

I WILL SHOW HIM MY SALVATION: THE EXPERIENCE OF ANXIETY IN THE MEANING OF PSALM 91

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I was sitting in chapel at Michigan Christian College (now Rochester College) one day about ten years ago when Steve Eckstein was the scheduled speaker. On this day, Steve reminisced about some of the formative experiences in his life. Among them, he talked about what it meant to be an infantry soldier during the Second World War as the allied armies ground their way through France and Germany toward Berlin. What particularly caught my attention about his lesson was his reference to Psalm 91. He said he had an aunt who wrote to him regularly while he was in Europe. In every letter she quoted Ps 91:7, "A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you."¹ Steve seemed to marvel at her faith, and, clearly, he had been deeply comforted by her application of this passage to his battlefield experience.

My reading of Psalm 91 reflects the struggles that I, as a counselor, and my clients encounter in an attempt to claim the promises of these verses. My goal is to help those with whom I am working find the confidence to trust God in the midst of their suffering. Weiser points out that Psalm 91 "is the wholly personal and intimate relationship of trust in God portrayed within the narrow scope of the personal circumstances of an individual."² One of the metaphors suggested in the language of verses 11 and 12 is that of a journey (Gen 24:7, 40; Exod 23:20; cf. Prov 3:23, where the parallel is "you will go on your way in safety"). Cohen notes that the Talmud interprets these verses as teaching that "two ministering angels accompany a man through life to testify about his conduct before the heavenly tribunal after death."³ The Christian counselor often has the sense of accompanying another on a long journey toward spiritual and emotional healing. This image influences how I understand Psalm 91 in the midst of human

¹ References to the Scriptures are taken from the New International Version.

² A. Weiser. *The Psalms* (trans. Herbert Hartwell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 605.

³ A. Cohen. *The Psalms* (New York: Soncino Press, 1977). 303.

difficulty. To begin, I will provide the reader with a brief overview of the meaning of the text, and then I will attempt to place these verses in the context of real life experience.

The psalmist's theme is the intimate enjoyment of the presence of God. The psalm begins: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust'" (Ps 91:1-2). The comfortable use of the divine names emphasizes the protection and intimacy the supplicant feels in the presence of God. God is "the Most High," the God who is above every other deity (Gen 14:17-24). He is *El Shaddai*, the almighty God who is totally self-sufficient. He needs no other assistance in rescuing, sustaining, and establishing his people (Exod 6:1-8). He is also *Yahweh*, the Lord of the covenant (Gen 12). The giving of the covenant is couched in the rich interpersonal experience of wedding language (Exod 19:1-17). In Hosea, the covenant relationship is governed by *hesed*, or covenant love. The essence of covenant love is loyalty and mutual service. The psalmist (91:4) echoes this idea: "his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart." Finally, he is *Elohim*, God. But he is "my God." Under the "shadow of the Almighty" and in the "refuge and fortress of my God," the speaker discovers security and significance that he cannot know away from the presence of God.⁴

One of the linguistic problems in Psalm 91 is the unusual use of the pronouns. Translators and commentators have been tempted to understand the second person singular, "you," as what they term "an ideal second person." Thus it becomes not "you" but "one," or an impersonal, literary description of "someone." But the power of this psalm is in the intimacy of the relationship that allows the traveler to seek "rest in the shadow of the Almighty" and to consider the Lord his personal "refuge" and "fortress." As with the permission to address God by his personal names, so the dialogue is carried along by the use of the intimate interpersonal pronouns "you" and "your," which strengthen the sense of belonging.⁵

This psalm promises that the one who trusts in the Lord shall be protected from four threats and will triumph over four dangerous beasts. The threats

⁴ Weiser. *The Psalms*. 607.612; Anthony Ash and Clyde Miller, "Psalm 91," in *The Living Word Commentary* (ed. John T. Willis; Austin, Tex.: Sweet Publishing, 1980). 318; Franz Delitzsch. *The Psalms* (trans. Francis Bolton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1968). 63; Eric F. Evenhuis. "Marital Reconciliation under the Analogy of Christ and His Church" (D.Min. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974). 18; Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster. 1960). 232-33; and N. Glueck. *Hesed in the Bible* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press. 1967), 57.

