to the first part:

- a prayer for help in affliction; praise to God for his mercy, and for his creation; and at the end, praise to God for rescuing Israel from Egypt; and finishing with psalm 106, praise to God for his faithfulness to Israel despite everything.

So that puts Psalm 91 in the context of finding a right relationship with God – a relationship that can easily go wrong if we fall to temptation and end up as one of those under God’s judgement. But, if we stay close to God, sheltered under his wings, we can resist the temptation to go astray, and God will rescue us from judgement – we’ll see his faithfulness and mercy, and we can praise him.

Psalm 91 has lots of references to life in the wilderness – war and disease, sharp stones, lions, poisonous snakes (v13), and the vulnerability of living in a tent in v10 – all dangers of a nomadic life in the wilderness. Psalm 91 tells us God will protect us from these if we turn to him. Later psalm 105 narrates how God actually did do that to his people in the past, and rescued them from the dangers that we see in Ps 91. Instead of the vulnerability of a tent in the wilderness, he gives them the protection of a fortress. The editor who put the psalms in this order was using Israel’s own history to inspire them to stay faithful to God, because *God’s* faithfulness is everlasting

So that’s an example for us when we feel tempted to forget about God – to fall into the bird snare of idolatry by making other things more important than God – This series of psalms warns us of God’s judgement, but it also reminds us to look back at all the times in the past when we or other people have turned back to God in the middle of our sin, or our suffering – turned back to prayer, and to the Bible, and then felt the miracle of his mercy and forgiveness – that surprising deliverance and salvation when we least expected things to turn around.

Maybe you're not very good at resisting temptation, or you don't feel the need to turn away from wrong-doing. If that's the case, this Psalm is a warning of the dangers we face, if we decide to walk through life without taking shelter in God.

So, what if you're struggling under the pressure of temptation right now?

What if you keep committing the same sin over and over again – despite your best efforts

Maybe you know you should forgive someone, but you just can't bring yourself to,

Or maybe like Jesus, Satan is tempting you to get results by underhand ways – not by following God's way. These pressures are often reinforced by our environment and the culture we're part of, whether that's at work; or people you love who don't understand, and want you to compromise your values; or just the radio and television forever portraying right and wrong differently from the way God sees it.

Sometime when we're trying to do the right thing, it can feel like we're alone in a wilderness.

And of course, that's where Jesus was. Alone in the wilderness for 40 days. Hungry and vulnerable, and that's just when Satan decided to pounce. When he couldn't get Jesus to create some bread to eat, he tried another tack. He took him to the highest pinnacle of the temple, and said to Jesus "if you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down, for it is written (cue Psalm 91 twisted out of context) "he will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands. So that you will not strike your foot against a stone".

Jesus' reply was "It is also written 'do not put the Lord your God to the test'". He's quoting Deuteronomy, but it's also a reference to Book 4, the same book in Psalms where psalm 91 appears. Psalm 106 v 13-15 says the reason the Israelites were wandering around in the desert for 40 years in the first place was because they *had* put God to the test. They forgot everything God had done for them, and made a golden calf idol to worship instead. So Satan tempts Jesus by quoting a psalm about resisting temptation at him, Jesus answers back with a reference to idolatry.

Immediately after the verses Satan quotes, here in Psalm 91, the very next verse says "you will trample the great lion and the serpent" and this reminds me of God's curse in Genesis when Satan in the form of the Serpent tempts Adam and Eve, and God condemns him to crawl on his belly, and be trodden on by man. When Satan comes back to tempt Jesus, it doesn't work so well this time. He gets a bruising from Jesus, and of course, ultimately he gets completely trampled when Jesus dies to defeat evil permanently. When Psalm 91 says that if you take refuge in God, you'll be lifted up by angels and you'll trample on serpents, it's talking about more than just a walk in the desert.

While Jesus was spending his 40 days in the wilderness, I wonder if he'd been meditating on this psalm. The psalm reads like a personal testimony of God's protection in the wilderness, for those who trust in him, and we know that that's exactly what Jesus was like.

