

Safe and Secure

Psalms for Uncertain Times

Psalm 91:1-16

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Psalm 91:1-16¹

¹*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.*

²*I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."*

³*For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence.*

⁴*He will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.*

⁵*You will not fear the terror of the night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,*

⁶*nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.*

⁷*A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.*

⁸*You will only look with your eyes
and see the recompense of the wicked.*

⁹*Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—
the Most High, who is my refuge—*

¹⁰*no evil shall be allowed to befall you,
no plague come near your tent.*

¹¹*For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.*

¹²*On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.*

¹³*You will tread on the lion and the adder;
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.*

¹⁴*"Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;
I will protect him, because he knows my name.*

¹⁵*When he calls to me, I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble;
I will rescue him and honor him.*

¹⁶*With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation."*

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

This psalm is one of the great psalms in the Bible. There are many familiar and quotable images in these verses. It provides great comfort for God's people and it's been a comfort in all generations. It's been especially encouraging to people in times like we're in right now. You probably noticed how in verses 3 and 6 it promises deliverance from pestilence, and how in verse 10 it provides confidence that no plague will come near your tent.

And so, for centuries people have called the church to pray this psalm during epidemics and pandemics. This is a good impulse. I'm certainly all for praying the Psalms. Just this last week, I wrote a blog on the importance of praying the Psalms. And Jordan Green wrote a post giving you guidance to pray Psalm 90. This week we'll post ways to pray Psalm 91. And in the coming weeks, we'll provide help for praying each of the psalms we're covering in this livestream.

But in order to pray the Psalms rightly, we need to first understand what they mean and what exactly they promise. So, what does this psalm promise?

Many of you are familiar with the psychologist Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of needs. He lays out five needs that motivate all human behavior. At the bottom of his pyramid are our physical needs, like food and shelter. At the top is the need for self-actualization, for achieving your potential, etc.

His basic argument is we can't achieve our higher needs unless our basic needs are met first. And do you know what the second most basic need is? According to Maslow, it's the need for safety and security. Next to our physical needs like food and clothing, we have a powerful psychological longing to know we're safe. People of all ages know this. Even very young children understand the need for safety and security. They want to know their parents and caregivers will protect them from harm.

I'm not saying I agree with Maslow on all points, but I think he's right about our need for security. And our God knows our need to be safe and secure. So, he speaks directly to this need in Psalm 91. He promises us protection and safety.² How reassuring, especially during the crisis we're in.

I want to begin this morning by highlighting the ways God promises to protect his people throughout this psalm. There are ten dangers mentioned in this psalm. God promises protection from the snare of the fowler and the deadly pestilence (v. 3). Protection from the terror of night and the arrows by day (v. 5). From pestilence and destruction (v. 6). From evil and the plague (v. 10). And from the lion and the serpent (v. 13).

The setting of this psalm is war. And God is promising his king and the army protection from the dangers of war. Specifically, from the defeat of the enemy and also protection from the plague that was common during times of war or siege.³

In addition to these ten dangers, we're told twelve times God protects his people from dangers. Twelve times what God will do. This may highlight the fact that God's protection is greater than the danger.⁴ God will deliver (v. 3). God will cover and will provide a refuge (v. 4). He will command his angels (v. 11), and they will bear you up (v. 12). God will deliver and protect (v. 14). He will answer, and be with his people; he'll rescue (v. 15). And he will satisfy and save (v. 16).

² Mike Bullmore, "[Drawing Near to the God Who Protects](#)"

³ Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston. *The Psalms as Christian Praise: A Historical Commentary*

⁴ Bullmore

The point is clear. God will protect his people. But it's more than that. It's a personal protection. It's loving. I love the imagery in verse 4: "He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler." The shield spoken of here is a full body shield. A huge shield that would require three people to carry. The buckler is a small hand-held shield. The imagery here is military imagery. God is tough! But he's also tender. He's like a mother hen who protects her baby chicks under her pinions, under her wings. God is a tough and tender protector.