⁵ Ronald W. Goetsch, "The Lord Is My Refuge," *Concordia Journal* (July.1983): 140; Ash and Miller, "Psalm 91," 319; H. L. Leupold. *The Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).. 654; Franz Delitzsch, *The Psalms*, 62.

suggested by "snares of the fowler" and the "deadly pestilence" (Ps 91:3) are further developed in verses 5 and 6. These images suggest attacks on the very existence of the one who is entrapped by the "fowler." The "deadly pestilence" is literally translated "from death of destructions" and carries the idea of a violent death (see also Ps 78:50 for the use of *deber*).⁶ The focus is not so much on the weakness of the wayfarer as it is on those who are hostile to his success. Chief among the fowlers is Satan, whose goal is to destroy not only the wicked but also the righteous (Job 1 and 2).⁷ Safety and protection from these dangers are found within the cover of the Lord's wings (Ps 91:4).⁸ This is the image of the eagle, who provides protection for her young and supports them as they develop their own abilities to scale heaven's heights (Deut 32:11).

God's faithful promise provides a bulwark against "the terror of the night" as well as the "arrow that flies by day" (Ps 91:4-6). The terms for "shield" and "rampart" refer to armor that would cover the entire body. The images of battle suggest all assaults by the enemy, both unprovoked attacks and direct confrontations. "You will not fear" (Ps 91:5) expresses the confidence of those who face life's natural dangers as well as threats that arise from conflict with others. The trust in the Lord overcomes fear even in relationship to all kinds of epidemics. The psalmist addresses the common beliefs that certain dangers were more prevalent in the daytime and others were to be feared at night. The presence of the Lord makes possible peace and rest for those who fear both the dangers of the day and the terrors of the night.⁹

Dangers of the journey are both hidden and obvious (Ps 91:13). The Hebrew for lion (*shachal*, 13) can be figurative for enemies of all kinds. Thus all violent and abusive threats may be included. Some are hidden, and others are openly threatening to the traveler. Both the cobra and the serpent represent the venomous dangers on which one may accidentally tread. As vipers, these creatures do not shrink from the one passing by but aggressively attack.¹⁰

In the midst of the dangers that the psalmist has enumerated, the believer is assured of protection. Though thousands and even ten thousands are falling to the right and to the left, the judgement of the Lord will become apparent to the one whose eyes are fixed on him (Ps 91:7-8). Commentators suggest that the

⁶ Cohen. *The Psalms*, 301.

⁷ Goetsch. "The Lord Is My Refuge." 142: Ash and Miller. "Psalm 91," 318: Delitzsch. *The Psalms*, 63: Joseph Exell, "The Psalms," in *The Biblical Illustrator* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956). 84-85: H. L. Leupold. *The Exposition of the Psalms*. 652: L. H. Spurgeon. *The Treasury of David* (Nashville, Tenn.: Nelson, n.d.). 2:90.

⁸ Ash and Miller. "Psalm 91." 318.

⁹ Cohen. *The Psalms*. 302. 12: Weiser. *The Psalms*. 608-9: A. F. Kirkpatrick. *Psalms* (Cambridge: University Press, 1906). 556.

¹⁰ Goetsch. "The Lord Is My Refuge." 144: Eugene H. Peterson, *Psalms* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NayPress, 1994). 130: Franz Delitzsch. *The Psalms*. 64-65.

poet has in mind the devastating retribution that was poured out upon the first-born of Egypt when the death angel passed and upon the armies of Pharaoh when the Red Sea closed upon them in their pursuit of the children of Israel. The Israelites were just beginning the great exodus, and though they would often falter during their journey, God ultimately redeems them.¹¹

Two metaphors of hope are suggested in the imagery of Psalm 91. The first is the impregnable fortress of the great army's commander situated high above the enemy and surrounded by rank upon rank of encamped legions of angels. The security of the fortress is offered to the weak and fearful as a city of refuge (Ps 91:1, 9-10). Angels are commanded to "guard you in all your ways, [and] they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone" (Ps 91:11-12; cf. Exod 19:4). In the midst of this great army committed to the believers' security, they may at last rest and recover from the wounds of hand-to-hand combat.¹²

