

SONS OF ADAM

Studies of Old Testament Characters in New Testament Light

by

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CHAPTER SEVEN

David's Amulet Against Fear

Psalm 91

ON JANUARY 6, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed Congress saying: "Our objectives are clear, namely, establishing and securing freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear everywhere in the world." Of these four freedoms, the last-named is most difficult to attain because most universal in its absence.

"Fear is the ruling motive of the human race and always has been," said Robert E. Speer. If you doubt the truth of this startling statement, study anthropology or the Bible Concordance. Men everywhere fear the powers of nature, the mysteries of the supernatural, their own consciences, their fellow men and, most of all, death and what lies beyond. Study the words "**fear God**" and "**fear not**" as they occur in the Scriptures and you have an index to GOD's attitude toward the first-fruit of sin - FEAR.

Read the seven hundred and ninety-six references to being afraid and fearing in the Concordance and you will agree that, at least in Scripture, fear is the ruling motive of man. "**The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom**" because it is the only remedy for all our fears. And "**perfect love casts out fear**" because JESUS CHRIST's favorite greeting was "**Fear not.**"

The ninety-first psalm was used from ancient times by Israel as an amulet against disease and pestilence, fire and flood, disaster or sudden death. During the London Plague of 1665 it was greatly used as a talisman; but aside from such superstition we have a most interesting story from the diary of Daniel Defoe.

He was at that time a saddler in Oldsgate and was strongly advised by his brother to join the masses who fled from London, the doomed city.

"In the retirement of the evening," says the saddler, "I endeavored to resolve first, what it was my duty to do; and I stated the arguments with which my brother had pressed me to go into the country, and I set against them the strong impressions which I had on my mind for staying; the visible call I seemed to have from the particular circumstances of my calling, and the care due from me for the preservation of my effects, which were, as I might say, my estate; also the intimations which I thought I had from Heaven. Add to this, that turning over the Bible which lay before me, and while my thoughts were more than ordinarily serious upon the question, I cried out, 'Well, I know not what to do'; 'Lord, direct me!' and the like; and at that juncture I happened to stop turning over the book, at the ninety-first Psalm, and casting my eye on the second verse, I read on to the seventh verse inclusive, and after that included the tenth.

"I need scarce tell the reader, that from that moment I resolved that I would stay in the town; and casting myself entirely upon the goodness and protection of the Almighty, would not seek any other shelter whatever; and that as my times were in His hands, He was as able to keep me in a Time of Infection as in a Time of Health; and if He did not think fit to deliver me, still I was in His hands, and it was meet He should do with me as should seem good to Him." [1]

This wonderful Psalm has been again and again the comfort of GOD's people, their confidence in fear and in the hour of danger or death.

It was one of the favorites of the Reformers and the Huguenots during the days when Protestantism struggled for its life. They turned it into their stately musical psalmody and sang it like French patriots do the Marseillaise. Even artists were bold enough to turn its imagery into carving.

I remember how in 1925 it was my privilege to preach in the Dutch Reformed Church at Capetown. The richly carved rostrum and pulpit in the old church has for its base a lion, an adder, and a dragon artistically entwined; and he who ascends the winding stairs literally treads upon the typical enemies of GOD's Truth (Psalm 91:13).

Such a pulpit is not a coward's throne but a royal seat of authority for the staunch Calvinists who believe in GOD's sovereignty and remember their glorious history of martyrs for the truth.

The keynote of the Psalm is courage. "**Thou shalt not be afraid**" occurs again and again.

Dr. Campbell Morgan has pointed out that the perplexing use of pronouns has its solution when we think of the three speakers: GOD, the believer and his fellow-pilgrim.

"There is a change in the use of pronouns from first to second person twice over, and from third to first at the beginning, and from second to third at the close; which, although it has created some sense of difficulty, is yet a key to the psalm for purposes of analysis. Let us set out the scheme of the psalm round these changes, leaving its familiar words to speak for themselves.

The statement of truth (v. 1).

Personal affirmation of realization (v. 2).

The address of the singer, either to his own soul, or to some other person, or to the nation, in which he affirms the convictions resulting from personal realization of the truth (vv. 3-8).

Repetition of personal realization (v. 9a).

Same as verses 3-8 (VV. 9b-13).

Conclusion of psalm, in which the singer with holy boldness expresses as in the words of the Lord, the safety of the trusting soul, and thus gives the testimony of GOD as well as that of man to the truth." [2]

In the Pilgrims' progress from the City of Destruction to the Golden Gate, they are beset by fears within and without: not only Mr. Fearful but Hopeful, not only Ready-to-halt but Christian himself.

