

## **SPIRITUAL TOOLKIT: PSALM 91**

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Jan Michael Joncas is a Catholic priest who teaches liturgy and composes music. In 1976, he was visiting a friend from seminary. They went out to dinner together, and when they returned home they received the news that while they were eating dinner, that classmate's father had died. Joncas wanted to console his friend. He felt moved to create something that would be both prayerful and comforting. In a few days' time, between the death and the funeral, he composed a song based upon three passages of scripture, including Psalm 91. The song came to be known as "Eagles' Wings."

It has become one of the most popular religious songs in our culture, played especially at funerals. Eagles' Wings was requested at the memorial service for the victims of the bombings in Oklahoma City. It was sung at Luciano Pavarotti's funeral, and at the funeral of President Biden's son Beau.

The popularity of the song has surprised Joncas. In his opinion, he's written other pieces that are both deeper and better, but he is grateful that this song has moved people.

We can't really ever fully explain why something touches our hearts, can we? And we don't want to. There's a mystery there that has its own power. It's something about the combination of the words and the music - especially the chorus, words which come from Isaiah: "And He will raise you up on eagles' wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of His hand."

In those lyrics we hear one of our basic desires described...we want to be safe in God's hands. We want to trust in God's presence. We long to live in trust.

Psalm 91 opens with these words, "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'my refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.'"

Our hearts are drawn to those images of God - God is our shelter, our refuge, our fortress. When we're afraid, God protects us and keeps us safe. These images lead us towards trust.

Psalm 91 is known as a Psalm of Protection, and throughout the centuries has been recited by people who are traveling. Psalm 91 indicates that God protects us on our journeys, including the journey from this life into the next.

During the time of the exile, when the Jewish people felt profoundly vulnerable and unprotected, this psalm gave them a sense of reassurance, a reminder that - no matter where they were at the moment - ultimately they have a home in God, a home with God.

In a traditional Jewish burial ceremony, this psalm is recited seven times. The pallbearers stop seven times on their way to the gravesite, and repeat this psalm each time.

One ancient Jewish tradition calls this psalm a psalm for a time of plague.

Some of you who are veterans might know that Psalm 91 is known as the soldier's psalm. Some soldiers are given this psalm on a laminated card when they leave for an overseas assignment. Especially during World War I, many soldiers learned this psalm by heart and recited it every day.

Every soldier knows that the battlefield is a risky place, and that everyone's life is in danger, no matter how well-prepared they may be. But imagine the difference between an attitude of fear and an attitude of trusting confidence. If you are too focused on all of the reasons you have to be afraid, you'll be unable to do your job. But if you enter each situation knowing that you have been well-trained, that you trust your leaders and your peers, and that your ultimate trust is in God, you'll have the confidence to do what's necessary.

This summer, our Social Justice Team sponsored a viewing of the film, "Harriet," about the life of Harriet Tubman. Barely five feet tall, a former slave, a woman living with a traumatic brain injury, Harriet would have had every reason in the world to remain in the north and try to enjoy what was left of her life. But that's not the life God called her to. She made 19 trips back into the south, rescuing 300 slaves. Bounty hunters were looking for her the entire time, making each trip more dangerous. One of her biographers writes that she was confident in God's providential guidance and protection; her faith helped make Tubman fearless. She wasn't foolhardy, she wasn't unaware of danger, but she didn't let her fears rule her life. She lived in trust. She chose to live in an attitude of trust, and because of that, she lived an extraordinary life, inspiring others still today.

In every one of our relationships, we assess the trustworthiness of the person. We may not even be aware that we're doing it, but subconsciously we judge - am I still safe with this person? Can I tell this person something confidential? How much of myself can I share?

If you have ever had your trust in someone shattered - and most of us have — then you know what that feels like. You know the difference between feeling secure with someone and feeling guarded with someone.

Sometimes it takes a long time to work up your courage to trust again after you've been hurt.

I once worked with a young man who had a very difficult relationship with his birth father. His birth parents never married, and he never knew his birth father very well. When he was a child, he looked forward to scheduled visits with his father, and about every third visit his dad would cancel or just not show up. It broke this young man's heart and he carried that wound with him into adulthood.

Sometimes people choose to learn to trust again, even knowing they'll probably be hurt again. As one woman said to me, "I'd rather be the kind of person who experiences deep relationships of love and hurt than someone who doesn't experience deep relationships at all."

In God, we have a trustworthy companion.

One of the benefits of growing older is that I can look back and recognize the times when God has helped me through times of crisis and hard decisions. When we're right in the midst of a challenging moment, we may not always be aware of God's presence, but in retrospect it's crystal clear. Gradually we come to realize, "This is a God I can count on." Each time of change or confusion is a little easier to bear because we remember that we're not alone.

The priest and writer Richard Rohr puts it this way: "The life of faith is learning how to rest in an Ultimate Love and how to draw upon an Infinite Source. On a very

practical level, you will then be able to trust that you are being *held and guided*. In fact, you can trust after a while that almost everything is a kind of guidance.”

God’s trustworthiness becomes more personal with the story of Jesus. When God chooses to enter the world as a human being, we know even more powerfully that God knows what our lives are like. In times of trouble, joy, sickness, health, vibrance, sadness, loneliness, and death, we have a divine friend who walks with us, cries with us, loves us with a continuing, deep, and abiding love.

Psalm 91 is not the only tool we need in our toolkit. It doesn’t begin to explain why bad things happen to good people, why some people have their trust betrayed again and again. Psalm 91 keeps us under God’s pinions, the wings of the eagle, and we need other passages of scripture which remind us that we also are called to leave the shelter and enter actively into the world, to be God’s partner in the work of repairing what is broken.

But for those times when we need to feel secure, Psalm 91 is one to keep handy.

In the best of childhood homes, a child grows up feeling safe. A child goes to bed at night without worrying about whether the utility bill has been paid, whether harm will come before morning. There is only the comfort of your home, your room, your bed, and the assurance of breakfast the next morning.

We all need to feel that sense of childhood security from time to time. Adults need to be sheltered, too. Some of us have known failure and loss. Some of us are deeply disappointed that life hasn’t turned out as we hoped. Some of us have been staggered by a report that has just come back from a lab. Some of us are anxious about more things than we can name and not one in particular.

To all of us, the psalmist speaks a word of comfort. It's one of the great themes of the scriptures: God is our shelter, in whom we trust. The image here is of an eagle, a bird that senses danger and protectively spreads its wings over its young. An expert on birds says that this move is very common. A bird senses the approach of a predator, or the threat of something falling from above, and instinctively spreads out its wings like a canopy. Then the fledglings scuttle underneath for shelter. The move is so instinctive that an adult bird will spread those wings even when no fledglings are around!

That is an image of a God who can be trusted.

Let us pray. Holy one, our hearts are full of gratitude for the refuge, the shelter, the protection you give us. Lead us towards trust so we can live as your people.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

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resources used:

Feasting on the Word

"The Wings of God," a sermon by Dr. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.