The comradeship shared with the commander ensures the safety of those who are too vulnerable to guarantee their own protection. This picture is reminiscent of Mephibosheth, the disabled son of Jonathon and grandson of Saul. Though he had no right to expect the generosity of the new king, he found safety in the house of David because of the integrity of his father. He ate at the table of David in Jerusalem, and the property that had belonged to his father and grandfather was guaranteed to him (2 Sam 9:1-13). Even in the midst of rebellion when another made accusations against him, David upheld his honor (2 Sam 16:1-4; 19:24-29).¹³

The second metaphor is the implied table fellowship of him who dwells in the "shelter of the Most High" (Ps 91:1). The guest is honored with protection and care. Every need is supplied as suggested in Psalm 23. The covenant benefits of goodness and love (Ps 23:6) are evident in the experience of dwelling in the house of the Lord. It is the attention of God to all of the needs of His guest that brings a sense of refreshment and fulfillment. The Hebrew verb in Ps 23:1 is *haser*, meaning "to lack, to need."¹⁴ Thus the effect of being the protege of the Lord is that he will always provide for every need, leading to contentment of both body and mind. Indeed, the symbolism of leading "beside waters of restfulness," walking in the valley of the shadow of death, being honored at a

¹¹ Cohen. *The Psalms*, 302; Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 553.

¹² Goetsch, *The Lord Is My Refuge*, 141; J. Richard Chase, "Don't Just Visit the Secret Place of the Most High—Live There!" *Decision* 27 (February 1986): 14; Cohen, *The Psalms*, 303.

¹³ Goetsch. *The Lord Is My Refuge*, 141; J. Richard Chase, "Don't Just Visit, 14.

¹⁴ Dennis Sylva. *Psalms and the Transformation of Stress: Poetic-Communal Interpretation and the Family* (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs: Eerdrnans, 1993). 78.

table set among one's enemies, and the anointing with oil emphasize the significance of trusting in the Lord.¹⁵

Psalms 91 identifies two qualities of those who are the Lord's guests. First, they have learned to trust the Lord (vs 2), and second, the gracious kindness of God has taught them to love their Lord (vs 14). The language of verse 14 means to cling to the Lord with love. It is used with reference to God's love for Israel (Deut 7:7–8; 10:15). The identity of the Lord reflected in the acknowledgment of his name involves an understanding of his identity as the faithful protector of those who belong to him. In response to this love, they have the Lord's assurance of safety and security. Even the significance of the Lord (lit., his glory) is imputed to those who trust him (Ps 91:15). The fullest realization of the protection of God is experienced in the phrase "my salvation" (Ps 91:16). This phrase refers to the experience of God's providence in every aspect of the lives of the individuals, including that which is material as well as that which is spiritual.¹⁶

The parallels to the experience of anxiety, depression, and stress disorders implied by the images in Psalm 91 have often occupied my thoughts during the last ten years. Like many in our society, my clients have experienced the frightening struggles that anxiety imposes on the spirit. During the First World War, Psalm 91 was known as the "Trench Psalm."¹⁷ This psalm described the trauma that the soldiers of all wars have had to endure. Long before the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) and its predecessors identified the experience of anxiety, soldiers, citizens, and, today, children in our schools have encountered the pounding heart, trembling, shortness of breath, choking, chest pain, sweating, dizziness, and fear of dying that is the essence of stress, fear, and panic.¹⁸ Anxiety and depressive disorders are the most significant mental health problem affecting people in our society. Physiological and psychological conditions, family problems, career difficulties, grief, domestic abuse, school violence, and media representations of these phenomena in our living rooms can bring on all of the symptoms of anxiety and depression. In addition, the choice of how we will live in a sinful world can corrupt our life experience, leading to crises in relationships, in personality structure, and in our relationship to God.

The psalmist encourages the believer to trust in God in the face of such dramatic, unexpected, traumatic, and even seductive life challenges. However,

¹⁵ Dennis Sylva. *Psalms and the Transformation of Stress*. 79, 84-91: Eugene H. Peterson. *Psalms*. 33–34.

¹⁶ Goetsch. "The Lord Is My Refuge." 144: Cohen. *The Psalms*. 303: Kirkpatrick. *Psalms*. 557–58: Weiser. *The Psalms*. 612-13.

¹⁷ Goetsch. "The Lord Is My Refuge." 143.

