

GOD DELIVERS

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Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Hebrews 5:1-10

“Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.”

– Psalm 91:14

It was not so many years ago, out on the highways of our fair state, that you might come across a sight such as you see pictured on this morning’s bulletin cover. Tractor-trailers emblazoned with the letters G-O-D used to be a common sight around here.

The letters stood for Guaranteed Overnight Delivery: the name of a trucking company. They got a lot of mileage — pun intended — out of their playfully blasphemous acronym.

I understand they had a terminal in the city of Kearney that had a huge sign on the side of the building: “Welcome to the home of G.O.D.”

Bet you didn’t know God lived in Kearney. (Maybe it was the Scottish fish and chips.)

For years, those tractor-trailer trucks caused drivers throughout the Northeast, and even beyond, to do double-takes.

“Does God deliver?” some motorists asked themselves, as one of the G.O.D. trucks roared past.

Put that question to the writer of Psalm 91, and the answer you get back is: “Well, yes.” But it’s not anything you can load on a shipping pallet. “Those who love me, I will deliver,” says the Lord.

That which God delivers is us. It’s a psalm about deliverance from suffering.

Psalm 91 contains some of the most beloved words of assurance in all of scripture:

**“For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”** (v. 12)

Sounds pretty unambiguous, doesn't it? Believe in God, and God will keep you safe. *Quid pro quo*. Such a promise sounds mighty appealing.

It's especially appealing because it's got angels in it. Angels are a popular concept today (have been, for some time). Psalm 91 seems, at first glance, to be about a certain kind of angel known as “guardian angels.” Some people believe each one of us has a guardian angel who looks out for us, every moment of every day.

There’s a famous painting depicting guardian angels, a very sentimental painting. It’s been reproduced endlessly. In the painting, a couple children are

walking together across a rickety wooden bridge that spans a deep gorge. The bridge is missing a few planks. It looks like the children's feet could break through at any moment.

Just behind the children, there's an angel, several times larger than they. The angel's hovering over them, her hands outstretched protectively. Clearly, nothing's going to happen to those precious little ones, because their guardian angel is looking out for them.

The painting may look good on a nursery wall, and — for children old enough to understand it — it just may help them sleep at night. Yet, the question is: does this vision of angels truly jibe with our experience?

Wouldn't it be great if there were such a thing as guardian angels — if each one of us had our very own celestial being following us around like some spiritual valet, picking up our discarded socks and making sure we don't do anything really stupid?

The problem is, there's nothing in the scriptures to make us think there's such a thing as guardian angels. The closest thing to it is this psalm — but if you read it carefully, you'll find it says nothing about God assigning each one of us a personal spiritual guide. It doesn't speak of individual angels at all; all the angel references here are in the plural.

Besides, if you truly think of what an angel is, as described in scripture, you wouldn't be all that eager to get close to one. Angels are soldiers in God's heavenly army. They're fearsome warriors, equipped with weapons like flaming swords. Remember how, every time an angel visits a person in the Bible, the first thing the angel says is, "Fear not!" That's because, in every case, the poor recipient of the visitation is cowering in fear, and has very possibly lost control of one or more bodily functions. No, you don't really want to meet an angel, up close and personal. Not in a dark alley, nor anywhere else, either.

So, what sort of deliverance is God promising, here? When the psalm says, "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone," does that jibe with our experience? Do people of faith ever dash their feet against a stone, in life?

Clearly, we do. "The rain falls on the just and the unjust," as Jesus himself says, in Matthew 5:45. Christian baptism isn't accompanied by an insurance policy against such difficulties.

It certainly wasn't true for Jesus: and he was God's son! Remember the story of his temptation in the wilderness? In Luke's version, the Devil quotes this very same psalm. He takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple, and has him stand

there, looking down on the tiny people strolling by, far below. Then the Devil taunts him with Psalm 91:

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” (Luke 4:9-11).

They say even the Devil can quote the scriptures, when it serves his purpose.

Jesus’ answer to this third and final temptation is resolute: “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Jesus rejects the tempter’s offer of protection: an offer which amounts to something very close to comic-book superhero powers. Jesus wants none of that. He could have lived his life perfectly safe and protected, but, as we know, he casts all that aside. Our savior chooses, instead, the slow and painful walk of shame, up Calvary’s hill. He suffered far more, that day, than merely dashing his foot against a stone.

Jesus chooses the cross because he knows God delivers. Not that he will be delivered from suffering. God will deliver him *through* suffering, and out the other side: to resurrection! That’s the hope for us: not that hard times will never come, but that when they do come, God will bring us through the experience to a place of new life.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord,” writes the author of another psalm, Psalm 130. It’s a plaintive cry for deliverance: “My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.”

