

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message Secure in His Care

Scripture Psalm 91

Today our focus will be on Psalm 91. This Psalm has been a source of comfort to many individuals who are coping with anxieties. The Psalm has many declarations of hope and protection. As we read through the Psalm, you will recognize the theme of the Lord's protection, and why it is a favorite of many believers.

Read Psalm 91:1-16

The words of this Psalm, when interpreted literally, seem to guarantee that God will guide us through the evils of this life and protect us against any difficulties which might come our way. In fact, the statements about the Lord's protection are so comprehensive that this Psalm has taken on magical proportions for some believers. These believers have latched on to statements such as "He will save you from the deadly pestilence" in verses 3 and 6 and claimed them as promises that the Lord will cure them of cancer and HIV/AIDS and other devastating illnesses. They have claimed verses 10 and 11 as their promise of escape from danger and calamity.

The fact of the matter is that the assurances of this Psalm contradict the actual experiences of most of us. There are many believers throughout the world who are persecuted for their faith and not a few of them become martyrs. And believers, just like non-believers, suffer and die of many diseases in spite of healthy lifestyles. The people of God are not immune to cancer, strokes, Parkinson's, and other debilitating diseases. They can also be the victims of broken bones and vehicle accidents and muggings. Christian parents give birth to children who have Down's syndrome and heart problems and cystic fibrosis. As believers we live in a less than ideal world, and Psalm 91 does not guarantee protection from commonplace human ills and dangers.

Obviously, there is a disconnect between this Psalm and the physical problems which afflict believers. The point here is that Psalm 91 must not be used as a magical guarantee against the physical threats which are encountered in ordinary human life. There is a deeper meaning and significance in this Psalm that we need to look for and consider.

Our first step is to consider the context of this Psalm. We don't know who wrote it, although there is almost universal agreement among commentators that it has a close connection to Psalm 90, which we thought about last week. Psalm 90 described the depressing but accurate picture of sinful people in their relationship to a holy God. Because of sin, all people are subject to the wrath of God and condemned to return to dust upon their deaths. The last verses of Psalm 90 are a prayer that God will "relent;" that is, will turn back from His anger and adopt a posture of favor toward His chosen people. Moses, who wrote Psalm 90, appealed to the unfailing love and steadfast goodness of the LORD, asking Him to have compassion on His servants.

Psalm 91 can be considered as God's response to Moses' prayer. The first statement in both Psalms is about the dwelling place of God. In Psalm 90: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations," and Psalm 91, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in (abide in, be secure in) the shadow of the Almighty." In other words, the person who is qualified to be in the presence of God will find himself/herself to be under the authority and protection of Almighty God. That's the theme of Psalm 91.

Some of the sovereign abilities of God were explained in Psalm 90. He determines the lifespans of people, He "sweeps men away" into death, He returns men to the dust from which they were created. These actions are within the sovereign rights and capabilities of the One who has existed from everlasting and who brought forth the universe for His own glory. He is indeed "the Most High" and "the Almighty."

God is not only able to control the destinies of sinful humans, but He also has the ability to protect and preserve the lives of those who are in right relationship to Him. The protection and preservation described in Psalm 91 is the flip side of His wrath and judgment. The One who can "sweep men away in the sleep of death" is the same God who can keep safe and secure those "who dwell in the shelter of the Most High." Verse 2 emphasizes this point, indicating that the LORD is a "refuge" and "fortress" for those who put their trust in Him.

The problem in Psalm 90 was that the chosen people of God were not thinking about Him or depending on Him for their well-being. That was why Moses asked God to teach the Hebrews “to number their days,” — to consider the consequences of their lack of intimacy with God.

The good news in Psalm 91 is that the person “who dwells in the shelter of the Most High” is in the place of the protection of the Almighty, and He is the One who has unlimited ability to keep in safety those who trust in Him. The word “shelter” is a reference to the presence of God. The word “dwell” means to make God’s shelter one’s place of on-going “habitation.” It must be thought of as a permanent living arrangement, as opposed to the kind of place one visits on occasion.

The first two verses of the Psalm give us a very clear picture of the ability of God to protect and take care of His people. He is described with four different titles: “Most High” (Elyon); “Almighty” (Shaddai); “Yahweh” (translated “LORD,” the “I am who I am”); and “my God” or “my Strong One,” (Elohim). These designations convey important aspects of God’s nature, specifically His sovereign, all-authoritative, and all-powerful capabilities.

