

Psalm 91: They Shall Bear You Up
(Lesson by Chuck Pike, Sharing Origen's Perspective)
Expository Lessons from the Psalms

I. Introduction to Psalm 91 (designated Psalm 90 in the Septuagint)

- a. While Jesus and the apostles quoted from the Psalms on many occasions, this psalm has the distinction that *Satan quoted it* to Jesus, to tempt him!
- b. Yet from this psalm we can learn things about Satan, the angels, how to read the Scriptures, and God's protection for those who seek Him.
- c. How I stumbled on to the importance of this psalm.
 - i. In a recent expository message on **1 Corinthians**, we discussed how Paul said one of the reasons for a woman to wear a head covering while praying or prophesying was "*because of the angels*" (**1 Corinthians 11:10**).
 - ii. I became aware from a secondary source that Origen had given an interesting explanation of the meaning of that phrase, in a series of expository sermons he gave on Luke's gospel, most likely written down c. 233-244 AD.
 1. Origen had made the case that Paul was referring to *the good angels* who are present when Christians gather to pray and worship the Lord.
 - iii. I tracked down the source and borrowed the book from the library system. These sermons, originally given in Greek, have survived through a Latin translation by Jerome.
 1. These sermons by Origen are available in English: *Origen Homilies on Luke*, translated by J. T. Lienhard, in the Fathers of the Church series (Volume 94), published by Catholic University of America Press.
 - iv. Reading through Origen's *Homilies on Luke*, I discovered a few things that surprised me.
 1. I did not realize what a gifted and practical expository preacher Origen was. In those sermons, I saw the heart of a shepherd looking out for his spiritual flock.
 2. As explained in the introduction to those sermons, at this time in the third century in Caesarea, the church where Origen

taught had three readings (a longer one from the Old Testament; a shorter one, perhaps 6-10 verses from one of the gospels; and a reading from the epistles) at their Sunday church gatherings. The cycle resulted in reading through all four gospels over a three-year period. Each short gospel reading was followed by a relatively brief message discussing it, which frequently included practical application.

a. (Source: *Origen Homilies on Luke*, Introduction, pp. xviii-xx)

3. I also noticed that Origen mentioned *angels* quite a bit in his preaching. He certainly talked about them more than any modern preacher or Bible teacher that I could recall.

a. That started me thinking...

i. Was it *Origen* who was hyper-focused on angels in his preaching?

ii. Or is it the *modern preachers and teachers* who are unbalanced, overlooking or underemphasizing the importance of angels?

b. Asking these questions led me to reconsider the role of angels and how much they are discussed throughout the Bible, especially in the New Testament.

v. Angels in Scripture.

1. We tend to think of angels more during the Christmas season, when many Christians are focused on the birth of Christ.

a. Many of the classic Christmas hymns and songs discuss angels.

b. There are multiple references to angels in the accounts of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus in **Matthew** and **Luke**. For example:

i. The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah in the temple, in **Luke 1**.

ii. The same angel then appears to Mary, announcing to her that she will conceive as a virgin and give birth to the One who will reign over the eternal kingdom promised to His forefather David.

- iii. In **Matthew 1**, an angel announces the virgin birth in advance to Joseph, in a dream.
 - iv. In **Luke 2**, angels announce to shepherds that the Christ has been born in Bethlehem.
 - v. Was the famous 'Star of Bethlehem' that the magi followed to Bethlehem an angel?
 - 1. Theophilact, writing c. 1100 AD in his commentary on **Matthew**, made a strong case that this 'star' could not have been an astronomical phenomenon in the heavens, but was an angelic manifestation. He gives several reasons to support this claim. For instance, it would have had to descend in order to lead the magi to the exact location where the baby was.
 - a. (see Theophylact, *Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Matthew*, Chrysostom Press, chapter 2)
 - vi. In **Matthew 2**, an angel tells Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt with Mary and the infant.
 - vii. An angel later tells Joseph that since Herod had died, they could return to Israel; then the angel warns Joseph in a dream to go to Galilee rather than to Judea.
- c. Other New Testament references to angels include:
- i. Satan challenges Jesus to throw Himself down from the temple so that angels would protect him from falling. (**Matthew 4, Luke 4**)
 - ii. Angels attended Jesus after His being tempted by Satan in the Wilderness. (**Matthew 4:11, Mark 1:13**)
 - iii. Angels in parables of Jesus.
 - 1. Parable of Wheat and Tares: the harvesters are angels. (**Matthew 13:24-43**)

2. Parable of Dragnet: angels sort out the good fish from the bad. (**Matthew 13:47-50**)

iv. Angels in other teachings of Jesus.