¹⁸ American Psychiatric Association. "Anxiety Disorders." in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.: DSM-IV: Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association. 1994). 393-444.

the impact of life's changes and struggles, especially those that are experienced as trauma, is to leave one feeling alone and isolated even in the midst of the most intimate, interpersonal relationships. Job and his wife could not communicate about their losses, and he could only sit in silence and grieve with the three friends who had come to comfort him. For seven days, Job had no voice even to express the depth of his loss (Job 2:9-13). When he could finally speak, his words expressed how loathsome life had become for him (Job 3). Everything in this life that gave richness to his experience had suddenly, unexpectedly been ripped away. The only meaning he could derive, that which caused him the greatest grief of all, is that he had somehow lost his relationship with God.¹⁹ How could that be, though, since he had done nothing so egregious as to warrant such unimaginable suffering (Job 13:18; 14:13--17; 16:19; 19:25-27)?

C. S. Lewis, whose wife of just four short years, Joy Davidman, had died of cancer, expresses the essence of the loss that the sufferer endures in *A Grief Observed*:

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep swallowing.

At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to, want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me.²⁰

Where is God in the midst of such agony? Has he hidden himself from his servant? God, the Almighty, has become for Lewis, and every sufferer like him, the great enigma. Lewis says of God that he is like the death of his wife, "incomprehensible."²¹

What consumes the sufferer is fear and confusion. The threats enumerated in Psalm 91:3-7 have become real. Since the current pain had always seemed far away and impossible, these other threats identified in Psalm 91 were likewise beyond imagining. Elton Trueblood notes that the experiences of life surprise us for they reveal unexpected and unacknowledged aspects of our inner selves.²² The heartache that must be suffered by others now has a personal reality. With the new consciousness of what suffering can feel like, the individual retreats, defeated, disappointed, and afraid.

¹⁹ H. H. Rowley. "The Book of Job," in *The New Century Bible Commentary* (ed. Ronald E. Clements; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 19-21.

²⁰ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 1-2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 26—27.

²² Elton Trueblood. *The Common Ventures of Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1949), 104.

It is when sufferers are in crisis that they finally seek assistance. The journey towards the hope alluded to in Psalm 91 begins with the realization that sufferers will need the assistance of others to reach the refuge of the Lord. Pastoral counselors often become the ones who help clients in crisis discover the meaning of the promises in Psalm 91. Counselors, like the psalmist, must have experienced the kindness and generosity of the Almighty and learned from the Lord how to communicate what the experience of a "a compassionate, penetrating, rich involvement with others" can mean. Out of the intimacy of their own relationship with the Lord and sometimes out of the experience of their own suffering, counselors lead others into a "deeper, worshipful, intimate enjoyment of God."²³

The first time I noticed Angie, she was standing in the shadow of the doorjamb to my office. She was herself a shadow, a specter of a person. She had come to see me against her will because her roommate had threatened to move out unless Angie sought help. I invited her in, and we began a three-year journey through the desert that was the grief and shame associated with her experience of one of the first school shootings to occur in the United States. Angie rehearsed for me the events that had transformed her life from a normal high school teenager into a victim. Her life had changed one day several years before when her teacher asked her to go check out the noise that had, come from a nearby classroom. That classroom belonged to one of the most popular teachers in the school, a teacher that Angie liked and admired. Entering the classroom, she was confronted by a horrific scene in which her teacher had been murdered by a single shot to the head and the murderer was holding the classroom full of students hostage. Angie now became a hostage, also. The young man with the gun taunted the other students with the potential of further violence. But as the day went on, he released more and more of the students until only Angie was left. Angie still does not remember the complete sequence of events, but she does remember finding herself in the hallway, the young man standing behind her with the gun pointed to the side of her head. At that moment, she believed that she would be the next to die. Then the custodian, a popular man among the students, came up to the young man and asked him what he was doing. The young man took the pistol from Angie's head, pointed it at the custodian, and shot him dead. The rest of the day was a blur to Angie. She remembers only somehow finding herself later standing outside the school with other students and teachers. As is true in so many high profile crimes, Angie would later experience more trauma as she repeated her understanding of the day's events to police, to prosecutors, to defense attorneys, and in court before a jury.

²³ Larry Crabb. *Understanding People: Deep Longings for Relationship* (Winona Lake, In.: BMH Books. 1987). 124.

