

Psalm 91

Psalm 91 is perhaps best understood with frogs, tea bags and temptation.

If you love God, God will protect you. That seems to be the logic of this psalm. And there are parts of the psalms that you may remember falling from the lips of Jesus. During the temptation narrative, the devil suggests that Jesus throw himself down from the roof of the temple. After all, you're a good bloke. "He will guard his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. They will lift up their hands so you will not strike your foot against a stone."

If you love God, God will stop bad stuff from happening to you! In fact, in some ways it seems like a very unfair kind of psalm. Because if you love God, then even if everyone all around you falls, if everyone around you gets struck down – you – individually – will be okay. God looks after people who love him!

Is that how it works, really. Were the people who wrote these psalms really that naïve? It's hard to imagine people seriously believing this stuff, never mind committing it to writing. "God will satisfy us with salvation and long life, if we acknowledge his name."

Not wanting to sound heretical or anything, but what kind of God is that. A God who offers us his protection when we acknowledge his name... It sounds like some divine protection racket. Because, if God is God, then ... all the nasty things happening to people around us, are happening because they do not acknowledge his name and therefore do not enjoy his protection. The bad things that happen in the world are caused, or at least allowed by God, but once we submit ourselves to his lordship, everything will be okay?

It's quite hard not to read the psalm that way --- and doesn't cast a shadow over the psalm itself when, in the Gospels, the person who quotes at length from this psalm is the devil!

The worst thing about the psalm, is that, at this point, I would usually suggest an alternative way of reading the psalm that shows us what the psalmist REALLY meant. The trouble is, I just don't think that can be done with this psalm. Of course we could make some clever arguments about different interpretations, but I don't believe they would be faithful to the text.

Isn't it this kind of psalm that leads to Christians gleefully announcing God's wrath on those who are victims of AIDS. That if we are happy it's because we are good Christians, and if our lives are in a mess, it's because we deserve it. Conclusion: if you want to avoid trouble, become a Christian. Do you want to be wealthy, do you want to be healthy, do you want to be safe? Just have faith!

Still, whenever agonising over a biblical passage, it's always best to consider the context. And when you do there is one phrase that leaps out for me. God's promise: "I will be with him in trouble..." There is no promise here of avoiding trouble, actually, when we look closely enough.

The one who loves God is not drawn out of the context of horror and suffering. Ten thousand will still fall at your right hand. You still walk upon the cobra and the lion. You still experience the terror of the night. In other words the context remains the same. And what

you end up with is perhaps, the promise that God does not offer salvation FROM suffering, but salvation THROUGH suffering. That, after all, is the way of the cross.

I suppose you only have to consider the great saints of the Christian faith. Either those you've read about or those you've known. I remember a friend who has now died, who used to say that Christians were like tea bags: that you only get their true flavour when you put them in hot water. And I suspect there is something true about this.

It's difficult not to talk of Mother Theresa in this regard. These people become saints – or at least Christian celebrities – by being in hot water. Being in a context where they see and taste and feel injustice, and yet ... at the same time ... they are there as a living temple, a Christian presence in the midst of horror. A great picture of Christianity.

I suppose the trouble is, that is precisely the nature of the temptation that the devil offered to Jesus. Throw yourself from the parapet of the temple. Put yourself in hot water. Put yourself in a situation where you can be a super-Christian. A year or two ago, Xchange had a trip to go and hear a radical Christian speaker – Sean Clayborne. And there he was talking about radical discipleship. And he was a great speaker actually, and a humble guy. A great hero of the homeless, being arrested for taking the side of homeless people in his home town. Going off to Iraq as a peace demonstrator and so on. The kind of selfless activity that many regard as a great example of Good Christian living. And I think, for this chap, entirely natural. But the reason he's become a Christian superstar, is that he goes into these situations where he ends up in hot water.

And hey presto – we make a great virtue of it. And people like me are left asking whether you have to be single to be a radical Christian. And whether Christianity is, once again, being taken out of the hands of the majority and placed into the hands of carefree individuals who happen to be privileged enough to globe trot around the trouble spots of the world doing exciting adventures for Christ, like the knights of old, with a shield on his arm and a lance in his hand, for God and for valour he rode through the land.

Let's be clear – that is definitely not who Sean Clayborne is – but I suspect it is why he's become a hero. And I suspect this is why that kind of hot-water temptation is something against which Jesus reacted, saying that we must not put the Lord our God to the test.

I suspect Christians with children and families and responsibilities to which they are rightly, and properly committed – are equally radical in the mundane activities. And there is something utterly unradical, shallow, in thinking that the best form of Christian service is in some kind of Christianised super-challenge. We live in an age where normal people have to try and prove themselves by doing big adventures of self-discovery – sailing adventures, climbing mountains, epic journeys – some kind of achievement because they cannot cope with the normality of real life. And there are idolatrous, Christianised forms of this – that lead us to regard people like Shane Claybourne as more radical than some single parent in a council house in Bradford who is unsung, but no less radical in her discipleship.

And if we find ourselves in trouble, it should be in the way of the frog! I'm not sure if it's true – but I am told that if you put a frog in water, and boil the water, the frog doesn't notice. Unlike being dropped in as a tea bag – whether we are who we are, called to be who we are – and that is the place where our Christian discipleship is worked out. Frogs, not tea bags.

And isn't that, in the end, what the psalm is really about? That we are where we are, acknowledging God's name through the little stuff that we don't necessarily get high profile Christian labels on very easily. But here we are, with ten thousand falling at our side, walking amidst lions and snakes, finding ourselves in trouble. Not putting ourselves in trouble, and putting God to the test, but occasionally finding ourselves in trouble – and finding that God is right there with us, getting in trouble with us.

And isn't it precisely then, that we begin to discover something of the salvation that the psalmist is talking about? Isn't it precisely then, when we are already in the thick of doing whatever it is we are doing, that we find ourselves able to cope with what is there.

Not that the powers of evil are in any way diminished. Not that the suffering we face is in any way lessened. Not that the agony is not present. But, that somehow, it is precisely when we are where we are, being who we are – that we encounter God's protection almost in the air we breathe? Isn't it when we accidentally find ourselves in situation

Isn't it here that death loses its sting?