1. No marriage in the resurrection; we will be “like the angels”. (**Matthew 22, Mark 12, Luke 20**)
2. Regarding the “little ones”, Jesus said their “angels in heaven” always see the face of His Father in heaven. (**Matthew 18:10**)
3. There is much rejoicing in heaven among the angels when a sinner repents. (**Luke 15:1-10**)
4. In the Lord’s prayer we are taught to say: “May your will be done on earth *as it is in heaven*” (**Matthew 6:10, Luke 11:2**). The first part of this phrase refers to the angels, who are in heaven (as noted several places in the gospels) and doing the will of God.
5. In the story of Lazarus and the rich man in **Luke 16:19-31**, after death, the soul of Lazarus is carried by angels to a place referred to as “Abraham’s bosom”.
6. In **Matthew 24:36**, regarding when the Second Coming would occur, Jesus remarked that “even the angels in heaven” did not know when that would happen.
7. In **Matthew 25:31-46** Jesus explains His Second Coming using the illustration of a shepherd separating sheep from goats. He begins by saying He will come “in His glory and all the holy angels with Him”. Then he explains that the wicked will be cast into “the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels”.

8. In explaining that we must never succumb to persecution from men and deny Jesus, He said:
 - a. “Also I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God. But he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.”
(Luke 12:8–9, NKJV)
- v. Angels are present in connection with the Passion of Jesus as well as His Resurrection and Ascension to Heaven.
 1. While Jesus is praying intensely in the Garden of Gethsemane, an angel appears and strengthens Him. **(Luke 22:43, NKJV)**
 - a. While this verse is not included in modern Bibles based on the NU text, it is included in the Majority Text, the Vulgate and the Textus Receptus (from which the KJV and NKJV are translated).
 2. In **Matthew 26:53**, Jesus tells those who want to fight to protect Him that He could ask His Father to send more than twelve legions of angels to protect Him.
 3. Angels rolled back the stone and were at the tomb of Jesus after His resurrection. **(Matthew 28:2-8, John 20:11-13)**
 4. Two angels speak to the apostles at the Ascension of Jesus, in **Acts 1:10-11**.
- vi. Second Coming of Jesus
 1. When Jesus returns, He will be coming with angels. **(Matthew 16:27, 24:31, 2 Thessalonians 1:7, etc.)**
- vii. Other References to Angels

1. Angels appear in several places in the book of **Acts** to encourage, rescue and direct the apostles.
 - a. This includes interactions with Peter, Philip, Cornelius and Paul.
2. Angels are discussed in **Hebrews 1-2**, to explain the nature of Christ. There, it says the Son of God was made “lower than the angels” in becoming man and that angels are “ministering spirits sent to help those who will inherit salvation”.
 3. Angels also are discussed in **1 and 2 Peter**, and **Jude**.
 4. Of course, there are many references to angels throughout **Revelation**.
2. There are multiple references to angels in the Old Testament, as well.
 - a. For example, they appear in **Genesis, Ezekiel, Psalms, Tobit, Job**, etc.
 - b. Hezekiah and Jerusalem are rescued when an angel destroys the Assyrian army in **2 Kings 19**.
 - c. Read **2 Kings 6:8-17** (designated **4 Kingdoms** in the LXX). In this story the prophet Elisha asks the Lord to open the eyes of his servant. After that happens, the servant of Elisha is able to see the hills surrounding them are filled with “horses and chariots of fire”.
 - i. This refers to the (normally) unseen spiritual forces of God, the angels.
 - d. **Exodus 25-26** explains that gold cherubim (an order of angels) are to be over the ark of the covenant, and the images of cherubim are to be woven into the fabric of the Holy Place in the tabernacle.
3. I came to appreciate that it was not Origen speaking so much about angels, but our speaking so little about them that is odd!
 - a. Perhaps we are like Gehazi (in **2 Kings 6**), who don’t believe in what we don’t see. Normally we can’t see angels.

- b. I find great comfort in the passage in **Psalm 34:7** (designated **Psalm 33:8** in the LXX), where it says that “the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him”.
 - i. The apostle Peter quotes from this psalm at length in supporting the very practical instruction he gives, in **1 Peter 3**.
 - ii. Note that instead of “*the* angel of the Lord”, it also could be rendered “*an* angel of the Lord”, since there is no indefinite article in Greek.
 - iii. Also, some translators capitalize “angel” (Angel) here, which suggests this could be referring to the Word of God. However, the distinction between capital and lowercase letters is not in the ancient manuscripts.
 - iv. Either way, David clearly states that the righteous, those who live in the fear of God, receive spiritual protection in this life. We see examples of protection provided by angels throughout the Old and New Testaments.

II. Satan Quotes Scripture

a. Read **Luke 4:1-13**.

