

TRUST IN THE LORD

Psalm 91

The lesson may be introduced by showing the position of the book of Psalms in the Bible—between the historical books and the Prophets—and this is a good opportunity to remind the younger children that all the books in our Bible are not part of the Word. Then point out that the Psalms were written not to portray any historical sequence but to express ever-recurring states of feeling and thought. All classes above the Primary should be told the belief of the Jews about the Psalms and why we know that they are a part of the Word.

Doctrinal Points

The Lord will take care of our souls if we trust in Him.

The book of Psalms is part of the New Church canon of the Word. —

Faith in the Lord implies trust in His guidance.

If we are unselfish interiorly, we are really living in heaven while we are in this world.

Notes for Parents

Everyone loves the Psalms. This is because they are songs and songs touch our hearts, and because in the Psalms the Lord gives us beautiful words to express our hopes and our fears, our joyful states and our griefs, and above all our sense of our own weakness and need of Him. We are told that even the most hardened materialist will instinctively fall on his knees and pray in a time of great danger which he himself can do nothing to avert. In the bottom of our hearts we all know that there is a God and that we need His help. But we do not all admit that we know this.

We do not all take advantage of the privilege every man and woman has of living close to the Lord. We human beings have the power—which no animal has—of knowing the Lord, learning of

Him, and walking in the light of His truth. In fact it is this power which makes us human. What a tragedy it is that any man or woman should choose to live like a mere animal!

In Psalm 91 the Lord, as everywhere in the Word, is speaking of our souls—the real person—not of our bodies. It is our souls that can dwell “in the secret place of the most High” and the dangers against which the Lord can guard us are dangers to our souls. In Psalm 64 we read of the wicked that they “whet their tongue like a sword, and bend their bows to shoot their arrows, even bitter words.” The things which really hurt us are the false thoughts that make their way into our minds and the selfish desires that eat away our good intentions. These are our temptations and some of them come upon us unawares, like the “pestilence that walketh in darkness,” and some we see clearly, like the “arrow that flieth by day,” but still are unwilling to oppose. The Lord wants to keep us safe from all of them, and our guardian angels are always at hand ready to help us, but we must make the choice ourselves.

If we turn to the Lord, acknowledge our need of His help, and try to learn and obey His truth, all the promises of this Psalm will be fulfilled. But we must make the effort to learn the truth which can protect us from falsity and evil. “His truth shall be thy shield and buckler.”

Primary

Be sure the children learn that a psalm is a song that we should sing the Psalms in church, and why they are sung differently from hymns. Stress the value of memorizing the Psalms and show the children how we can use them to help us to resist temptation, using Psalm 91 as an example.

You remember King David, don't you? He was the one who conquered all the enemies of Israel. And you remember that he brought the ark to Jerusalem, and that he sang and danced before it as it was carried into the city. David was a musician as well as a warrior. When he was a young man, he played the harp before King Saul to soothe Saul when he was unhappy.

So it was natural that the Lord should choose David to write down many of the Psalms. For the Psalms are songs. The Hebrew people sang them in their services in the temple and we sometimes sing them in our services in church. And we try to learn as many of them as we can so that we can say or sing them to ourselves when we are thinking about the Lord or when we are troubled about anything and need His help especially. For the words of the Psalms are given us by the Lord Himself.

What is our Psalm for today about?

In it the Lord tells us that if we will learn His truth and do as it teaches, we need never be afraid of anything.

Whatever may happen to our bodies, our souls will be safe.

The Lord's angels are always with us even though we cannot see them.

If we trust the Lord and try always to learn more and more about Him and to do what He shows us is right, nothing that may happen to us can really hurt us, and so we shall not need to be afraid of anything. Remember though that the first part of doing right while we are children is to obey our parents.

We should learn as many of the Psalms as we can, because in them the Lord teaches us how to say the things we ought to think and feel.

