

SESSION 2

Shaking Off Fear



QUESTION 1:

What's something you don't like admitting you're afraid of?

THE POINT

God is our defender no matter what we face.

THE PASSAGES

Psalm 91:1-6,9-16

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Fear takes many forms. We all have things we'd just as soon avoid. I have no desire to visit the reptile section of the zoo because ... well, reptiles are in there. Some fears are good for us, in that they make us cautious. For example, I love woodworking, but my "healthy fear" of a running table saw is the reason I still have ten fingers.

Some people actually enjoy being afraid. That's one reason horror movies are so popular. For many, experiencing fear during a movie releases the chemical dopamine, giving them the same exhilaration they'd get from skydiving or bungee jumping.¹ While many of these horror fans would never jump out of a plane, they experience the same rush through movie-induced fear. They rationalize that a scary movie is a "safe" place to experience fear.

What looms before us may or may not be a legitimate concern, but the fear we feel is real. If unchecked, it can paralyze us or lead us to act irrationally. Thankfully, we do not face our fears alone. Psalm 91 gives us strong assurance that, whenever fear strikes, we can rest in God's power and protection.

Psalm 91:1-6

1 He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

2 I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

3 Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence.

4 He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.

5 Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day;

6 Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.

We don't know what threats the psalmist faced, but he was not afraid because he had a strong trust in God. His trust was grounded in the character of God. He used three different names for God that reflect God's character.

- ▶ “The most High” (*El Elyon*)—The Hebrew word captures the absolute supremacy of God. As the One who is over and above all, He is all-powerful and omnipotent (Ps. 18:13) and never-changing (21:7).
- ▶ “The Almighty” (*Shaddai*)—The Hebrew word focuses on the power of God. He is omnipotent and nothing is too big or beyond His ability.
- ▶ “The LORD” (*Yahweh*)—This is the name of God by which He revealed Himself to Moses and the children of Israel. Usually translated “I Am,” this is the name by which God established a covenant and relation with His people (Ex. 3:13-15).

The psalmist acknowledged the greatness and power of God as creator, by using a fourth name, “my God” (*Elohim*), the word

used for God in Genesis 1. The psalmist acknowledged the power of God, but he also called Him by His covenant name; he wrote as one who had a relationship with the Lord. In this relationship, the writer proclaimed, God “is my refuge and my fortress.” The imagery shows just how secure the psalmist felt with God. He lived “in the secret place” of God, a phrase that carries the idea of tucked away and hidden. We can’t always see what’s in the shadows, yet that is where this psalmist dwelled. God was over Him in every way, continually hiding Him in His shadow that was also an impenetrable fortress.

Under such powerful protection, it is easy to see why the psalmist declared that He is “my God; in him will I trust.” That *trust* was a secure confidence in God. Trusting in Christ means we have a secure confidence in His salvation, love, and protection over us—and we reflect that confidence in how we live and respond in the face of fearful situations.

A consistent walk of trust is vital because fearful situations most often come at us with no warning. For example, a bird doesn’t knowingly walk into a trap. The whole point of the trap is to catch the bird unaware. Life often surprises us the same way. A doctor’s diagnosis, a fall, or a car accident can paralyze us with fear, but the Lord will keep us from falling into the trap of fear if we keep our eyes on Him and trust Him.

QUESTION 2:

What are some of the traps that people often fear?

When we trust God and stay close to Him, “He shall cover thee with his feathers.” This imagery captures the loving heart of God. Just as a hen pulls her chicks in close and covers them with her wings, God lovingly keeps us close to protect us. The psalmist also used another image. He is a mighty warrior who defends and fights for us: “his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.” God provides both tender care and victorious defense.

Nothing that comes at us surprises God. Whether it's "the terror by night"—shadowy assailants we can't see—or "the arrow that flieth by day"—attacks we can see, God is powerful enough to defeat them all. We simply need to trust Him. Regardless of what we face, He is with us.

David echoed this same trust. "The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?" (Ps. 27:1).

QUESTION 3:

What are some of the ways God has rescued you from your fears?

Psalm 91:9-13

9 Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation;

10 There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.

11 For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.

12 They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.

13 Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet.

We can trust God to protect us as we dwell in Him. One example of God's ability to protect those who trust in Him is the exodus event. God told His people, "There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling." When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, God stepped in to set them free. As plague after plague devastated the Egyptians, the Israelites rested securely in

their homes. When God rained down hail that destroyed everything in the fields of Egypt (Ex. 9:22-25), nothing belonging to the Israelites was harmed. “Only in the land of Goshen, where the children of Israel were, was there no hail” (v. 26).

The tenth and final plague was the death of all firstborn males. Death visited every home in Egypt except those of the Israelites. They expressed their trust in God by placing the blood of a lamb on the doorposts and lintels of their houses. God had told them, “And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt” (12:13).