- i. In the account of Jesus resisting temptation here, we see how He simply quoted Scripture in the face of severe temptation. He used the sword of the Spirit, the great offensive weapon we have been given.
 - 1. Let us follow His wonderful and effective example when we are being tempted!
- ii. We are reminded by the words of Jesus here, quoting from **Deuteronomy 8:3**, that we need the bread of God, the word of God. (the Scriptures and the Lord’s Supper). This is our daily food, to sustain us through our own time in this spiritual Wilderness.
 - 1. We need it every single day. Our spiritual survival depends on it. Let us never fall into the trap of being ‘too busy’ and neglect daily devotion to the word of God!
- iii. Reminder that Satan rules most of this world. He offered Jesus a shortcut to a kingdom. Satan offers us the same.
- iv. In the third temptation in **Luke 4** (the second one in the **Matthew 4** account), Satan quotes Scripture from **Psalm 90/91**.

- b. **Questions:** *Here* Satan quotes Scripture. Does he know the Bible? Does he read the Bible? Does that strike anyone as odd?
- c. Origen addressed those questions and made some compelling points in his *Homily 31 on Luke*. From sections 2 and 3 of that message:
- i. “So the devil led Him into Jerusalem, placed Him upon the parapet of the temple, and said to Him, ‘If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down from here.’ **(Luke 4:9)** He led Him onto the roof, to the highest point of the temple, and urged Him to throw Himself headlong from there. The devil proposed this dishonestly and, under the pretext of having Christ display His glory, strove for a different end. So the Savior stated, ‘Scripture says, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”’ **(Luke 4:12)** Consider, too, how the devil tempts. He does not dare to tempt with any means other than the Divine Books. He takes his text from the **Psalms** and says, ‘If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down. For Scripture says, “He gave His angels a command concerning you, that they should raise you up in their hands, lest perhaps you strike your foot against a stone.”’ **(Luke 4:9-11, citing Psalm 90/91:11-12)**
 - ii. “How can you, o devil, know that these words have been written? Have you read the prophets, or do you know the divine utterances? Even though you remain silent, I shall answer for you. You read, not to become better through reading the holy books, but to use the simple, literal sense for killing those who are friends of the letter. You know that, if you wish to speak to him from other books, you will not deceive him, nor will your assertions have any authority.
 - iii. “Marcion reads the Scriptures as the devil does. So do Basilides and Valentinus. Along with the devil they say to the Savior, ‘Scripture says, “He gave His angels a command concerning you, that they should raise you up in their hands, lest perhaps you strike your foot against a stone.”’ **(Luke 4:9-11)**
 - iv. “Whenever you hear quotations from the Scriptures, be careful of trusting the speaker immediately. Consider the person: what sort of a life he leads, what sort of opinions he holds, what sort of intention he has. Otherwise he might pretend he is holy and not be holy, and, infected with the poison of heresy, he might be a wolf in sheep’s skin. The devil might even be in him, citing the Scriptures. When an opportune moment arises, the devil cites the Scriptures.
 - v. “For the benefit of those who hear him, Paul does the opposite. He quotes passages not only from the Scriptures, but even from secular books. He says, ‘Cretans are always liars evil beasts, lazy bellies.’ **[Titus 1:12]**, where Paul is quoting from *On Oracles*, by Epimenides] And again, from another author, ‘For we are also his offspring.’ **[Acts**

17:28, where Paul is quoting from *Phaenomena 5*, by Aratus] And once more, from a comic playwright, ‘Evil conversation corrupts good morals.’ [**1 Corinthians 15:33**, where Paul is quoting from *Thais*, by Menander]

vi. “For even if the devil speaks from Scriptures, he cannot deceive me by this action, nor, if Paul takes an illustration from Gentile literature, will he turn me against his eloquence. For Paul takes words even from what is foreign to us to sanctify them.”

1. (Source: Origen, Homily No. 32 on Luke, sections 2-3; found in *Origen Homilies on Luke*, translated by J.T. Linehard, Fathers of the Church vol. 94, Catholic University of America Press, pp. 125-126)

2. According to Origen, the most dangerous people of all can be those who quote Scripture.

3. We need to know who they are, and whether they are serious about living their lives according to righteousness. Are they using their knowledge of Scripture to deceive Christians and to advance some ungodly agenda?

