

# The cradle of the Psalms\*

## 2. Psalm 91

A. Hall

**T**HE NINETY-FIRST Psalm constitutes the second half of a picture, of which Psalm 90 is the first, and when the two are compared a much more detailed picture may be obtained than when they are separately considered. No title is prefixed to this psalm, but Jewish tradition (Kimshi) ascribes it to Moses, and Bullinger considers that Psalms 90 and 91 constitute but one poem.

The abrupt change of person is startling and suggestive; from the 'we', 'our', 'us' of 90 we come suddenly upon the 'he', 'thou', 'I' of 91. This psalm was obviously written in the first place concerning a single individual. This person was an honoured and privileged member of the community, as is clear from the context, while the fact that he was a type of Jesus proves that he was above the normal standard of mankind (*cf.* vv. 11,12, cited Mt. 4:6).

Moses, as we saw in [Part 1](#), it could not be, for he was included under the general condemnation of Psalm 90, and, if we are correct in considering these two psalms as the work of a common author, the subject could only be Joshua. In a very limited sense it could refer to Caleb, but additional detail as we examine the psalm will rapidly bring conviction that it was of Joshua that it spoke.

### Death in the wilderness

The root of the condemnation under which Israel stood is contained in Numbers 13 and 14, and a brief recapitulation of detail will be helpful at this point. Twelve spies were sent into Canaan to glean information concerning the position of defenders. Among their number went Caleb as representative of Judah, and Joshua as representative of Ephraim. After forty days they returned, and Caleb, confident of success, exhorted Israel to attack. With the exception of Joshua, the other spies adopted a defeatist attitude and persuaded the multitude to rebel against God's command to advance.

Moses and Aaron prostrated themselves before Yahweh, and, in the face of repeated exhortations by Joshua and Caleb to attack, the multitude prepared to stone them. There followed the intervention of Yahweh, in which the multitude

were convicted for unbelief, and all but Caleb and Joshua were condemned to die before reaching the Promised Land.

The consummation of this episode, and the key to Psalm 91, is contained in the following:

"Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against Me, doubtless ye shall not come into the land, concerning which I swear to make you dwell therein, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun" (Num. 14:29,30).

Since Caleb and Joshua were to be preserved from the wrath of the Deity that they might enter the Land, it follows that the terrors described in Psalm 91 from which they were to be preserved must be the agencies used by God in the promulgation of His sentence.

The question posed in [Part 1](#) as to the manner of death of those who perished in the wilderness is answered in this psalm:

"Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night;  
Nor for the arrow that flieth by day;  
Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness;  
Nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday . . .  
There shall no evil befall thee,  
Neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling" (vv. 5,6,10).

By all these agencies, therefore, were the rebels consumed, and they operated selectively under the direction of God:

"A thousand shall fall at thy side,  
And ten thousand at thy right hand;  
But it shall not come nigh thee.  
Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold  
And see the reward of the wicked" (vv. 7,8).

As a conservative estimate, some 25,000 must have so perished each year of the wanderings—in each case a death individually directed under the hand of God—and through this valley of death Joshua and Caleb alone were permitted to pass,

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preserved alike from "the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence" (v. 3).

Even in our days, so far removed from these tragic events, the spectacle is almost too awful to contemplate. What, then, must have been the effect, both upon Joshua and upon the younger generation then growing into manhood? The promise that no plague should come near his tent was almost certainly a primary reference to the staying of the plague which slew the other ten spies (v. 10; Num. 14:36-38).

#### National calamity and personal salvation

One reason for the present division of the two psalms, which are yet one epic, we have seen in the dramatic change of person which occurs in the grammatical structure. A second is seen in the striking contrast here exhibited between national calamity through unbelief and personal salvation through faith.

Inspiration does not record its words with a cold metallic precision, but breathes through the emotions of the deeply moved servant of Yahweh, himself faithful in his ministry, but doomed not to enter the yearned-for rest because of momentary wavering of belief. At the end his faith stands firm, however:

"For the LORD shall judge His people,  
And repent Himself for His servants,  
When He seeth that their power is gone,  
And there is none shut up, or left" (Deut.  
32:36).

The Old Testament presents no sadder picture than that of Moses viewing the Land of Promise from Mount Nebo after forty years of striving, in which he had stood in intercession between God and a stiff-necked people, his journey ended, the goal in sight—yet not for him.

In meek abnegation he transfers to Joshua the authority which has been his, in a manner which concurs well with the transition between these two psalms. We suggest that three people are dramatically represented as speaking in Psalm 91:

- Moses (vv. 1,3-13)
- Joshua (v. 2)
- Yahweh (vv. 14-16).

The first verse contains the key to the whole:

"He that dwelleth in the secret place of the  
most High  
Shall abide under the shadow of the Al-  
mighty".

Because he said of God, "He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in Him will I trust" (v. 2), therefore he should be delivered from the fowler

and the pestilence, and have length of days, in contrast to the wicked, who are to be "cut off" (90:10).

#### Joshua preserved

What was the "secret place of the most High" at this time, and who was the mysterious person dwelling there? The answer is surely contained in the following passage: "the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend. And he turned again into the camp: but his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, departed not out of the tabernacle" (Ex. 33:7,11). It is for this reason that, although the preservation described in the psalm could apply equally well to Caleb, the other details make it certain that the principal application is to Joshua. It is recognised, of course, that it is prophetic of Jesus, but with that most important aspect we are not here concerned.

The psalm, then, as one of the last words of Moses, assures the people that while Joshua occupied this position in Israel he was immune from death by misadventure:

"With long life will I satisfy him,  
And shew him My salvation" (v. 16).

Their entry into the Land and victory over their enemies was assured. Through the Spirit they were assured that Joshua would remain at his post as leader in the tent until the final distribution of the inheritance had been effected.

Not until that precise moment, when the great general had conquered his enemies and divided the Land according to the word of the Lord, when his work was accomplished and the promises of God fulfilled, did he leave the tabernacle and receive his own inheritance, the last of his people to do so (Josh. 19:49,50; 21:41-45; 23:14,15). His movement from the tabernacle to inheritance was a sign that the promised inheritance had been received and his work completed. The statement that it was "according to the word of the LORD" (19:50) may indicate that he removed from commandment rather than from choice. The geographical position, ten miles from Shechem, and closely adjoining a Levitical city, would indicate how loath he was to depart from the sanctuary of God.

So ended one of the most glorious lives of old time, a life teeming with significance when one thinks of the Messiah, and one well fitted to be used by God in this psalm to foretell the greater leader, who should enter into still closer proximity to the most High.

(Concluded)