

August 13, 2017/ Psalm 91/ Grand Avenue Baptist Church

This Psalm is one of the very most grand and memorable of the Psalms. It just sings. It does good to the souls of Christian believers. I have been most blessed to live in it this week as I have prepared to teach. I commend it to your meditation in the coming week. The Psalm is, in short, encouragement that despite any appearances to the contrary, the basic safety of God's people is never in doubt.

Calvin said "In this Psalm we are taught that God watches over the safety of His people, and never fails them in the hour of danger. They are exhorted to advance through all perils, secure in the confidence of his protection."

Derek Kidner called this "a Psalm for danger." He spoke of it as a Psalm "for times of being under attack or for openly opposing the forces of evil." You and I are rarely in the kind of open life-and-death-conflict faced by Moses or David or Calvin or Luther, or our persecuted modern brethren in closed countries. Our temporal dangers are comparatively small. But we can rejoice that this Psalm is universally true and relevant in all of life's dangers, big and small.

Let me pray and then we'll work through this Psalm line by line.

Father, we thank You for Your Holy Word. Thank You for revealing to us who You are and who we are. Encourage Your people as we meditate on this Psalm we pray in Christ's name, Amen.

Psalm 91 divides into 3 sections according to changes of "person." Verses 1-2 Kidner called "My refuge" and the Psalmist speaks of himself. Verses 3-13 might be called "Your refuge," as the Psalmist speaks to (singular) "you." Calvin understood the Psalmist to be speaking to himself in these verses, preaching to His own heart. But most commentators hear the Psalmist speaking to others in these middle verses. He is speaking to us, one at a time. Verses 14-16 might be called (again using Kidner's language) "God's pledge." God Himself speaks in promise to His people.

Consider with me the first two verses, "My refuge."

Psa 91:1 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

Psa 91:2 I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

The Psalmist states both the general truth in verse 1 and his personal experience and intention in verse 2. God protects His own, and the Psalmist can personally attest to this. The word rendered "to" in verse 2 could be rendered "concerning." That is it might be, "I will say 'concerning' the LORD." The ESV rendering emphasizes the Psalmist's person-to-person experience with God. He will speak "to" God. The alternative has a grandeur about it, with the force of a kind of legal proclamation to all the listening universe. In either case, this is far more than rote form. This is personal.

God's people like the Psalmist, "**remain/live/abide**" in Him. They find continual dwelling/hospitality in Him. They **trust** Him. They live in Him and they rely on Him.

Look at the ways that the Psalmist describes God's gracious protection in these two great verses. He's **shelter**, offering protection. He's **shade** from a withering desert sun, offering refreshment. He's "**my**" **refuge**/a place the Psalmist personally retreats to. He's a **fortress**, and in fact is the Psalmist's fortress. Shelter, shade, refuge, fortress: God is the complete embodiment of protection and relief for those who come to Him.

Look too at the names of God used in these verses. He's the **Most High**/the all-ruling God. If this is true, then what threat can stand against Him? He's the **Almighty**/the God who intervenes in saving power when human strength is quite gone. He is the **LORD**, the I AM, the self-existing, self-revealing, and self-defining One. And He is "**my**" **God**. That is, He is specially related to the Psalmist. Again, if this is true, what threat can the person who knows Him face? In a time of danger, the God of the Bible is all of these things to His people one at a time. And all of these things ARE constantly true about His person.

There is a wonderful little book entitled *The Person of Jesus* consisting of transcripts of 5 radio addresses made in the 1930's by J. Gresham Machen, one of the 20th century's greatest defenders of orthodox historical Christianity. At the end of his second chapter, Machen says this, speaking of Christ, the second person of the Trinity:

"We have trusted in Jesus. But how far can we trust him? Just in this transitory life? Just in this little speck we call the earth? If we can trust him only thus far we are of all men most miserable. We are surrounded by stupendous forces; we are surrounded by the immensity of the unknown. After our little span of life there is a shelving brink with the infinite beyond. And still we are subject to fear—not only fear of destruction but a more dreadful fear of meeting with the infinite and holy God.

So we should be if we had but a human Christ. But now is Christ our Savior, the one who says "Your sins are forgiven," revealed as very God. And we believe. Such a faith is a mystery to us who possess it; it seems folly to those who have it not. But if possessed it delivers us forever from fear. The world to us is all

unknown; it is engulfed in an ocean of infinity. But it contains no mysteries to our Savior. He is on the throne. He pervades the remotest bounds. He inhabits infinity. With such a Savior we are safe."

