

Psalm 91
SMAS 10.30am
(21-10-2012)

A new planet was discovered this week: Alpha Centauri B. 25 trillion miles away but can be seen in the night sky without a telescope. So far away though that a trip there using current technology would take tens of thousands of years.

Doesn't life amaze you? Aren't there things that make you wonder 'how can that be'? I'll tell you some thing I often wonder about. Not as scientifically challenging as how we might get to Alpha Centauri B, but why does man feel compelled to skim stones out across the sea or lake? Apparently it's a natural urge/instinct but no one knows why.

There's another instinct we are all born with that some people say is a mystery too. We're all born with a fear of the dark. You may not realize this because you've grown out of it but nevertheless it's there. I wonder if you've ever thought about that? You might not because you want to dismiss it as silly, or rubbish even. But I think it's a good thing to think about and, perhaps, even more so for the Christian.

Why do I say that? Well for many reasons, but I expect first and foremost that most people would see a link between a fear of the dark standing in opposition to Christ being the light of the world. And it's most certainly not for nothing that the Bible talks a lot about the light of Christ shining in the darkness of the world and about the darkness not overcoming it.

Today I'm saying it because I want to talk about Psalm 91, the psalm that clergy use when they get called out to the sort of 'unexplained happenings' that frighten people. Sometimes these 'unexplained happenings' are very explainable: anything from noisy water pipes to sleeplessness arising from an over-wrought, nervous disposition.

Sometimes 'unexplained happenings' are genuine. I wonder how many of you would dismiss this as nonsense? Rather a lot I suspect because many people, and by this I mean grown-ups, don't want to acknowledge the 'unseen' aspect of life.

I can understand this attitude in an unbeliever but find it incomprehensible that a Christian doesn't believe in an unseen evil presence and the accompanying works of the devil.

Much of the time our faith is unseen, centering on a relationship between us and Christ that takes place within the depths of our being. Yes of course it has outworkings that are seen, but the full extent is only seen by God.

Psalm 91 talks about the seen and the unseen too. It talks about the dangers of life: hidden traps, deadly plagues, terrors at night and arrows by day, stumbling over rocks, and facing lions and snakes! Often contemporary life seems every bit as dangerous as the one described here. But what this psalm is mostly talking about is spiritual evil and if you still have doubts about that then you need to realize that Satan himself quoted verses 11–12 when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness.

There's a story about someone sensing the presence of evil. During the Civil War a Confederate soldier was placed as a sentry far out at the edge of the woods. The moon was shining dimly in the woods and suddenly a strange fear came over him. He felt a compelling urge to sing softly the old song, "Jesus, Lover of my soul, let me to Thy bosom fly," which also includes, "Other refuge have I none." Immediately he felt relieved of fear. After the war a few years on, he was at a church meeting and sang the same song. After the service a stranger approached him and said, "I've never met you, but I've heard your voice before, did you ever sing that song when you were a sentry during the war?" The stranger told him that he and his men, Union soldiers, had been hidden among the trees with their guns aimed at him ready to fire. "But as we heard that song, 'Jesus, Lover of my soul,' and 'Other refuge have I none,' I said to my men, 'Don't shoot,' & we slipped away. But I have never forgotten the voice I heard that night."

The "secret" place of God is invisible to people because it is spiritual. However, the Godly person can find that place, and his soul becomes protected.

Verse 3 could be taken to refer to physical enemies and disease. It's true that God can protect from these things, but this promise is protection from spiritual problems: the devil and sin. V5 explains that we don't need to be anxious in anything, whether it's spiritual or physical - our eternal hope is in God.

Verse 11 God will command His angels to help us. How they perform this is a mystery because they rarely make their presence known. Verse 12 the verse Satan used to Jesus. Jesus knew this verse speaks of spiritual protection, rather than protection from every physical external or self-inflicted harm and He didn't fall for the trap. When we live "the hidden life," we are not alone for God is with us and compensates for our inadequacies. We need not be afraid because the Lord and His angels watch over us.

We all want a place to go when we're sad, tired or lonely. Somewhere to unload our burdens and get comfort and relief. When we feel insecure and inadequate we need a refuge - a shelter. The safest place in the world is in the shadow of the Almighty.

God is very close to His children. Jesus likened Him to a mother hen keeping close contact with her chicks as she protects them. The psalmist uses two images for God. Firstly of a large bird sheltering its young with his wings; a majestic eagle protecting his young high on a mountain ledge. He is the "most high" of all living creatures. The person being protected by God is pictured as a small bird in the nest. No predator comes near the nest because the father eagle is standing in the nest next to his young so that his shadow falls over them. This is a picture of extreme tenderness on the part of God. The young are lovingly cared for and protected.

The second image is of a military fortress: "I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'" "His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart." We have both the tenderness and strength of God. Tenderness without strength wouldn't give the kind of protection needed. But strength without tenderness wouldn't be the kind of protection you'd want. God's strength provides our protection. Its motive originates in the heart of God though and reminds us that we are cared for deeply.

As we study the character and qualities of God we quickly realize that God is in control. His power is supreme. He can help - and He will help. God is omnipotent. We should pray to God at all times. He will deliver us from physical harm, but ultimately, He will deliver us from all spiritual harm.

Seen or unseen evils, this psalm is, in all events, a great psalm of protection from the God who made us and loves us. Being sheltered and cared for by our heavenly Father who protects us like any loving parent does is wonderful don't you think? No, I lie, it is more than wonderful - it is

AMAZING.

As amazing as the gospel passage we had this morning which speaks of the God who created the universe, including us and Alpha Centauri actually wanting to love and serve us. I am, as they say, gob-smacked by it.

St Paul says that anyone can see that the world didn't come into being by itself. Whoever, or whatever brought this world into existence, must have tremendous power and an eternal nature. Knowing this, and knowing He wants to love and protect us, means surely that we should worship Him?

Did you know that mosquito repellants don't actually "repel" mosquitoes? They hide you by blocking the mosquito's sensors so they don't know where you are. God can become our trouble repellant, He doesn't always dispel troubles from our lives but He can hide us from them!

Jesus reinforced this insight when he said, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."

We like the idea of the "ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" part of Christ's promise. But we often forget the condition attached: if we're going to ask God to answer our prayers, we must "remain" in Christ and His words must "remain" in us.

I think I can live with the question about why men skim stones across vast expanses of water knowing that I am safe and loved in the protection of the Most High. The Most High who came not to be served but to serve. He hides us so that He can help us and then send us back to serve Him in all the struggles of this earthly life.