

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – March 10, 2019

## Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the NRSV on biblegateway.com.)

### Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### Commentary on Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

(From *Homiletics*; “G.O.D.”, March 10, 2019)

Psalm 91 is a psalm of trust influenced by the wisdom tradition. Today's reading is an excerpt from this psalm of assurance, emphasizing the overwhelming confidence the psalmist displays in God's protection (a confidence expressed also in Psalm 46).

Despite the rendering of NRSV (and JPS), the psalm opens with a statement about, rather than an address to, an unnamed individual; the verb, somewhat unexpectedly, is a singular, not plural, participle: “Whoever dwells” (so NIV; see also the remarks of Artur Weiser on the singular forms in this psalm in his commentary, *The Psalms* [The Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962], 605). The word translated “shelter,” *seter*, means “covering” or “hiding-place” or “that which obscures” (such as dark clouds, Job 22:14). The image of Yahweh as shelter is found regularly in the psalter (e.g., Psalm 27:5; 31:21; 61:5; etc.) and is the consummate place of refuge for the devout Israelite.

The name for the deity that appears first in this psalm, *‘elyon*, is from the Hebrew root meaning “to go up” or “to ascend,” and is identical to the adjective from that root, meaning “high,” “upper” or “highest.” The theophoric is an early name for Israel's God, rooted in Canaanite divine names. It can appear alone, as here, or as part of a binomen, such as *EI Elyon* (“El Most High,” Genesis 14:18, 19, 20, 22; Psalm 78:35); *Yahweh Elyon* (“the Lord Most High,” Psalm 7:18; 47:3); *Elohim Elyon* (“God Most High,” Psalm 57:3; 78:56). Its parallel theophoric, translated “Almighty,” is *Shaddai*, from an unknown root (see the many guesses in BDB, 994-95); it, too, is found in the earliest strata of biblical literature and it also appears to be an Israelite adaptation of a Canaanite original. It also frequently appears as the binomial “*El Shaddai*” (Genesis 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3; Exodus 6:3; etc. Of the several divine compound names, only these two forms, found in the lyrics of a widely sung contemporary Christian song, are popularly known. The use of these ancient divine names does not indicate that this psalm is itself ancient; its language and concepts elsewhere suggest a composition from later in Israelite history. The psalm is not likely archaic but rather archaizing. This is also true of the classic poetic parallelism found in this verse, better captured by the Hebrew than by most English translations.

The verb translated “abide” is the Hebrew *lun/lin*, meaning “to lodge” or “to pass the night” (e.g., Genesis 28:11). The verbal form used here, the Hithpo’el, is uncommon with this root, occurring only one other time in the OT (Job 39:28); this is one of the clues of a later date for this composition.

How literally or figuratively one should understand the opening words of this psalm remains uncertain. Some traditional commentators understand “the shelter of the Most High” to refer to the temple, with this psalm being part of the temple liturgy (perhaps an entrance or departure psalm). The language may also refer to the less concrete spiritual state of those whose lives consistently reflect the divine. One need not force a decision on the question; the psalm has provided comfort across cultures and centuries in part because of its wide (and not overly specific) applicability.

The second verse of the psalm reinforces the idea that this psalm may have been sung by those entering or leaving the temple: the verse appears almost instructional. The declaration of Yahweh as refuge and fortress (or similar acclamation) may have been obligatory on certain occasions for pilgrims or, even more likely, for the resident temple personnel. The sentiment expresses the essence of Hebrew belief: trust.

The verses omitted from the lection (vv. 3-8) contrast in vivid detail the destruction of the wicked with the preservation of the righteous. Today’s reading resumes with verse 9, an echo of verse 1. Because the pious person has made Yahweh his or her refuge and dwelling place (again, the verbs and pronominal suffixes are singular), he or she is assured of security and safety, here described in the negative (“no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent,” v. 10). The reference to “scourge” approaching one’s tent, as well as references in the omitted verses (e.g., “His faithfulness is a shield and buckler,” v. 4; “You will not fear ... the arrow that flies by day,” v. 5, “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand,” v. 7), has led to this psalm’s frequent use by those engaged in warfare. “Plague” and “scourge” may also refer to personified demons.

The plural use of “angels” (v. 11), as well as the image of angelic guardians, is another clue of the relatively late date of this psalm. Angelology was a late development in Israelite religious thought. Although angels (Hebrew *mal’akim*) appear in early Israelite literature (e.g., Genesis 19:1, 15; 28:12; 32:2; Exodus 3:2-4, all from the JE tradition), their function there is almost exclusively that of divine messenger. Their role as intermediaries between humans and an increasingly transcendent God expanded in later biblical literature (e.g., Daniel 10:13), reaching its fullest form — as guardian angels — in the Intertestamental and New Testament periods (although the idea may reach back as far as earliest Babylonian times; cf. Weiser, 1962, p. 611). The angelic protection specified in verse 12 (“On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone”), as well as the first half of verse 11, is quoted by the devil as part of Jesus’ temptations (Matthew 4:6 and parallels). The imagery is a bit unexpected; wings, rather than hands, were the most prominent angelic feature (cf. the prominence of the wings of the cherubim — angel-like creatures mentioned more frequently in the OT than any other heavenly being apart from God — in such passages as Exodus 25:18-22 and Psalm 18:10).

The imagery of verse 13 is unique, but may echo such mythic images as Yahweh’s crushing of the multiple heads of the twisting sea-monster, Leviathan (Psalm 74:14), or the cursed relationship between humans and serpents in Genesis 3:15 (“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.”). The same constellation of imagery, stripped of its violence, may also be in the background of the “peaceable kingdom” envisioned in Isaiah 11:8, “The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.” Verses 13 and 14, along with the ending of the gospel of Mark (16:18), have been used in some religious circles to justify such high-risk worship practices as snake-handling (which claimed the life of a Kentucky pastor as recently as 2014).

The psalm concludes with the promise of “long life” for those who “call to me” (v. 15), paralleled by “my salvation” (v. 16). The idea of salvation as a privatized translation of a person from earth to heaven is exceedingly rare in the OT (the cases of Enoch, Genesis 5:24; Ecclesiasticus 44:16; 49:14; and Elijah, 2 Kings 2:11, are the exceptions proving the rule). Salvation was understood by the theologians of the OT to be divine deliverance from every form of threat with a resultant life of longevity, prosperity, integrity and fertility. The idea of *HaOlam HaBa*, “The World to Come,” developed gradually in ancient Israel, flowering late in the Second Temple Period (i.e., 63 B.C. to A.D. 70) and helped to give birth to Christianity.

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org).

## Reflection Questions on Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

1. Does not this text demand an answer to the question of “Why do bad things happen to good people?” With all the promises of vv. 9-16 for the faithful who trust in God, how do we read and receive these words in the midst of “undeserved” troubles (e.g. cancer, terror, tragedy, etc)?
2. Thinking about how Jesus applied the words of this scripture in the story of his desert temptation (when they were quoted by the devil – Matthew 4:6-7 and parallels), how shall we receive and apply them today? Are they meant to be akin to a “pep talk” – meant to raise spirits and inspire the kind of trust advocated, but not be taken literally? Or are they something more?
3. Do you believe in angels? If so, what role do they play in the spiritual realm? How do they touch / interact with our lives?
4. V. 15 promises an answer to those who love and call out to God. What about when God is silent?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?**