God still protects today. “For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.” Many people hold onto this verse as the grounds for believing God has assigned a guardian angel to each and every person (or at least to every believer), but it’s a stretch to make that conclusion based on just one verse. But we also see other biblical references to angels:

- ▶ “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 18:10).
- ▶ “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?” (Heb. 1:14).

These passages still don’t refer to guardian angels as such, nor do they explain exactly how these angels serve. Nevertheless, many people take comfort from the idea that God has assigned them a specific angel who is always there and always looking out for them.

What is troubling in this questionable theology is its emphasis on angels and not on Christ. People find comfort in believing they have their own personal guardian angel, rather than being encouraged by the indwelling presence of God’s Holy Spirit. Hebrews 1:4 reminds us that Jesus is “so much better than the angels.” He is the One we are to trust for protection. I am not dismissing the idea that God uses His angelic messengers on our behalf, but anything

they might do on our behalf is never done to draw attention to themselves but to point to and glorify Christ. We are to trust and worship the One the angels worship. God is the One who protects us.

Satan used this passage when he tempted Jesus.

“Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone” (Matt. 4:5-6).

In his challenge to Jesus’ divinity, Satan wanted Jesus to force God to show He would intervene. Jesus’ response about not testing God is a good word for us. We should never presume upon God. God’s promise of protection doesn’t mean we can act foolishly. God’s protection is grounded in our faithfulness and obedience to Him.

QUESTION 4:

When have you seen God’s protection cause fear to fall away?

Psalm 91:14-16

14 Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name.

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

16 With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation.

Psalm 91 now shifts so that God speaks. The Lord gave two reasons why the psalmist could rest assured of His protection.

1. **He has set his love on me.** God responds to the one whose heart is undivided, the one who looks to God and no one else. What does an undivided heart look like? Jesus described it this way: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matt. 22:37).
2. **He knows my name.** Knowing God in this way is more than being aware of God’s name; it is also knowing Him by experience. The one who knows God’s name has a relationship with Him. Some try to use God’s name like some incantation: utter the right words, like “in Jesus’ name,” and you’re guaranteed protection. God is not someone we can manipulate. Jesus said, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (7:21). We must have a relationship with Him.

God gives us more than we ask (Eph. 3:20). The psalmist trusted God for protection; God answered his request, but He also gave him honor, long life, and salvation. The psalmist honored God by trusting Him in the face of fear; God in turn honored Him. The psalm looked to God to save His life; God did that—and blessed him with a long life and salvation.

Allow me to address the elephant in the room. Sometimes we *don't* get rescued. Even though we trust God, sometimes our greatest fear comes to pass anyway. Our loved one dies, our vision deteriorates,, or we slip and fall and break a leg or hip. Where was God with His protection then? The Book of Job touches on a similar thought. Job was a righteous man who loved God, yet he lost his children, his servants, his livestock, and his health. Job was a man who knew God’s name and had his heart set on Him, so why was he not protected?

As God responded to Job with questions of His own, Job realized he knew little about how our sovereign God works. Job learned

what we should: we can trust the hand of God even when we don't understand. God doesn't tell us how or when He will rescue us from what we face; He only assures us that He *will* deliver. We should keep the big picture in mind. God's protection includes a long life and salvation, and that takes us eternally beyond just what we know and experience on this temporary earth.

“For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:16-17).

QUESTION 5:

What difference does setting our hearts on God make when we are afraid?

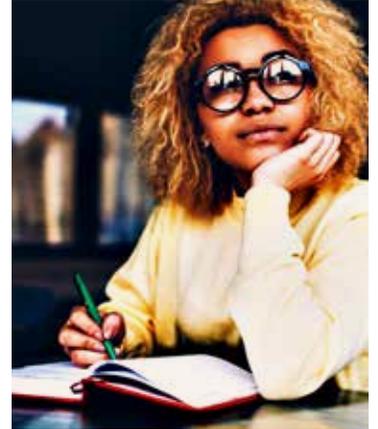
ENGAGE

Psalm 91 identifies God as our “refuge” and “fortress.” Use the space below to sketch a castle. Then within that drawing record some of God’s attributes that make Him our ideal source of protection.

LIVE IT OUT

When you are afraid, what will you do to “shake off fear” and trust the power and protection of God?

- ▶ **Make a list.** Make a list of those things that tend to cause you fear. Beside each of those fears, make a note of why trusting God will help you to overcome that fear.
- ▶ **Get counsel.** If you deal with a long-term, deep-seated fear or phobia, talk to your pastor or a trusted counselor. Talking to a counselor can help get to the root of such fears and help you get to the place where you can trust God.
- ▶ **Support.** Walk alongside someone who might be prone to fear. Be an example and model of 2 Timothy 1:7: “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”



END NOTES

1. Anthony Rivas, “Why Do We Watch Horror Films? Some Want to Understand Archetypal Fears While Others Crave the Psychological Ride,” *Medical Daily*, October 22, 2013, www.medicaldaily.com/why-do-we-watch-horror-films-some-want-understand-archetypal-fears-while-others-crave-psychological.