Junior

This is a good lesson in which to introduce the Juniors to the basic fact that in the Word the Lord is always speaking to us of our souls rather than of our bodies. If the class shows interest in this idea, the teacher may take up one or two of the dangers mentioned in Psalm 91 and show what they mean spiritually. This information will be found in the Intermediate notes.

Our lesson for today is in the book of Psalms. A psalm is a song. As they are printed in our Bible [KJV] the Psalms look just like all the rest of the Word. They do not look like poetry. But in the Hebrew language they are poetry, and we sometimes sing them as part of our church service. Because the English version of the Psalms is not written in meter like most songs, we have to have a special kind of music, called chanting, to enable us to sing the Psalms.

The Jews sang the Psalms as part of their temple worship. Their singing was a form of chanting, too, and they had choirs trained for just this purpose. In fact, certain families of the Levites handed this duty down from one generation to another. So their singing was famous. One of the Psalms written about the captivity of the people of Judah shows us this. Read Psalm 137. Then read Psalm 126, which tells how they sang when they were allowed to go back to their own land. They sang these songs so much that they felt that the words were their own instead of the Lord's; so to this day the Jews do not consider the book of Psalms as sacred as some of their Scriptures. But we have means of knowing better. You know perhaps that many of the Psalms are attributed to King David, who was a skillful player on the harp (I Samuel 16:14-23), a musician as well as a warrior. But we read in II Samuel 23:1-2: "Now these be the last words of David. David the son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, said, The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue." David knew that the words of his Psalms were not his own, but were spoken through him by the Lord. And then we have another proof that the book of Psalms is part of the Word. When the Lord appeared to His disciples after His Resurrection, "He said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me." (Luke 24:44) The Psalms are songs written for us by the Lord to teach us about Himself and the feelings and thoughts we ought to have about Him, and to help us express those feelings and thoughts.

Our Psalm for today shows us what trust in the Lord can do for us as we go through life. To understand this Psalm we need to remember that it is our souls about which the Lord is talking to us. Our bodies are just a sort of clothing which we wear for a few years while we live in this world. What happens to our bodies is not really very important, although we should try to keep them in good condition so that we can be as useful as possible to our

neighbors while we are here. But our souls are our real selves and they go on forever. It is our souls that feel love and hate, trust and fear, happiness and unhappiness. It is our souls that think. And it is our souls that act by means of our bodies. So what happens in our souls is very important. The person who in his soul wants to learn of the Lord and keep close to Him is “he that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High.” He really lives with God. He knows that no matter what happens to him in the world—even if he has sickness and poverty and bereavement and disappointment—his soul is safe in the Lord’s keeping. So he is not afraid of anything. It isn’t what happens to our bodies that counts but the way our souls take what happens. We all admire brave people who can bear pain with a smile and stay friendly and cheerful instead of complaining of their troubles. We can all be like that if we try.

All the bad things that the Lord speaks of in this Psalm are really pictures of wrong thoughts and feelings which try to get into our hearts and minds and hurt us. But if we trust in the Lord—which means to know that He is always wise and right and therefore to do what He tells us to do—His angels will always be with us to help us fight off the ugly and harmful thoughts and feelings as they come. All these bad things come to us from the hells and we need the Lord and the angels to help us meet them. As you grow older, you will learn more and more about these enemies of our souls, but you need not be afraid of them if you begin now to deal with them as the Lord teaches us. One of the first and best ways is to learn as many verses from the Psalms as possible and use them when you are tempted. This is what is meant in verse 4 of Psalm 91 by the words, “His truth shall be thy shield and buckler.” Each one of us is like a soldier fighting for the kingdom of God, and our armor is the Word, the Lord’s truth.

Intermediate

The correspondence of the various dangers mentioned makes a good study for this class. The teacher should think of simple illustrations of these dangers which will fall within the pupils’ experience.