But this truth raises all kinds of questions, doesn't it? If God promises to protect his people, then why are some of them not protected? Some of his people in the Bible are delivered from death, but some aren't.

Even the most faithful believers in the Bible die at the hands of their enemies and from disease. Jesus himself suffered and died. Paul suffered and died. And many others throughout the history of the church.

Think of the missionary John Patton, whom Jordan Krahn highlighted in a sermon a few years ago. He was a missionary to the New Hebrides islands. Three months after his arrival to the island, his wife, Mary, died of the tropical fever. Just days later his newborn son, Peter, died of the same fever. Did the promises of protection from pestilence not apply to them?

Or think of the missionary Jim Elliot, who was speared to death on the shores of Ecuador. Later his wife, Elizabeth Elliot, told his story in her book, *The Shadow of the Almighty*. The title of her book comes straight from Psalm 91. Was the title a slip? How could she speak of the protection of the Almighty when her husband wasn't protected from death, even though he was trying to reach the lost with the gospel?

How does this psalm apply to us today? In a day when people are dying from the coronavirus—both believers and nonbelievers alike? How can we pray this psalm faithfully in our day? In order to answer that question, I want to begin by answering three other questions about this psalm. Who is promised protection in this psalm? What are they promised protection from? And how are we protected?

WHO IS PROMISED PROTECTION?

First, who is promised protection? Let me start out by saying that it's a little difficult at first to figure out who is speaking and who is being spoken of in this psalm. Poems are divided into stanzas. And in this psalm, there are three different voices in three different stanzas.⁵ In the first stanza, the psalmist is speaking. Probably David or another king. He says in verse 2, "I will say to the LORD, 'My fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'" In the second stanza beginning in verse 3, there's another voice introduced. Probably a prophet who's speaking to the king about God's protection. The prophet says, "For he [God] will deliver you from the snare of the fowler." Then in the third stanza, beginning in verse 14, there's a third voice introduced. This is the voice of God speaking about the king. He says, "Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him."

After you see that basic structure, it's not that hard to figure out what's going on. The person being protected in all three stanzas is the same. It's likely the Davidic king. But it applies generally to

⁵ Waltke

anyone.⁶ To anyone who dwells in the shelter of the Most High. To anyone who abides in the shadow of the Almighty (v. 1). To anyone who makes the LORD their refuge. It's for the one who trusts the LORD (v. 2). For the one who holds fast to him. To the one who loves him, who knows him (v. 14). To anyone who calls out to him (v. 15).

This promise of protection is not for everyone. But it is for anyone. For anyone who trusts God. For anyone who finds security and safety in him and in him alone!

As we said last week, we may seek protection in science, in financial security, in politics, you name it. But the coronavirus has exposed these as impotent in the face of death and disease. Our only protection is found in God. He's our only refuge.

Charles Spurgeon said, "The bird flies away to the thicket, the fox hastens to its hole, every creature uses its refuge in the hour of danger, and even so in our hour of peril or fear let us flee unto Jehovah, the eternal protector of his own."⁷

WHAT ARE WE PROTECTED FROM?

So, we've seen who God protects. Let's now turn and consider what God promises protection from? Verse 8 is critical to understand the theological significance of this passage.⁸ It throws light on the rest of the psalm. It says, "You [the one who trusts God] will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked."

It's clear the psalmist is protected from enemies and disease. I've shown that. But this verse gives us a specific context for these promises. It's in the context of war, where the king is facing enemies. And at the end of the war, the people of God are protected from death and disease but their enemies aren't. And that's because God is judging the wicked. The context is judgment.

Now again, as I said last week, this is not to say all death and disease are God's direct judgment on specific sins. But in this psalm, death and disease are God's judgment on the wicked.

And that's what God's promising to protect us from in this psalm. This is not a promise of protection from the hardships in life. It's not even a promise of protection from death and disease. It's a promise of protection from God's judgment on the wicked. And it's a promise that applies to those who've placed their trust in God!

