

Reflections on Psalm 91

Read Psalm 91:1-16

Psalm 91 is one of the most familiar and beloved Psalms of trust. In Psalms of lament, like we saw last week in Psalms 42 and 43 where the Psalmist is crying out for deliverance, there was a regular component we call a confession of trust. At times the psalmist might develop the concept of trust in the Lord to the length of an independent psalm; that's what we have here in Psalm 91 (we saw this in Psalm 46; the most well-known of these type of Psalms is Psalm 23).

The psalm does not indicate the author. It is possible because of its placement here and its connections with Psalm 90 that it may have also come from Moses. Very likely, the experiences and ideas of Moses, especially in the Exodus, were used by the writer of this psalm. *The main thrust of this psalm is that the believer is not afraid in the face of all kinds of surrounding "natural" dangers because of the Lord's powerful and ever-present protection.* This psalm teaches that God will protect and preserve His people through all dangers, at all times, in all circumstances until they are safely home. The relevance of this psalm to our present situation of the coronavirus is obvious (he mentions "disease" and "plague"!), and yet, liable to misapplication. Let's enjoy a few observations about this psalm of trust, and then think carefully about its application for us.

Three Observations:

1. The poetic images of God's powerful and ever-present protection.

The psalmist begins with confessing his own confidence and sense of security in God's protection (v. 1-2) before applying it all believers (v. 3-13, "you" singular). In doing so, he uses two contrasting images to describe God's protection. The first is built off of the different designations for God in verse one in the context of Him being a refuge or shelter. The terms "Most High" ('elyon) and "Almighty" (Shaddai) together speak of God in mountain-like majesty—awe-inspiring and enduring—in whose presence there is a "secret place" or shadow to find shelter or deliverance. Coming to God is like coming to a crevasse in a towering mountain to find protection from the storm or shelter from the heat of the day. God is indeed a "secure fortress!" The second image, from verse four, is one of the loveliest images of protection. God is here described as a mother hen under whose wings His children may come for refuge. Only one who has seen chicks flee under the wings of their mother at the first hint of danger can truly appreciate this dramatic image. Whether viewed as an unmovable mountain fortress or a protective mother hen, how safe the believer is in God's protection! His faithfulness is truly a shield and bulwark, signifying an "all-protective shield." There is complete protection from all harm.

2. The comprehensive extent of God's powerful and ever-present protection.

In light of God's unassailable protection enjoyed by His people, the psalmist now applies it to all believers by stating that we are not afraid of any possible danger. He personifies dangers of all types that might befall otherwise helpless people: the bird trap (intentional harm), deadly disease, unknown and unseen terrors of night, random arrows in the daytime. Whether they are deliberate, malevolent attempts to harm the believer or seemingly random, indiscriminate forms of danger, the believer need not fear for God will protect and preserve His people. God's protection is ever-present, it never sleeps. Whether dangers come at night or at noon, whether in darkness or daylight, God's is actively protecting His people. As a vivid example of this kind of protection, think of Israel during the plagues on Egypt in the time of the Exodus, which is likely in the writer's mind. God's people were spared from all the dangers that touched their neighbors; ten thousand fell at their right hand and yet no plague came near their tent. Indeed, the punishment of the wicked is as sure as the deliverance of the righteous (v.8). Again, this psalm teaches that God will protect and preserve His people through all dangers, at all times, in all circumstances until they are safely home.

3. The pledge by God Himself of His ultimate and never-ending protection.

At the end of the Psalm, we hear the voice of Yahweh as He "irrupts" (breaks in) in the poetry of the text (read v. 14-16). He speaks directly His promise of rescue to each believer. The believer is described as one who "holds close to" ("hugging tightly in love" – unusual word for "love") the Lord and has an intimate, experiential knowledge of Him ("knows My name"). This promise goes beyond mere protection in the midst of danger, but signifies a final deliverance from all danger. To be "set on high" means to place one out of the reach of trouble or danger. To see God's "salvation" in this context, as often in the Old Testament, means deliverance from distress or danger into open area in which you can breathe. This combined with the promise to "satisfy him with a long life," point ultimately to the resurrection from the dead, the final rescue from the greatest danger. God's powerful and ever-present protection celebrated in the psalm will culminate in a final and lasting rescue of his children from the very possibility of harm, when we are delivered from the power of death itself and satisfied with an unending, indestructible life. O how eternally safe we are in the shelter of the Most High, our God and Father!

Pastor Mark

Application and Questions:

How do the images of God's protection as that of a mountain refuge or a mother-hen help you picture his protection and overcome fear?

Does this Psalm give believers an unqualified promise that, if they are really trusting in the Lord, nothing bad can happen to them (e.g., we will not get the coronavirus)? Why or why not? (think of the example of Job) How are we to understand these promises of protection?

❖ **Three levels of application of Psalm 91:**

1. *Old Testament nation of Israel:* in keeping with the outward, physical nature of the old covenant, and the typology of the nation of Israel in the land of Canaan, God's blessing and judgments were often in outward, visible forms; this is not necessarily true of believers under the new covenant. These outward forms were visible types of ultimate realities fulfilled in Christ in the new covenant. The dangers of Psalm 91, while seemingly "natural," are yet viewed as a form of God's judgment (see v. 8), especially in references to the plagues on Egypt.
2. *Christians under the new covenant:* while we are not exempt from the tribulations, sufferings and difficulties of this fallen age (including the coronavirus), as Christians, we do not experience these as God's punitive judgment. These dangers "shall not approach" us in the sense that they can do us no ultimate, spiritual harm. In God's wise and good providence, these dangers work together for our ultimate good (remember Romans 8:28!). God's protection and deliverance is ultimately fulfilled in the resurrection from the dead secured in Christ.
3. *Christ Himself:* ultimately Christ is the singer of this Psalm! Re-read the Psalm, especially v. 9-16, and think of Jesus. In fact, at v. 9 the psalmist seems to address a specific "you" – "surely *you* have made the Lord, who is my refuge, *your* dwelling place." While it applies to all believers, it uniquely speaks of Jesus. Who, more so than Jesus, loved the Father and knew His name and trusted in Him? No wonder Satan used these very verses to tempt Jesus (see Matt. 4:6). They apply uniquely to the "Son of God" ("if you are the Son of God..."); Satan knew this, but subtly misused this Psalm. V. 14-16 is ultimately the Father speaking to the Son of His resurrection, in which our deliverance and the promises of the psalm are guaranteed.

What does this Psalm teach us about the sovereignty of God? If even of these dangers do befall us physically (like the coronavirus), what can we know for certain?

In what ways is this Psalm equivalent to the words of Romans 8:31, "if God is for us, who is against us?"