Psalms are songs, songs which were sung as part of the worship in the temple as well as at other times. The Jews did not consider them a part of the most sacred Scriptures, but the Lord, when He was talking to His disciples after His resurrection, named them with the Law and the Prophets and said they taught of Him (Luke 24:44). And when in His Second Coming He opened for us the inner meaning of the Scriptures, He enabled Swedenborg to see the spiritual sense of the Psalms.

Our lesson for today is Psalm 91. Many people know this Psalm by heart and many more know some verses from it. It is a very useful Psalm to learn because it reminds us that the Lord and the angels are always with us and that if we trust in the Lord and try to do right, nothing that happens to us can really hurt us. We are all often tempted to be afraid of various things and to worry when troubles come to us. If we think we have only ourselves to depend on, these fears and troubles will be too strong for us. But if we can remember that we are not alone at all, but that the Lord and the angels are always near us and ready to help us, we can face any trouble bravely. So if we have this Psalm in our minds and can say it to ourselves when we need help, it will always give us the courage we need.

Let us see what some of the dangers are from which the Lord can deliver us. We know that in the Word the Lord is telling us of spiritual rather than of material things. In verses 5 and 6 the dangers are divided into two classes: those that strike by day and those that come in the night. Day, when it is light, pictures the state when we see things plainly; night, when we cannot see very well, pictures a state of ignorance. We know that the things which are dangerous to our souls are evil and falsity. And if we think a little, we can see that there are some evils which creep into our hearts and some false ideas which we accept as true because we don't know any better. These are the "pestilence that walketh in darkness" and the "terror by night." Then there are other wrong desires which we know very well are wrong and yet we enjoy having them, and there are some falsities which we really know are false but like to

believe just the same because they excuse the wrong things we are doing. These are the “destruction that wasteth as noonday” and the “arrow that flieth by day.” The Lord can protect us against both these forms of evil and falsity if we try to keep close to Him by learning His truth and obeying it. “His truth shall be thy shield and buckler.” Truth from the Word is the armor which can protect us.

Again, in verse 13, the lion and the young lion refer to the power of evil and the adder and the dragon to the power of falsity. We can remember this if we think how hateful feelings can tear us to pieces inside, and how false ideas can poison our minds. The “noisome pestilence” in verse 3 is the same evil which eats into our system, and the “snare of the fowler” the falsity which captures our thoughts.

Now let us think of verses 11 and 12. You have all been taught from childhood that guardian angels are always with us. Sometimes, however, we get hurt without any fault of our own and we may be tempted to ask why our guardian angels didn’t take better care of us. Here again we must remember that it is our souls which are important—not our bodies—and that it is our souls which the angels are trying to protect. I wonder if you can see that to take these two verses literally would be a form of “falsification of truth”—see if you can remember what that is—and would turn them into a stone over which we might stumble. Do you remember the Gospel story of how the devil tempted the Lord in the wilderness? In the letter the devil quoted this very passage, but the Lord was not deceived. Read the story in Matthew 4:5-7.

The Lord answered the devil, “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.” We tempt God when we try to see how far we can go in our selfish ways without getting into trouble, just as we tempt our parents sometimes until their patience with us is worn out. All the promises of our Psalm are made to those who dwell “in the secret place of the most High.” We know that this cannot be said concerning our bodies. It is only with our souls that we can approach the Lord. Our bodies live in this material world in houses made with hands. But our real homes are where our souls are living, and each

of us chooses where his soul shall live. If we let ourselves be selfish and just try to get our own way and look for excuses to do what we want to do, our souls are at home in hell, because selfishness and false reasonings are the life of the hells. But if we try to forget ourselves and to learn the Lord's ways and make other people happy, our souls are living in heaven even while we are in this world, and the Lord can protect and help us in everything we do.

The Psalm ends with the promise of long life. In the original Hebrew it says "length of days." When we remember what the day represents, we see that this means that our souls will be in the light of truth always.