Verses 3 through 13 describe just how comprehensive is the ability of God to protect and preserve those who trust Him. These verses describe what God will do for the person who dwells in His presence. Keep in mind that these verses are expressed in poetical and metaphorical terms and the threats and dangers which are mentioned are not to be taken literally. They represent examples of what God will do in response to the trust which is placed in Him.

Verse 3 mentions the “fowler’s snare” and the “deadly pestilence.” The terms can refer to any kind of trap or difficulty which might affect the well-being of a person. Verse 4 is a general description of what God will do to protect the person who is under His care. He will use the “feathers” of His “wings” to form a protective cover and provide a place of refuge. The reference to protective wings is a common idiom in the Old Testament. (*See Exodus 19:4; Ruth 2:12; Psalm 17:8*). It was even used by Jesus as He wept over Jerusalem: “How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (*Matthew 23:37*). Individuals who are under the protective wings of God are in “the shadow of the Almighty.”

The last part of verse 4 describes the faithfulness and dependability of God as a “shield” and “rampart.” The word “shield” used here is presumed to be the kind which protected the entire body, and not the small kind that was worn on the arm. The words “shield,” “ramparts,” “refuge,” and “fortress” describe God’s protection from outside attack. He has put a protective barrier between His people and danger.

Some commentators use these metaphors to call attention to the two sides of God’s concern for people. They suggest that the imagery of the mother bird’s efforts to protect her chicks represents the warmth and tenderness of God’s love. The imagery of the “shield” and “fortress” represents the “toughness” of God and His determination to block and deflect all blows aimed at His people. From the perspective of the protected, God is warm and tender; from the vantage point of the attacker, God is stronger than steel.

Next, the Psalm states that the protection of God is available both night and day, and that He provides security from all kinds of dangers. The “terror of night” and the “arrow that flies by day” refer to any sudden unanticipated attacks which would threaten life. Another kind of danger is represented by the words “pestilence” and “plague,” terms which suggest the onslaught of some sort of disease or illness. We must not attach specific meanings to these terms. They are metaphors, and are intended to represent all kinds of potentially deadly happenings.

The completeness of God’s protection is highlighted in verses 7 and 8. Even when men are “falling about us,” God is able to keep His people from harm. The point is not that we will be in situations in which a thousand or ten thousand will actually fall around us, but if the follower of God is in such a situation, the cause of the destruction of others “will not come near.” Rather, if such a dreadful event does occur, the one who is under the protective care of God will only be a witness to what is happening.

In my opinion, the last part of verse 8 is a significant clue to the interpretation of verses 3 through 8. The thousands who “fall” are identified in verse 8 as “the wicked,” and the “falling” represents their “punishment.” Now think back on the preceding verses. The verses imply that the snares and deadly pestilences and night-time and day-time terrors are part of the punishment to which the wicked are subjected.

We can therefore conclude that this Psalm is contrasting the fate of those who trust in God with those who are not under the protection of God. It is contrasting those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High with those who do not; contrasting those who are righteous with those who are wicked.

The unwillingness of a person to follow the ways of God will bring out the anger and wrath of God, as we found out last week in Psalm 90, which stated, “We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you; our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. The length of our days is seventy years, or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow” (*Psalm 90:7-10*). It is for this reason that Moses asked God to “Teach the people to number their days aright that they may gain a heart of wisdom” (*Psalm 90:12*).

Now that we understand the message of the first part of Psalm 91, we can quickly grasp the meaning and application of the second part of the Psalm. Those who “dwell in the shelter of the Most High” need not fear God’s wrath, which is the most awesome danger of all. Those who are qualified to dwell in the presence of God will only have to observe the circumstances of the wicked with their eyes. They will not have to experience the wrath of God. Notice verses 9 and 10, “If you make the Most High your dwelling place, make the Lord your refuge, then no harm or disaster will befall you.” The word translated “harm” is literally “evil.”

Verse 9 is a conditional statement, “If people make the Most High their dwelling place, ... then no harm or disaster will come to them.” One of the ways in which God will accomplish this is explained in verses 11, 12, and 13, “God will command His angels ... to guard them.” Yes, God really has provided guardian angels! The angels will lift the people of God out of danger. With the help of angels, God’s people will not stumble, nor will they be harmed by mortal threats which are compared to lions and deadly serpents. In fact, with the help of angels, God’s people will be able to walk all over the lions and deadly serpents which attack us!