To become Angie's guide in the journey to a more intimate relationship with the Lord, I had to develop a meaningful relationship with her, for the rapport developed with the sufferer is the basis for the journey that they take together.²⁴ The teacher celebrates the power of the shared journey in Eccl 4:9-12:

Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their work:
If one falls down,
his friend can help him up.
But pity the man who falls
and has no one to help him up!
Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

The rich, poetic language is a metaphor for a journey that two take together. They are supports for each other. The confidence that one expresses for the other makes it possible for them to do difficult things together. In the frigid cold of the desert night, they keep each other warm, something that is not possible for one to do alone. As they face the threat of attack, they defend each other. Though it appears that they are only two, the bond of their relationship is ensured by the presence of the Lord.

The first thing that the counselor and client must do is learn how to talk to one another. Trust is built on understanding. The journey with Angie began with my listening to her. The focus of the listening was to be able to understand what the central events in Angie's experience had meant to her. Counselors understand that the same event can mean different things to different individuals. Thus they put aside their assumptions and focus all of their attention on the meaning of the sufferers' words for the sufferers, and them alone. The growth of understanding creates the bond of trust necessary to take the risks to confront all the pain bound up in the sufferers' grief. Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu fail Job because they try to impose meaning on Job's suffering (Job, 4-5, 8, 11, 15, 18, 20, 22, 25, and 32). The Lord recognizes their failure to serve Job, and tells them Job will pray for them that God may "not deal with [them] according to [their] folly" (Job 42:7-8).

Listening is particularly important because those traumatized by life find that the anxiety they are experiencing seems to steal their voice. The goal of listening is to give sufferers back their voice and help them feel heard again. It

²⁴ Scott D. Miller, Barry L. Duncan, and Mark A. Hubble, *Escape from Babel: Toward a Unifying Language for Psychotherapy Practice* (New York: Norton, 1997), 26-27.

begins with sufferers telling their story. But there is the additional goal of teaching the sufferers how to pray with power and hope again. Trusting in the Lord means having the confidence to "acknowledge [his] name" and "call upon [him]" with the assurance that he will answer. This is the promise God makes to those who love Him (Ps 91:14-15).

The longing to pray is a powerful drive for those who have known the presence of the Lord. Several years ago, I counseled a woman who had experienced losses truly comparable to those of Job. After many months, we agreed that she had made sufficient progress that we could terminate therapy. In the closing session, she told me that she had come to therapy all of those months for one reason. She said that the one thing that had been most important to her in every therapy session was the time that we would spend in prayer.

In Psalm 91, the believer who wants to trust the Lord is aware of the potential threats and dangers to be faced. Clients in counseling who have experienced an overwhelming trauma may find it difficult to risk any new threats in their emotional landscape that may arise during therapy. The deadly pestilence referred to in Psalm 91:3, 6, is frightening because it catches people suddenly and they have no way to protect themselves. The plague suggests the deadliness of a chasm into which the unwary may tumble, never to be seen again.²⁵ This unexpectedness creates intense anxiety for those who have already stumbled. Afraid of once again being injured, travelers may become frozen by fear, unwilling to move to the right or to the left, to go forward, or to return. The journal of Ernest Shackleton describes the horrors of the traveler who passes over the unstable snow and ice of the Antarctic. His team struggles against all odds to reach the South Pole. On the great glacier, he records the maze of crevasses that constantly threatened their safety. For December 7, 1908, he writes:

Started at 8 a. m.. Adams, Marshall and self pulling one sledge. Wild leading Socks [the pony] behind. We traveled up and down slopes with very deep snow, into which Socks sank up to his belly, and we plunged in and out continuously, making it very trying work. Passed several crevasses on our right hand and could see more to the left. The light became bad at 1 p.m., when we camped for lunch, and it was hard to see the crevasses as most were more or less snow covered. After lunch the light was better, and as we marched along we were congratulating ourselves upon it when suddenly we heard a shout to "help" from Wild. We stopped at once and rushed to his assistance, and saw the pony sledge with the forward end down a crevasse and Wild reaching out from the side of the gulf grasping the sledge. No sign of the pony. We soon got up to Wild and he scrambled out of the dangerous position but poor Socks had gone. Wild had a miraculous escape.²⁶

²⁵ Goetsch. *The Lord Is My Refuge.* 142.

²⁶ Ernest Shackleton. *The Heart of the Antarctic: The Farthest South Expedition, 1907-1919* (New York: Signet). 205.