Basic Correspondences

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| day | = | a state of understanding |
| night | = | a state of ignorance |
| shield and buckler | = | protection against falsities |
| stone | = | truth or falsity |

Senior

This is a good lesson in which to urge the Seniors to begin a regular program of reading in the Word and the writings. No habit will stand them in better stead as they go out into their independent lives in the world. It is this habit, together with the habits of prayer and of church attendance, which will keep them in safety close to the Lord.

With the end of II Kings we have finished with the narrative history of the Jews as representing the spiritual church in the world. The ancient Hebrew church was only representative of a church, because its worship was wholly external, but so long as the people observed the laws and statutes given them at Sinai, the Lord could maintain His connection with men through the correspondence of those rites. When, however, the nation ceased to observe them, it could no longer be even a representative of a church. So it was carried away into captivity, and the rest of its history to the time of the Advent of the Lord is barely mentioned in the books of the Word. We get most of our knowledge of the

return from Babylon and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which are not part of the Word which has an inner sense. However, we also learn from II Kings 25:12 that when Judah was taken captive some of the “poor of the land” were left as vinedressers and husbandmen. That is, there were still some individuals left in whom there was humility before the Lord—these are what is meant by the “poor” throughout the Word—and we also know that there were some who even in captivity still observed the prescribed Jewish rites. We shall see this when we study the book of Daniel.

The book of Psalms is of a different character from all the other books of the Word. We know that it is a book of the Word because the Lord Himself tells us so in Luke 24:44. Swedenborg interprets the general meaning of each of the Psalms in a summary form in his work *Prophets and Psalms*, and he gives us the meaning of many individual verses in the course of his writings. There are, for example, twenty-two places in the writings in which he quotes one or more verses of Psalm 91 and in many of them explains their spiritual meaning. But the book of Psalms in its letter does not tell the history of the Jews or even of men in general. It is a book of songs, and songs are the expression of emotion. That is why people have always loved the Psalms and why they are easy to memorize. Every religious person can find particular Psalms which say what he feels and which bring him help from the Lord in his states of anxiety. In their inmost meaning the Psalms are expressions of the states through which the Lord passed when He was in the world, and we know that in some of them even in the letter there are prophecies of events in the Lord’s life on earth. For example, compare Psalm 22, verses 1, 7, 8, and 18 with Matthew 27:46, Matthew 27:39, Matthew 27:43, and John 19:23-24.

Psalm 91, on which this lesson is centered, is a good Psalm to learn. We all have troubles in our outward life—disappointments, sicknesses, bereavements—and we are liable to feel alone and discouraged in the face of them. When such times come, repeat this Psalm and realize that it is forever true. The Lord and the angels

are always at hand to help us. The Lord does not always save us from outward dangers and troubles—we need them to show us our own weakness, to broaden our sympathies, and to develop our spiritual strength. The Lord in the Word is always speaking of our souls rather than of our bodies. The dangers mentioned in Psalm 91 are spiritual dangers, evils and falsities from the hells. Some of them comes upon us unawares; these are the dangers which are said to come in the night. Others are falsities and evils which we can clearly recognize but which we still want to think and do. These are the dangers which are said to attack by day. The Lord will save us from all these dangers if we dwell “in the secret place of the most High,” that is, if in our inmost hearts we try to keep close to Him and trust His guidance.

But the Psalm also teaches us that there is more to this matter of trust in the Lord and our soul’s safety than just a feeling. There is mental effort, too. “Under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.” Wings in the Word picture spiritual truths. We must want truth from the Lord—more and more truth and deeper and deeper truth—to use in our daily lives. If we are brought up in the church and go to Sunday school regularly, we learn a certain amount of this truth, but that is only the beginning. We must continue all our lives not only to read the Word regularly but to study for ourselves the writings which the Lord has given us in His Second Coming to open the inner meaning of the Word to our understanding. In AC 4096 Swedenborg tells us that the understanding of spiritual truth in the Word can be given only to a mind “which has been instructed, and which perceives delight in the memory-knowledge of such things,” and also that “The good which is of love and charity flows in from the Lord, and does so through angels who are with man; *but not into anything else in him than his knowledges.*” You remember that we who live in the world today do not have a direct perception of the truth such as the people of the Most Ancient Church had, but that truth must be shown us in the knowledges which have entered our minds by an external way, as light from the sun reflected from the

drops of water in the cloud makes the rainbow. Swedenborg says elsewhere, “The good love truth.” We never in this world or in the next reach the point when we “know enough.” The Lord can protect us in our temptations only as we seek to learn more and more of the Word and its meaning every day. “His truth shall be thy shield and buckler.”