He was a person who lived continually in the shelter of the Most High, and rested in the shadow of the Almighty. He spent time with God and trusted him implicitly. Perhaps that's why it's particularly poignant that that Satan uses a verse from this psalm to try and turn Jesus away from God. But Jesus was

ready for him, precisely because he did what this psalm says – he trusted in God, and God was his fortress – a strong tower, protecting him from these attacks – like a little chick, he shelters under God’s wings. So the promise in verse 10 applies: Jesus comes to no harm from this temptation.

When v11 says that God will command his angels to guard you in your way, it doesn’t mean what Satan said: that if we’re reckless and put ourselves in danger, angels will rescue us. We can’t do whatever we want, and expect God to keep us safe. No – that would be selfish and sensationalist. It would be testing God – to jump off a tower to see if he’ll catch you. That’s not what’s promised in the Psalm. What v11 does say is that when we follow God’s way, the angels will *guard* us in that way, they’ll help keep us on track, and safe from the bumps in the road. When we’re trusting in God, we have the strength to withstand temptation – to trample down Satan underfoot like the snake he is.

The final promise in verse 14 is that God will rescue the people that love him. He’ll protect them and answer their call. This is true for us, even though in this life, we don’t experience it to the full. But it’s completely true for Jesus, who proved the full extent of it. Let’s read v14-15 again, thinking of Jesus:

*“Because he (Jesus) loves me, says the Lord, I will rescue him.*

*I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name*

*he will call upon me and I will answer him*

*I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him.*

*With long life will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation.”*

That’s true for Jesus, and because of what Jesus did, it’s also true for us.

It's because Jesus loves God, that God will rescue *us*. God protects the ones who acknowledge his name because Jesus acknowledged God's name.

It's because God delivered Jesus, that he can now deliver us. We have salvation and long life because Jesus sacrificed his life to get salvation for us.

It's hard to resist the pressure of temptation, and like the people of Israel, we are one of the thousand or ten thousand who always fall to it. But God is always waiting for us to come back to him. And when we do, he pours over us the forgiveness and mercy that Jesus has obtained for us by taking our place, and doing it for us – doing it right, for us.

Verse 4 talks about the shield of faithfulness – an image perhaps more familiar to us from the book of Ephesians where Paul talks about the armour of God, and the shield of faith which we can use against Satan's burning arrows. The Psalm calls it the shield of *God's* faithfulness – our own faithfulness isn't up to much, but when we're shielded by God's faithfulness, there's nothing to fear – from temptation or anything else. He's faithful to us, despite everything (as we saw in Ps 106), and Jesus, as *our* representative, was completely faithful to God.

It's because of Jesus that *we* can take shelter in the Most High God.

It's because of Jesus that the snares, and war and disease have lost their power to destroy us. It's because of him, that we can say with v2 "The Lord is my refuge and my fortress, the God in whom I trust"

So Psalm 91 is a psalm for people under pressure from temptation. When temptation comes, it tells us to shelter from it in God – he will be a fortress, protecting us. When we feel tempted, how often do we make the mistake of looking too closely at the temptation, as we try to resist it? This psalm tells us we should look more closely at God. When we do that, we'll be lifted up away from it, and it will be trampled down.

I'm going to finish with a story about a dog.

There was a man who was trying to teach his dog not to steal meat from the floor. He would put a piece of meat on the floor, and tell the dog to leave it. But the dog took the meat and ate it. The man went on training him, but the dog couldn't resist the temptation of the meat. But eventually there was a breakthrough. When he put the meat on the floor, and told the dog to leave it, the dog stopped looking at the meat, instead, he stared intently at the man's face. By not looking at the temptation, and keeping his eyes firmly on his master, he was able to remain obedient.

I think that's what Psalm 91 is telling us when we're under pressure from temptation – don't look at the thing that's tempting you, because that will sap your will-power. Instead, keep focused on God, and he'll save you from it. Call on him for help and he'll answer, his angels will guard us in the right way, and we'll be saved. And we know it's true because he's already done it for Jesus, and because it's true for Jesus, he makes it true for us. And isn't that something we need to hear, when we're under pressure?