

Psalms 91:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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

Analysis

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. This opening verse establishes a condition and promise: continual dwelling with God results in continual protection by God. The verse uses four different names/descriptions for God, each revealing aspects of His character.

"Dwelleth" (יָשֵׁב/yoshev) means to sit, remain, dwell continually—not occasional visits but permanent residence. The participle form indicates ongoing, habitual action: "the one who is continually dwelling." This isn't about physical location but spiritual posture—living consciously in God's presence.

"The secret place" (בֵּסֶתֶר/beseter) means hiding place, shelter, secret chamber. This evokes the Holy of Holies, God's innermost sanctuary, or intimate private communion. It suggests both protection (hidden from danger) and privilege (intimate access to God's presence). Psalm 27:5 promises: "In the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion: in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me."

"The most High" (עֶלְיוֹן/Elyon) emphasizes God's sovereignty and supremacy above all powers—spiritual and earthly. Genesis 14:18-20 introduces this name through Melchizedek blessing Abraham by "God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth." No power—demonic, human, or natural—exceeds the Most High.

"Shall abide" (יָתְלוֹן/yitlonan) means to lodge, pass the night, remain. The imperfect tense indicates future certainty: "will remain." This is promised consequence of

dwelling with God—not might abide but shall abide. Divine protection is certain for those who dwell with Him.

"Under the shadow" (לַצֶּל/betzel) evokes protection from harsh Middle Eastern sun—shade providing relief, refreshment, safety. Shadow implies closeness; to be in someone's shadow means proximity, shelter under their covering. Ruth 2:12 speaks of taking refuge "under whose wings thou art come to trust."

"The Almighty" (יְהוָה/Shaddai) means all-sufficient, all-powerful. Used 48 times in the Old Testament, often in contexts of covenant blessing and divine sufficiency. God revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai (Exodus 6:3)—the God who is enough.

Historical Context

Psalm 91's authorship is uncertain, though tradition sometimes attributes it to Moses. The psalm reflects desert wilderness experiences—dangers from beasts, pestilence, sun and moon, arrows and terror—suggesting either Sinai wanderings or later wilderness circumstances.

The psalm's structure moves from third person (v.1-2) to second person (v.3-13) to first person divine speech (v.14-16). This progression suggests it may have been used liturgically, perhaps with a priest or prophet speaking God's promises to a worshiper.

Rabbinic tradition called this "the Song of Evil Occurrences," recited for protection from demons and disasters. Medieval Jews considered it protective prayer against plague. Some traditions prescribed reciting it 91 times for deliverance from danger.

Satan quoted verses 11-12 when tempting Jesus to jump from the temple (Matthew 4:6; Luke 4:10-11). Significantly, Satan omitted "in all thy ways"—God's protection extends to those walking in His ways, not those presuming on His grace by deliberate foolishness. Jesus's response ("Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God") reveals the distinction between faith and presumption.

Church history records countless testimonies of this psalm's comfort during plague, war, persecution. During the Black Death, Christians recited it. During World Wars, soldiers memorized it. During Communist persecution, believers clung to its promises.

Modern misapplication treats it as magical protection—guaranteeing no harm will ever come. But biblical saints who trusted these promises still faced martyrdom, persecution, hardship. The psalm promises God's presence and ultimate victory, not exemption from all suffering. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4) assumes difficulty, promising divine presence within it, not elimination of it.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to 'dwell' (continually abide) in the secret place of God versus merely visiting through occasional prayer?
2. How do the four names for God in this verse (Most High, Almighty, secret place, shadow) reveal different aspects of His protection?
3. How did Satan's misuse of Psalm 91:11-12 in tempting Jesus reveal the difference between faith and presumption?
4. What does it mean to 'abide under the shadow of the Almighty,' and how is this different from being distant from God while expecting His protection?
5. How should we understand God's protection promises in this psalm when faithful believers throughout history have faced persecution, martyrdom, and suffering?

Interlinear Text

יֹשֵׁב	בֵּית תָּר	עָלֵי וֶן	בְּצֵל
He that dwelleth	in the secret	place of the most High	under the shadow
H3427	H5643	H5945	H6738
שֵׁי יְיָ	יִתְּלוֹן:		
of the Almighty	shall abide		
H7706	H3885		

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 32:7 (Parallel theme): Thou art my hiding place; thou shalt preserve me from trouble; thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance. Selah.

Psalms 27:5 (Parallel theme): For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion: in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me; he shall set me up upon a rock.

Psalms 36:7 (Parallel theme): How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings.

Psalms 17:8 (Parallel theme): Keep me as the apple of the eye, hide me under the shadow of thy wings,

Psalms 31:20 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt hide them in the secret of thy presence from the pride of man: thou shalt keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of tongues.

Isaiah 25:4 (Parallel theme): For thou hast been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall.

Psalms 121:5 (Parallel theme): The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand.

Isaiah 32:2 (Parallel theme): And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

Psalms 90:1 (Parallel theme): Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.

Psalms 57:1 (Parallel theme): Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast.

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