- Peter was afraid and began to sink (Matthew 14: 30).
- Paul testified "**without were fightings, within were fears**" (II Corinthians 7:5).
- We read that Adam was afraid when he heard GOD's voice in the garden;
- Sarah was afraid when she told a lie;
- Moses was afraid and hid his face;
- Saul was afraid of David and David of Saul;
- Gideon was afraid.
- GOD's first word to Hagar, Moses, David, Isaiah and Daniel was "**fear not.**"

Angels used the same words to Joseph and Mary; and to Paul in danger of ship-wreck; and to John on lonely Patmos came the same word "**Fear not, I am he that liveth and was dead and am alive for evermore.**"

The Talismanic psalm, as a Jewish rabbi remarks, goes round the clock. It speaks of terror by night, of the arrow that flieth by day, of the pestilence that walketh in twilight, and the destruction that wasteth at high-noon.

Who has not felt the terror of darkness? Because they enter the world "trailing clouds of glory," little children are afraid of the dark. And saintly mystics speak of the dark night of the soul.

In Dr. Edwin Bevan's Gifford *Lectures on Symbolism and Faith*, he emphasizes the fact that in all religions, light is a symbol of GOD and darkness of evil.

The psalmist tells us that if we dwell in the secret place of the Most High we shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

Darkness and light are both alike to Him who dwelleth in light inaccessible and full of glory. So the four demons that love darkness and dwell in darkness, flee at His presence. They are discouragement, despair, remorse and loneliness. These demons evade you, elude you, attack you, strangle you, spring at you or crouch near you so you can hear their whisperings without recognizing their hideous forms.

"Christian, dost thou see them on the holy ground
How the powers of darkness rage thy steps around?"

So sang Andrew of Crete (660-732) and we echo the song in the twentieth century in our hymnal. There are faithless Elijahs who have fled from some Jezebel and sit in despair under a juniper-tree. **"It is enough, now Lord, take away my life for I am not better than my fathers."**

Many would-be suicides might have escaped had they taken refuge under the shadow of the Almighty! Others come to despair by fear of themselves or their task: **"I was afraid and hid thy talent in a napkin."**

Fear is the foe of endeavor. It was remorse that pursued Judas when he threw the thirty pieces of silver back to those who hired him, crying, **"I have betrayed innocent blood."**

Or do you desire to witness the terror and the night of loneliness?

- Watch Abraham when **"the horror of a great darkness fell upon him,"** standing guard near the carcasses of his sacrifice (Genesis 15:11-13);
- Watch Job when he was bade to curse GOD and die, or when he said, **"O that I knew where I might find him";** or
- Watch John the Baptist in prison where his faith in the Messiah, whom he saw at the Jordan, nearly failed.

In the *Pilgrim's Progress* the two who had victory over Giant Despair in Doubting Castle, met the **"terror by night"** in the Valley of the shadow of death. But they took refuge under the shadow of the Almighty and dwelt in the secret place of the Most High.

Some faint-hearted Christians are so pessimistic that they blow out their candles to see how dark it is; others are optimists and trust that He who lit their candle will not quench the smoking flax-wick but re-kindle its flame.

A man of unbreakable courage was George Hunter, missionary of Turkestan. For sixty years he preached among Moslems with only one furlough. And then in his old age the Soviet authorities arrested this man as a British spy, subjecting him ruthlessly to a prolonged and hideous torture, devilish in its ingenious subtlety. Sleep was denied him; a flaring electric light burned down upon him constantly; and, if he lifted a blanket between it and his eyes, a warder immediately pulled that down again; he was, night after night, interrogated till his tired mind could hardly think; he was doped to break down his will power. But the folk who hail, as Hunter did, from Scotland are a tough and indomitable breed. And he held out till release came through a turn in the political wheel. But it told even on him. "Do what you can," he wrote, "to make the Church at home understand that this has nothing to do with the severities of normal imprisonment, but is based on profound understanding of demoniacal psychology. Long after you are released you still hear their voices taunting you, and, for longer still, you feel that they are after you, seeking to hurt and destroy you." [3]

But his refuge was the secret place of the Most High. And now, released from earth's darkness, he dwells in the place of light.

And more deadly even than the terror by night there is "**the arrow that flieth by day.**"

David often uses that word arrows, (e.g. Psalm 64:3), of the attacks on him by foes and traitors. Job and Isaiah also use the word of the hatred of men, of slander and back-biting - the arrows of Satan. They come unseen from some evil hiding place; they come from behind.