For travelers traumatized by the anxieties of the journey, trust does not come easily and the focus is not on loving but on surviving. Although the travelers long for relationship, they fear the risk. The cumulative result of their losses is that they feel unworthy of meaningful connections with others and incapable of establishing them. In addition, they must often struggle against feelings of anger and bitterness born of confusion and directed at the Almighty, whom they feel has deserted them. C. S. Lewis demonstrates this pain in his own words as he struggles with his confusion about his wife's death and about whether this anguish can even end with death:

"Because she is in God's hands." But if so, she was in God's hands all the time, and I have seen what they did to her. Do they suddenly become gentler to us the moment we are out of the body? And if so, why? If God's goodness is inconsistent with hurting us then either God is not good or there is no God: for in the only life we know He hurts us beyond our worst fears and beyond all we can imagine. If it is inconsistent with hurting us then He may hurt us after death as unendurably as before it.

Sometimes it is hard not to say. "God forgive God."

Sometimes it is hard to say so much. But if our faith is true, He didn't. He crucified Him.²⁷

In their anger and bitterness, the weary travelers struggle to believe the bold assertion that "you will not fear" (Ps 91:5). For the psalmist, "the terror of the night" and "the arrow that flies by day" may be metaphors for the sudden attack of the enemy, but for those governed by fear, the night has its own smothering impact. Sudden awakenings from frightening dreams in which the horror of their trauma is replayed bring a heightened sense of anxiety, disorientation and difficulty going back to sleep. Their fear of the night adds to their struggle and makes it difficult to find the peace and rest that seems to be promised in Psalm 91.²⁸ Finding meaning in suffering is a significant part of the journey to healing. This involves helping clients to resolve issues of guilt and shame. Lewis Smedes points out that "shame is a very heavy feeling. It is a feeling that we do not measure up and maybe never will measure up to the sorts of persons we are meant to be." He adds: "The feeling of shame is about our very selves--not about some bad thing we did or said but about what we are."²⁹ Almost all who have suffered as victims must deal with the guilt and shame they feel about being

²⁷ C. S. Lewis. *A Grief Observed*, 29.

²⁸ Ash and Miller. "Psalm 91." 318: American Psychiatric Association, "Nightmare Disorder" and "Sleep Terror Disorder" in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.), 580-87.

²⁹ Lewis B. Smedes. *Shame and Grace* (San Francisco: Zondervan. 5-6. See also Julie J. Exline and Roy F. Baumeister. "Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance" in *Forgiveness: Theory Research, and Practice* (ed. Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Carl E. Thoresen New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 142.

victims. Sexual abuse, rape, assault, robbery— violence of every kind leaves a stain of self-loathing on the victims as though the victims, themselves, were somehow responsible for what had taken place in their lives.³⁰ This is the "fowler's snare," "the pestilence," and "the plague" by which Satan often separates the weak and helpless from the Lord. The goal in counseling is to convince sufferers of the truth of the Paul's statement in Rom 8:1–2: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death."

Central to Angie's healing process was the sense of guilt and shame that she carried with her. This shame got mixed up with other events in her childhood and her adolescence about which she also felt guilt. It was often difficult to separate the meaning of these events in Angie's understanding of herself. The healing began with the experience of having someone who listened to her accounts of all of these events and who accepted her unconditionally. We were able, again and again, to confront the pain and the accompanying guilt she carried with her, and session by session she was able to leave small parts of it with me.

To help Angie process her shame and guilt interpretation, we had to investigate the meaning of these events in her life-setting. Family and community systems as well as cultural and ethnic issues often play important roles in the guilt that people struggle with as victims. Very often societal expectations about what individuals should have done and about how long the healing process should take add to the suffering.³¹ The community, the church, and the family also have difficulty realizing that victims may feel a need for forgiveness. The task of counselors is to help clients separate true guilt for things they have actually done from false guilt for things that have been done to them.³²

For sin that is real, repentance, confession, and prayer are necessary to healing. In Psalm 91, the faith of the psalmist encourages the readers to risk trusting in the Lord. In the pastoral setting, clients lean on the faith of counselors and hope their confession of sin may lead to relief from guilt and shame. This part of the journey often moves slowly as the sufferers' trust and confidence in the Lord are restored. Counselors must be faithful and patient guides over the difficult terrain at this point in the journey, kindly lifting up and supporting their

³⁰ John P. Splinter, *The Healing Path: A Guide for Women Rebuilding Their Lives after Sexual Abuse* (Nashville: Nelson, 1993), 146-47.