Adult

Serious thought should be given in this class not only to the spiritual meaning of the dangers mentioned in the Psalm but to the fact that the promises are also spiritual and that they are made under the definite condition that we acquire and use the truth which the Lord gives us. Mental laziness gives the lie to *good intention*.

Let us begin by asking ourselves why the Psalms play so prominent a part in our public and private devotions. In the first place, the Psalms are songs, and music because it expresses the emotions has a very deep appeal. In the second place, the Psalms put into words—words inspired by the Lord—our inner states, those states of thought and feeling which we of ourselves find it so difficult to express. Finally, the Psalms throughout describe our relationship with the Lord, that highest privilege of man which distinguishes him from the animals. In their inmost sense the Psalms show us the inner states through which the Lord Himself passed while He was on earth, and because we are created in His image and after His likeness they show us in their spiritual sense states of every regenerating person.

The book begins with the clearly drawn contrast between the righteous person and the ungodly person, in the first Psalm, and throughout the book the need of the righteous for the help of the Lord in meeting the assaults of evil and falsity is a constant theme. The triumphant praise of the Lord with which the book closes is the result of experience of the Lord’s saving power. The Introduction to the book of Psalms in the International Bible Commentary says: “No book in the Bible so completely unites the world’s divided Christendom. Roman Catholic and Protestant, Anglican and

Non-Anglican, use it in public and private devotion. No book so completely expresses the varied needs of the human heart.”

Psalm 91 is one which many people know by heart and in which many have found support and comfort. Even without a knowledge of the spiritual meaning one gets from it the feeling of the nearness of the Lord and the angels, the sense that one is not struggling alone and that in the end, as Paul says, “all things work together for good to them that love God.” But there is and always has been a tendency to think that the promises of this Psalm concern salvation from external dangers, and to feel that when sickness and bereavement come to us, it must be because we do not have sufficient faith in the Lord. In fact, this is always the excuse offered by the faith healers when they fail to cure. Even from the literal sense of the Word we should know better than this, for it is in this obvious external sense that the devil quotes this Psalm in tempting the Lord in the wilderness (Matthew 4:5-7), and the Lord’s reply indicates that the promise is not to be taken literally. In the New Church we know that in all the Word the Lord is speaking to our souls, and that the dangers from which He wishes to save us are spiritual dangers. In the interest of our spiritual growth the Lord permits many afflictions to come to our bodies.

In his summary of the internal sense of the Prophets and Psalms Swedenborg interprets Psalm 91 entirely in its relation to the Lord’s states during His glorification. The summary is as follows:

1. Song in praise of the Father by the Lord, who is to be made one with Him.
- 2-6. Thus there will be protection from enemy attack.
- 7-9. Thus there will be no uprising of the hells,
10. not even against the church.
- 11-12. Thus heaven will serve Him.
- 13-16. There will be no fear from the hells, when the Divine has been made one with the Human.