Verses 14 through 16 are the most exciting and reassuring part of this Psalm. The speaker is the LORD. The promises He makes in these verses not only validate the statements made in the earlier part of the Psalm, but they also push our attention toward the ultimate purpose of this Psalm.

I began my comments about this Psalm by stating that it does not apply specifically to the physical problems which afflict believers. I said that there is a deeper meaning and significance that we need to consider. We need to think about this Psalm in primarily spiritual terms. On the surface, the verses seem to be describing deliverance from human adversity and physical challenges, but the Psalm is really describing the reality of spiritual opposition and adversity.

In this last section of the Psalm, verses 14 through 16, the LORD announces seven actions He will perform for the person who loves Him. The LORD “will rescue him,” “will protect him,” “will answer him when he calls,” “will be with him in times of trouble,” “will deliver him and honor him,” “will satisfy him with long life,” and “will show him salvation.”

Notice that these assurances are for the person who “loves” the LORD — the person who literally “has a deep longing for” and “has set his love upon” the LORD as a priority. This individual “knows” and “acknowledges” the name of the LORD. The implication is that there is an intimate relationship between the individual and God.

There are three words in these promises which have similar meanings: “rescue,” “deliver,” and “salvation.” They all refer to the individual’s removal from danger. Those individuals who sincerely “love the LORD” will not have to experience the wrath of God, a fate that will befall all those who refuse to put their trust in the LORD.

Another phrase, “I will protect him,” in the Hebrew language, literally means, “I will raise him to a high, secure place.” This is the place where no evil can exist. Furthermore, there is a significant additional blessing implied in that phrase because the person who “dwells in the shelter of the Most High” is in the presence of the LORD, and there is no more desirable place to be than to be in the presence of the LORD.

Notice the final verse in the Psalm. It speaks of “long life” and “salvation.” These verses apply most specifically to that future time when God’s people will be united with Jesus Christ. When He appears at the end of the age, they will experience ultimate salvation — they will be completely delivered from sin and evil and all the miserable earthly afflictions associated with sin. The ultimate hope of God’s people is not to be found in deliverance from trouble and pain and death in this life, but in a deliverance after death.

The metaphors mentioned earlier in the Psalm can represent Satanic attacks. The “fowler’s snare” can be temptation. In the New Testament believers are warned about falling “into the reproach and snare of the devil” (*1 Timothy 3:7*). Behind pestilence and plague can be the supernatural evil powers of Satan, whose ambition is to destroy and kill. On one occasion, when Jesus encountered a crippled woman and healed her, He attributed her condition to the work of Satan (*Luke 13:10-16*).

The deep meaning of this Psalm is that the people of God are secure — eternally secure — “in the shelter of the Most High.” God is their “refuge and fortress” against all threats of evil. This Psalm does not promise to protect God’s people from physical conditions. The assurances apply to spiritual attacks of evil. Jesus told His disciples that they would have tribulation in this world, but the people of God can count on God’s everlasting spiritual protection regardless of the hardships they might encounter during their years on earth. Whenever troubles do befall believers, and they will sooner or later, and they will sometimes be painful and difficult, God promises to be with them, helping them to endure.

The Scriptures do not promise that the people of God will be always delivered from physical suffering. Quite the opposite, there are many Scriptures which make it clear that the followers of Jesus will face spiritual opposition, opposition which would be experienced in physical ways. The Apostle Peter wrote, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you; but rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ” (*1 Peter 4:12-13*).

The Apostle Paul stated, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (*Romans 8:18*), and then he later asked the rhetorical question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" Paul acknowledged that the followers of Jesus will have problems in this life, but then he answered his question by writing, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (*Romans 8:35-37*).

Psalm 91 assumes the followers of God will experience troubles and difficulties. The deliverance, salvation, and satisfaction that God promises do not mean a care-free, unopposed life. Rather, those who fully entrust themselves to God are guaranteed to be with God in eternity. In spite of the hardships and problems the righteous people have here on earth, the LORD will enable them to be "overcomers." He will protect and preserve for eternity those "who dwell in His shelter" and "under his shadow."