4. Satan knows that those who love the Word of God will not listen to anything else. So what does he do?

a. He quotes Scripture and takes the words and phrases out of context, missing the spiritual meaning behind it.

d. Origen makes additional points regarding this passage from Satan tempting Jesus and quoting from **Psalm 91**. From sections 4 and 5 of his *Homily 31 on Luke*:

i. “...See how crafty he [*the devil*] is, even in the texts he quotes. For, he wishes to diminish the Savior’s glory, as if the Savior needed the help of angels. It is as if He would strike His foot unless He were supported by their hands. The devil takes his verse from Scripture and applies it to Christ. Yet it is written not of Christ, but about the saints in general.

ii. “Freely and in total confidence, I contradict the devil. This passage cannot be applied to the person of Christ, for Christ does not need the help of angels....

iii. “...As I say, the Son of God does not need the help of angels. No, devil; learn, rather, that, unless Jesus helps the angels, they strike their feet....

iv. “And you, o devil, ‘fell like lightning from heaven,’ (**Luke 10:18**) because you were unwilling to believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

But, to understand why your interpretation is wrong, listen. What follows concerns the saints. God frees 'from ruin and the mid-day devil' (**Psalm 91:6**) not Jesus Christ, but the saints. Read the ninetieth psalm, [*based on LXX numbering; equivalent to **Psalm 91** in modern Bibles based on the Masoretic Text*] which begins, 'He who dwells in the help of the Most High will remain in the protection of the God of heaven' (**Psalm 91:1**) and you will find that this fits the just man more than the Son of God."

1. Point made by Origen here: The statements/promises in this psalm are *addressed to us*, rather than to the Christ.
- e. From sections 6-7 of the same homily, Origen provides additional insights regarding the devil, based on **Psalm 91**:
- i. "Likewise, the devil adduces texts from Scripture so perversely as to assert that passages applying to the just should be applied to the Savior. Meanwhile, he remains silent about and passes over verses that have been written against him. For, when he quoted, 'He has given his angels a command concerning you, that they should raise you up in their hands, lest perhaps you strike your foot against a stone,' (**Psalm 91:11-12**) he was silent about what follows: 'You will walk on the asp and the basilisk, and you will tread the lion and the dragon underfoot.' (**Psalm 91:13**)
 - ii. "Why do you keep silence about these words, o devil, unless you are the basilisk and the petty ruler of all serpents? Your poisons are more harmful than those of other snakes, for, as soon as you see someone, you kill him....
 - iii. "You are the 'dragon' and you are the 'lion' of which Scripture says, 'You will walk on the asp and the basilisk, and you will tread the lion and the dragon underfoot.' (**Psalm 91:13**) Go ahead and keep silent. We, however, read the Scriptures more correctly. We know we have the power to tread you underfoot; we know that this word has been given to us. For, I say, it was given not only in the Old Testament, as this psalm states, but also in the New Testament. For the Savior states, 'Behold, I give you power to tread on serpents and scorpions and every power of the enemy, and nothing will harm you.' (**Luke 10:19**)
 - iv. "Encouraged by this power, we should take up these great weapons and accomplish everything. Through our lives we should tread the lion and the dragon underfoot."
 1. Here Origen reminds us that *the righteous will tread upon Satan*.

2. The *very psalm* that Satan quoted to Jesus in tempting Him also foretells Satan being utterly defeated (crushed) by the righteous!
- f. In addition to what Jesus said in **Luke 10:18-19**, we also have Paul's words near the end of **Romans**, where he makes a similar point:
 - i. "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. And the God of peace *will crush Satan under your feet shortly*. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen." (**Romans 16:17-20**, NKJV)

III. The Text of Psalm 91

- a. Read all of **Psalm 91** (designated **Psalm 90** in the LXX).
- b. According to Origen's explanation, the great promises in this psalm apply to the righteous. It speaks of the angels (who will help us) and Satan (who will be crushed under our feet).
- c. Satan is described in this psalm, as elsewhere throughout Scripture, as being like a serpent or a dragon, and being like a dangerous lion out to devour us. (Consider **Genesis 3:1-14**, **1 Peter 5:8**, **Revelation 12:9**, etc.)
- d. Many lines in this psalm, and its overall encouraging sentiment, remind me of what has been my favorite psalm, **Psalm 34** (designated **Psalm 33** in the LXX).
 - i. Both psalms speak of angels protecting the righteous.
 - ii. Both speak of the Lord being with those who are righteous, even in the midst of their afflictions.
 1. When we follow God, we are promised that the Lord will be with us in the midst of our trials, if we remain faithful to Him. He never said that we would have an easy path in this life!
- e. Let us take this psalm back from Satan. It speaks of his defeat by the righteous.
 - i. Let us always be diligent to read every passage of Scripture in context.
 1. Consider, for example: Who is a given passage addressed to? Do the promises refer to the righteous, to Christ, or to someone else?

- ii. We can take tremendous comfort in this psalm, which speaks of our ultimate victory over Satan.
- iii. Notice that in many places, the Scriptures employ figurative language (for example, trampling *snakes*), the meaning of which would be missed by Satan, but which the spiritual can understand.
- iv. As in the case of **Psalm 33/34**, this psalm (**Psalm 90/91**) can give us great comfort in the midst of the various challenges and afflictions we will face in this life.
 - 1. If we stay righteous, and the angels will protect us.
 - 2. We will trample on Satan and on those with him!