And Swedenborg does not leave us without help in the understanding of this Psalm’s meaning in our own lives. Scattered through the writings there are some twenty-two instances in which he

quotes and often explains one or more verses from it. He says, for example: “‘To trust under his wings’ signifies under truth known” (AE 283⁶); “The ‘dread of night’ denotes falsities of evil which are from hell; the ‘arrow that flieth by day,’ falsity which is openly taught, whereby good is destroyed; the ‘death that wasteth at noonday,’ evil which is lived in openly, whereby truth is destroyed” (AC 6000⁹); “‘The pestilence that creepeth in thick darkness’ denotes the evil which vastates in secret; ‘the death that wasteth at noonday’ denotes the evil that vastates openly” (AC 7505); “To destroy the interior and exterior falsities that vastate the truths of the church is signified by ‘treading upon the lion and adder’; and to destroy the interior and exterior falsities that vastate the goods of the church is signified by ‘trampling on the lion and dragon’ ” (AE 714²⁴).

We all know that we are constantly assailed by temptations, and we know from our doctrines that these temptations come from the hells. Some of the evils and falsities we see immediately in their true character. These are the dangers which are said to come “by day” and “at noonday.” There are others which we do not immediately recognize because our thinking is obscure. These are the dangers that come “by night” and “in darkness.” We know that although in general we mean to be good, we often yield even to the temptations which come “by day.” We need help from above to reinforce our weak wills. And certainly we need the Lord’s help to recognize and reject those evils and falsities which disguise themselves.

Our Psalm teaches us that this help is always available. But it also teaches us that if we would obtain it, there are conditions which we must fulfill. To imagine that we can go our own way and then when trouble comes call upon the Lord and be saved is merely wishful thinking. The Psalm is addressed to the person who “dwell-eth in the secret place of the most High.” That is not where we are dwelling when we live according to our natural thoughts and inclinations. The wings which we are to trust are spiritual truths, and it is faithfulness to truth which is to be our shield and buckler.

We cannot expect to have this security and protection if we neglect the daily reading of the Word and the study of its spiritual meaning as the Lord has opened it for us in His Second Coming. We read in AC 4096: “The good which is of love and charity flows in from the Lord, and does so through angels who are with man; *but not into anything else in him than his knowledges.*” We like to think that good intentions are all we need, but the writings tell us that good receives its quality from truth and exercises its power through truth. They tell us also that “the good love truth”; so we should keep in mind that the quality of our intentions is actually measured by the effort we are willing to make to learn the truth.

In AE 471² we read: “The expression ‘to answer’ frequently occurs in the Word, and it signifies, in reference to the Lord, influx, inspiration, perception, and information, likewise mercy and aid.” The answers to our prayers for salvation from our troubles will not necessarily be preservation from any outward calamity, but will be an understanding of the reason why it is permitted to come to us and the strength to meet it and use it for our spiritual development.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 7102¹⁰: “Here the ‘dread of night’ denotes the falsity which is in secret; the ‘arrow that flieth by day,’ the falsity which is in the open; the ‘pestilence that creepeth in thick darkness,’ the evil which is in secret; the ‘death that wasteth at noonday,’ the evil which is in the open.” [We need to know that Swedenborg made his own translation of the Hebrew—a very literal translation.]

Arcana Coelestia, n. 7505: “A very grievous pestilence. That this signifies a consumption in general, is evident from the signification of ‘pestilence,’ as being the vastation of truth. . . . [in Psalm 91:5, 6] ‘the pestilence that creepeth in thick darkness’ denotes the evil which vastates in secret; ‘the death that wasteth at noonday’ denotes the evil that vastates openly.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

P. In what book is our lesson today? *Psalms*

P. What is a psalm? *a song*

- J. How do we know that the book of Psalms is part of the inspired Word?
Luke 24:44
- I. Why do you think everyone loves the Psalms? *appeal to heart*
- J. In Psalm 91 what does the Lord promise the man who lives close to Him?
protection
- I. Of what two general classes of dangers does the Psalm speak? *of night, of day*
- J. Is the Lord talking about dangers to our bodies? *no*
- P. What does He say our armor against these dangers is? *obeying His Word*
- P. What does He tell us about the angels? *will take care of us*
- J. How can we use this Psalm to help us? *use against bad thoughts and feelings*
- S. What is the difference between the dangers by day and those by night?
“day” = deliberate evils
“night” = errors of ignorance