Mike Bullmore uses Luke 21 to illustrate this point. In verse 16-17, Jesus says, "You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake." So Jesus doesn't promise his disciples protection from physical harm. But he goes on to say, "But not a thread of your hair will perish" (v. 18).

Is Jesus out of his mind? How can he say that some of you will die? And then in the same breath say that not a thread of your hair will perish? It must be because in his mind we're promised protection from a greater danger than physical death and disease. And that protection is guaranteed for all who make God their refuge.

⁶ John Goldingay. *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Psalms 90–150*

⁷ C. H. Spurgeon. *The Treasury of David: Psalms 88-110*

⁸ Craig C. Broyles. *Psalms*

I believe this is the promise in Psalm 91. God protects us from his judgment and the evil one.

Elizabeth Elliot titled her book about her husband's martyrdom *The Shadow of the Almighty* for a reason. It wasn't a mistake. In the words of John Piper, it was because "she was utterly convinced that the refuge of the people of God is not a refuge from suffering and death, but a refuge from final and ultimate defeat."⁹

HOW DOES GOD PROTECT US?

So, we've seen who this psalm promises protection to and what we're protected from. But if God provides ultimate protection for those who trust in him, how does he provide that protection for us?

To answer that question we need to turn to the New Testament. This psalm ultimately applies to Jesus. And it applies to us only through Jesus. How do I know that? Well because Satan tells me! Now before you close the screen on this livestream, let me explain.

Satan used this psalm in Matthew 4 when he was tempting Jesus in the wilderness. Even though Satan twisted this psalm, as he always twists God's word (cf. Gen. 3), he was right in one point.

He knew this psalm ultimately pointed to Jesus. God promised all who trust in him will be protected from judgment and evil. But this psalm points especially to Christ. Listen to these words: "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot" (vv. 11-13).

Jesus is the one who entrusts himself to God. And God protects him. He is invincible. Sure, he voluntarily laid down his life to pay for the sins of his people (cf. Isa. 52:13-53:12; Jn. 10:18). But before his voluntary death, he was unscathed. People tried to stone him or throw him over a cliff, but he was protected until his appointed hour (Mt. 7:13-18; Lk. 4:29-30; Jn. 10:31-39).¹⁰

Jesus' death on the cross wasn't a lack of God's protection. In fact, even though Jesus was given up to death, he was then raised by God. And this was God's way of providing us the protection we need. Through Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection, he has defeated the enemies of sin and Satan. He fulfills the promise of Genesis 3:15 where God promised that the Messiah would crush the head of the serpent. The very promise made in Psalm 91. Through Christ all our enemies and the spiritual forces behind them are defeated. Through Christ's death and resurrection, he is victorious. He's conquered death, and he will one day vanquish death forever (1 Cor. 15:55)! Even though we may die, we are still delivered from death. Like Jesus, we will one day be raised from the dead!

So how does God protect us? It's through trusting Jesus! How do we experience God's protection? It's through making Christ our dwelling place, through abiding in him. It's through holding fast to him in love. It's through crying out to God and asking him to deliver us through Christ. He's the shelter, the refuge, we need. It's under the cover of his atoning blood that we find protection.

And as we trust in Jesus, we have the promise of eternal protection, not just long life but eternal life and eternal salvation (cf. v. 16). If you're in Christ, you're safe. You have an inheritance that is

⁹ John Piper, [Slain in the Shadow of the Almighty](#). *Desiring God*

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imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for you (1 Pt. 1:3-5). If you're in Christ, there is nothing that can separate you from his love. Not tribulation, distress, famine, nakedness, danger, or sword. If God is for you, there's nobody who can be against you (Rom. 8:31-39).

This psalm is not promising us a vaccine against plague. It's promising something much bigger! It's promising total security and ultimate protection. And the eternal security that's ours in Christ can give us confidence in the face of lesser dangers. God is able to protect us from the fire of pestilence and plague, but even if he doesn't (cf. Dan. 3:17-18), he's still God Almighty, *El Shaddai*. And we're secure in him.