Wendell Berry’s novel, *Jayber Crow*, contains a sort of parable about a hunter who gets himself into a very tight spot. On a perfect fall day, he’s walking through the woods when he steps onto the rotted wood cover of an abandoned well. He plunges into the watery depths below, comes up for air, then grabs hold of the cool, mossy stones that line the side of the well.

Looking up, he sees a tiny circle of light, impossibly far away. There are no discernible handholds on the sides of the well. There’s no point in calling out for help, because no one’s nearby. Berry writes:

“How does this story end? Does he save himself? Is he athletic enough, maybe, to get his boots off and climb out, clawing with fingers and toes into the grudging holds between the rocks of the wall? Does he climb up and fall back? Does somebody, in fact, for a wonder, chance to pass nearby and hear him? Does he despair, give up, and drown? Does he, despairing, pray finally the first true prayer of his life?”

Listen. There is a light that includes our darkness, a day that shines down even on the clouds. A man of faith believes that the Man in the Well is not lost. He does not believe this easily or without pain, but he believes it. His belief is a kind of knowledge

beyond any way of knowing. He believes that the child in the womb is not lost, nor is the man whose work has come to nothing, nor is the old woman forsaken in a nursing home in California. He believes that those who make their bed in Hell are not lost, or those who dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, or the lame man at Bethesda Pool, or Lazarus in the grave, or those who pray, ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani.’

Have mercy.” [Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), 356-357.]

That parable is truer to the meaning of Psalm 91 than the shallow, sentimental picture of a God who never allows anything bad to happen to us.

Is this a psalm about escaping the everyday hurts and pains of life? Or is it, in fact, something deeper and more wonderful: a celebration of the powerful truth that, as long as we are enfolded in the love of God, we can never be truly lost?

None of us have to think very deeply to recall stories of people we’ve known who’ve been inundated by the dark storm surge of undeserved suffering. Some have died before their time, laid low by cancer. Others have breathed their last breath in crumpled wrecks of cars, before the first responders could get to them. Still others have watched their dreams of happiness slip away, amidst business failures or divorces or addiction.

You can’t say of people like these “no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.” No guardian angel showed up in the nick of time, so they would not so much as dash their foot against a stone.

Was this because God had it in for them, somehow: because they'd done something terrible that deserved punishment? Or maybe they just didn't love God enough (the Lord, in today's psalm, does say, "*Those who love me I will deliver*").

The ways of the Almighty are mysterious, but even so, we don't want to go there. Yes, there's some suffering in this world that people bring on themselves, but there's also a type of suffering that has no explanation. It's random — at least as far as we can see. Sadly, it just *is*.

So, is all this talk in Psalm 91 about God's deliverance just a passel of empty words: a pleasant fantasy, to distract the naive and simpleminded?

No, it's not. Sometimes, God intervenes in troubling times, changing our circumstances in unexpected ways. When this happens, we call it a miracle — though we can never count on such a graceful outcome. Other times, God may leave our outward circumstances unchanged, but instead changes our inner life: helping us discover reservoirs of faith we never knew we had. When this happens, it's likewise a kind of miracle: for who would have thought, at the beginning of such a season of suffering, we'd have what it takes to get through it?

As we journey with God through the bleak, uncharted landscape of pain — physical or emotional — we frequently find the only way to do it is one step at a

time. We find that, as we place one foot in front of the other, God guides our steps. Together, our Lord and us, we get through it. Very often, we emerge as stronger people than when we began the woeful journey.

Perhaps the greatest way in which this psalm is true is a larger, spiritual sense. It has to do with the question of where we end up, ultimately: on the other side of death. We, as Christians, believe life does not end with death. It continues, by the grace of God, straight through it, and beyond. God's deliverance and protection are not limited by the number of times our hearts beat, nor our lungs inflate, over the course of a lifetime. The resounding promise of this ancient faith of ours is that, if we trust the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, there is a wonderful and unimaginable life beyond this one: a life hidden with Christ in God.

Let us pray:

**As long as you are with your children, O Lord,
they are with you.
They lose nothing by dying.
They depart out of the world, but not out of your family.
They vanish from our sight, but not out of your care.
They are not dead:
no, for it is death itself that has died in them.
In the fullness of your time, O Lord,
gather all your sons and daughters to yourself:
those who have turned to you for strength,
those who have served you with joy,
even those who have hung their heads and said, at the last,
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” —
for even they have followed the sacrificial way**

**of Jesus, your son:
he whom you have made the resurrection and the life.**

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