- David had the arrows of Absalom, Saul, Ahitophel, and Shimei who cursed him as he crossed the brook Kedron.
- CHRIST had the arrows of the Scribes and Pharisees.
- Paul, those in the Corinthian and Galatian churches as well as those of "**false brethren.**"

It was JESUS who said, "**Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my name's sake.**"

Men shoot arrows with their lips carelessly. To label fellow Christians is often to libel them. Our safest refuge is the Secret Place.

And then there is the "**pestilence that walketh in darkness.**"

Thou shalt not be afraid of it in the streets of our great cities or in the loneliness of the world's Vanity Fair where sensuality, greed and evil passions, self-indulgence and frivolity scatter their deadly microbes unseen. "**The fleshly lusts,**" as Paul said, "**which war against the soul,**" spare no man.

- Joseph walked on the edge of the precipice but held fast to the GOD of his fathers.
- David fell over and wrote his repentance in tears of blood.
- Solomon, in his older years, seems to have lived for a time in the canyon but took pains to write warning for others.

In our present age when Vanity Fair shouts to pilgrims to live as the world lives and sex-appeal spreads its net in advertisement and on the news-stands, who can escape? Only those who abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

I recall days during the first World War when a soldier in Cairo told of his temptations and quoted the lines:

"Fighting alone tonight
With never a stander-by
To cheer me in the fight.
Or hear me when I cry.
Only the Lord can hear,
Only the Lord can know
The struggle within how dark and drear,
Though quiet the outside be."

"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God," in the hour of temptation on Piccadilly or Broadway.

David's Talismanic Psalm also guards against the insidious **"destruction that wasteth at noon-day."**

The guardian Hand goes all around the clock. From mid-night to the morning, the noon-day and the evening shadows - we can abide under the shadow of the Almighty. Here is a Psalm to write on life's sundial. It is always appropriate and always fits our need. The noon-day on the clock and the noon-day of life are not free from dangers. The high-noon of success may be the hour when Pride comes, followed by Destruction. And the siesta at noonday may end as it did for David in sore temptation and fall. Insidious is the arch-enemy of our souls.

CHRIST's threefold temptation to self-indulgence, to presumption and to pride came after His baptism by the Holy Spirit and the voice from the Father proclaimed Him beloved. It was from this very Psalm that the Tempter drew his sharp shaft of doubt. **"Cast thyself down . . . He shall give his angels charge concerning thee . . ."** But he omitted part of the Psalm text, **"to keep thee in all thy ways"** (Matthew 4:5,6).

Paul the apostle wrote, **"Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me"** (II Corinthians 12:7).

In the previous chapter (II Corinthians 11: 33) we read that he was let down over the wall of Damascus in a basket! In this chapter we are told he was caught up to the third heaven and in Paradise heard unspeakable words. So he had his ups and downs like all lesser disciples. But GOD's strength was made perfect in his weakness and he could glory in his infirmities, for the power of CHRIST rested on him. He poured contempt on all his pride at the Cross; there is no race pride, or pride of position, or self-righteousness, or pride of human wisdom at Calvary.

That was a great call to repentance for all Christians given by D. R. Davies in his exposition of the General Confession, *"Down Peacock-Feathers."* This is a book for every man and every minister. **"He that dwells near the shadow of the Cross shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."**

How beautiful is the interpretation of this amulet Psalm by Ellen Lakshmi Goreh, daughter of an Indian bishop:

"In the secret of His presence how my soul delights to hide!
Oh, how precious are the lessons which I learn at Jesus' side!
Earthly cares can never vex me, neither trials lay me low;
For when Satan comes to tempt me, to the secret place I go.

"When my soul is faint and thirsty, 'neath the shadow of His wing
There is cool and pleasant shelter, and a fresh and crystal spring;
And my Saviour rests beside me, as we hold communion sweet;

If I tried, I could not utter what He says when thus we meet.
"Only this I know: I tell Him all my doubts and griefs and fears;-
Oh, how patiently He listens! and my drooping soul He cheers:
Do you think He ne'er reproves me? What a false friend He would be,
If He never, never told me of the sins which He must see!

"Would you like to know the sweetness of the secret of the Lord?
Go and hide beneath His shadow; this shall then be your reward;
And whene'er you leave the silence of that happy meeting-place,
You must mind and bear the image of the Master in your face."

1 Defoe's Journal, 1665.

2 G. Campbell Morgan, *Notes on the Psalms*, p. 174. Fleming H. Revell Co., New York.

3 *George Hunter, Apostle of Turkestan*, by Mildred Cable and Francesca Frence (China Inland Mission).

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