RESPONSE

Well, we've seen what this psalm means. Now what does it call us to do? Let me suggest five things, briefly.

First, let me say what not to do. Don't use this psalm as a lucky charm. For centuries this psalm has been written on charms or amulets to ward off sickness and devils. Friends, I don't need to remind you that Christians don't practice magic. But that's almost what's happening today with the prosperity gospel or with "name it and claim it" theology. This psalm is not promising any deliverance from death and disease, so we can't "name and claim" that promise. This psalm, like I've said, is promising much more than that.

And that leads me to my second application. Trust the promise of God's ultimate protection. This psalm is promising protection from judgment and spiritual death. There is a death on the other side of COVID-19 much scarier than you can imagine. It's the judgment of God. But friends, if you find your refuge under the shadow of God's wings, you can be saved from God's judgment. If you place your trust in Christ's death for your sins, you can be forgiven. You can be given eternal life. Cry out to God to save you today.

Third, take up the full armor of God. When Satan tempts you to despair, when he casts his arrows at you and tempts you to question God, remember the gospel. Christ has made an end of all our sin. And when he returns, he will make an end to all death and disease. Because the sinless Savior died, we have victory over death. Our life is hid with Christ on high. We're safe. We're protected.

Don't let Satan trip you up. Open your Bible and lean on the promises of protection in God's Word. One little word shall fell him! Remind Satan that Christ has crushed his little skull!

Fourth, draw near to God. Even though we're not promised protection from temporal trouble, we know that our God is with us in trouble (v. 15). And so, we can draw near to him during this time. He can be our dwelling place.

Fifth, pray for the end of this virus. Even though we have no promise of protection from plague, God is still powerful. If there is any shelter from this virus, it will come from God. He may use science. He may use government. He may use the distancing we're practicing. But we don't trust in those things. We trust in God. And so, we cry out to him for deliverance. May your kingdom come, may your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

PRAYER

Father, we know that you are faithful, no matter what happens. And just that truth is armor enough. Help us to trust you and to not be afraid. We know that our life is hidden with Christ on high, with Christ our Savior and our God. He will cover us with his pinions. He will shelter us under his wings.

Father, help us to not be afraid of the terrors of the night, nor the arrow that flies in the day. To not dread the disease that stalks in darkness, nor the disaster that strikes at noon. Help us to not be afraid of this virus. Help us to not be afraid of the decline in the economy. We know that you gave us your own Son. And you are able to graciously give us all things. We trust you.

We pray also Father that you would lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. We know that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual powers of darkness. We know our adversary prowls like a lion, seeking to devour us. But we also know that we're protected from him. We are sealed by the Lamb. Help us to not give in to despair or discouragement. To not be consumed with frustration or anxiety.

We thank you for the victory that we have in Christ. And yet, we desire for others to know his protection. And so we pray for our witness in this world. Help us to bear witness to our mighty Savior in word and deed.

We pray the same for our missions partners. Particularly, we lift up Jesse and Monica Pauly who are serving in Rome, where this virus has devastated their community. We pray that you would continue to soften hearts in that community. We thank you that you are with the Paulys as they seek wisdom on how to minister and support those in their community. And we thank you that you are with us as well.

We pray for those who grieve the death of a loved one. Thank you for the hope that we have in the resurrection of Jesus. I pray you would fill their hearts with hope.

We also pray that you would put an end to this virus and restore our community. But in the meantime, I continue to pray that you would use this season to grow our faith, to grow our fellowship, and to help us to prioritize what's most important in our lives.

We rest in you, Almighty God. You are our shield and our fortress. We want to dwell in your presence in these days. So pour out your Holy Spirit.

Now we pray that you who are able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or think, according to your power at work in us, we pray that you would be glorified in the church and in Christ throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.