³¹ Smedes, *Shame and Grace*, 69-82.; Splinter, *The Healing Path*, 155-56; Exline and Baumeister, "Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance," 143.

³² Smedes. *Shame and Grace*, 31-44; Splinter. *The Healing Path*. 146-49; Anderson, Zuehlke, and Zuehlke, *Christ Centered Therapy: The Practical Integration of Theology and Psychology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2000), 267-71; Frank N. Thomas and Thorana S. Nelson. *Tales from Family Therapy: Life-Changing Clinical Experiences* (New York: Haworth. 1998). 175-79.

fellow travelers. As faith grows, sufferers begin to release the guilt and claim the promises of protection and deliverance (Ps 91:14-15).³³

There is also the matter of the anger that is felt towards the offenders. In Psalm 91, the writer identifies the "fowler" as the one who has intentionally set "snares" to entrap others (Ps 91:3). Having suffered painfully at the hands of another, sufferers find themselves bound to those people by their anger and sense of injustice. It is a difficult struggle for them to forgive and let go of the past. The metaphor in my work with Angie was a prison cell. Early in the process, I discovered that she was emotionally locked in the same cell with her tormentor. Many issues such as fear that transgressions will be repeated or the belief that justice will not be done can be barriers to forgiveness. But forgiveness is not always about justice; very often it is about mercy, and the journey to mercy and grace can be very difficult.³⁴

Research suggests five aspects of the forgiveness process. They include first the acknowledgment of strong emotions such as fear, hurt, and rage. Second, individuals must be willing to let go of previously unmet needs such as failure on the part of perpetrators to repent of and apologize for their behavior. Third, there must be a shift in the sufferers' attitude toward the offender. Fourth, empathy for the offenders and some understanding of their motivations develops. Finally, sufferers must develop a new, healthier view of themselves and the other persons.³⁵

The journey from prison cell to freedom progressed slowly for Angie. As discussions of the perpetrator developed, Angie came to accept him as a person with great pain in his own life. Her empathy for him grew; thus she was eventually able to open the door to their prison cell and step from it. As forgiveness for him progressed and she acknowledged that many of these memories and feelings needed to remain. In the past, she was able to take other steps on her journey to freedom. One day she voluntarily returned to the school, to visit, the first time she had returned, since her graduation. Then one day she took a letter she had written to her beloved teacher and left it on the teacher's grave. Later she brought me the packed file of clippings from newspapers and magazines that reported the events of the shooting. That day, and for several more, we sat in my office going through the file and reading the articles. As we finished each one, I would ask her what she wanted to do with it. For most of

³³ Splinter, *The Healing Path*, 158-64; Anderson, Zuehlke, and Zuehlke, *Christ Centered Therapy*, 271-74.

³⁴ Exline and Baumeister. "Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance," 147. Wanda W. Malcolm and Leslie S. Greenberg, "Forgiveness as a Process of Change in Individual Psychotherapy." in *Forgiveness: Theory Research, and Practice*, 179-81. See also. Kristina C. Gordon, Donald H. Baucom, and Douglas K. Snyder, "The Use of Forgiveness in Marital Therapy," in *Forgiveness: Theory Research, and Practice*, 215-20.

them, she chose the garbage can that I had set in the middle of my office floor. When we had finished this task, she had discarded many of the evidences of her suffering, and this physical act emphasized that she had left the prison of her past. Later, there were other days, usually on or near the anniversary, when she would return and we would spend some more time talking and praying. But these visits were brief, and she moved on with her life. Occasionally now, I get a phone call or a visit when she returns home, but these are times in which we are celebrating the joy that God is giving her.

The second half of Psalm 91 reflects the victory that Angie has found of this point in her journey. Echoing verses 1-2, the opening couplet (9-10) states:

If you make the Most High your dwelling—
even the Lord, who is my refuge—
then no harm will befall you,
no disaster will come near your tent.

The psalmist now builds promise upon promise. Help and protection as well as rescue and redemption are dedicated to those who love the Lord and know His name. Each promise sounds more glorious rising toward the ultimate goal (16):³⁶

With long life will I satisfy him
and show him my salvation.

³⁶ Delitzsch. *The Psalms*, 64.

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