In a fundamental sense, every human ever born as a son or daughter of Adam is in the profoundest of cosmic danger. If not in our temporal lives, surely in eternity we need shelter. The Psalmist declares that those who seek shelter in the real God find real protection. Though the Psalmist couldn't see it in detail when he wrote, the work of Christ is the ground/basis/foundation of that safety. Believing people are genuinely safe in Christ.

The Psalmist now begins to speak of God's protection for "you." The discussion is not about "I" but now about "you." He will protect you. Calvin thought that the Psalmist was preaching to his own soul. Even if he was correct about this, these truths really are for each individual person who will trust/abide in God. They are for the likes of us.

Psa 91:3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence.

The snare of the fowler is a word picture for a trap that comes unaware on both the strong and the weak. Deadly pestilence is deadly sickness that you can't even see. God protects His own from the subtle plans of unknown enemies and from silent deadly infections, things of which they may not even be aware to ask for or acknowledge His deliverance. As one is saved from these things, he or she may not even know it!

Most importantly and in its fullest New Testament sense, God delivers His own from the snares of the evil one and the deadly sickness of sin. In present time and space, God at times supernaturally spares His people attacks of human enemies and the ravages of disease and misery. But always and forever He protects those who are His from eternal misery that otherwise would of necessity follow from our sin.

Psa 91:4 He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

In this verse we see pictured the care of a mother bird for her young. It is the same tender figure used by Jesus in lamenting over Jerusalem in **Luke 13:34b** when He said "**How often would I have gathered your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings ...**" But unlike wayward Jerusalem, the Psalmist sees God's people welcoming the shelter of God's care.

In verse 4, God's faithfulness is likened to pieces of armor, first a large **shield** that covers the majority of the body. The second is variously rendered as a "**buckler**" or "**rampart**."

If it is the first, it's a small mobile shield 6-18 inches in diameter gripped in the center. If it is the second, it's part of a fortress. In either case, God's care has both the personal warmth pictured in the first part of the verse and also the hard, unyielding nature of armor. Christian, we need both. Warmth without real strength is ultimately of no help in danger.

His "faithfulness," is real toughness that gives His care for His people substance and has to do with His whole character. The King James Version renders the word "faithfulness" as "truth." These two English words have the same Hebrew behind them, and we should know that this guarantee of God's care has to do with His fidelity to His word, to His promises. It is His nature, and the fact that He can be trusted to be and do exactly as He has said, that is ultimately the believer's tough, tempered protection in all of existence.

Psa 91:5 You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day,

Psa 91:6 nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

God's protection of His people is a 24/7 and completely comprehensive matter. He never sleeps nor goes on break. He's there in the night and He's there at high noon. He saves His people from stuff visible and invisible, natural and supernatural, human, bacterial, and demonic. So, of course "**You will not fear ... !**"

Mathew Henry said, "God by His grace will keep thee from disquieting fear (that fear which hath torment) in the midst of the greatest dangers. Wisdom shall keep thee from being causelessly afraid, and faith shall keep thee from being inordinately afraid. ... A believer needs not fear, and therefore should not fear any arrow, because the point is off, the poison is out. Whatever is done, our heavenly Father's will is done; and we have no reason to fear that."

Psa 91:7 A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

Psa 91:8 You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked.

The "you" in verse 7 is emphatic. To *you* it will not come near. The picture in verses 7 and 8 is one of complete devastation and carnage, and the child of God standing in the midst of it, unscathed, viewing God's judgment on sin. What is it that saves redeemed people from God's judgment, that protects them from the "recompense of the wicked" that lays waste thousands and ten thousands all around them? It is His faithfulness to His Word and to His people, made plain to the universe at Calvary.

Verses 7 and 8 are no temporal promise that the righteous will never die in a calamity or military conflict. They are rather a promise that they will not do so as God's judgment on their sin (that has been dealt with on the cross of Christ). And they are a promise that God's providence is at work on a very minute level. It works protecting every one of His own. And it works bringing judgment on every one of those who are in rebellion against Him.

The rest of this part of the Psalm (v9-13) is a series of wonderful promises of God's care. But they are not unconditional. The condition is in verse 9.

Psa 91:9 Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place-- the Most High, who is my refuge—

The condition on the protection the Psalm promises is that the individual has the Most High as his "dwelling place." James Boice said, "This is more than merely believing in God or coming to God occasionally when danger threatens. It means resting in God continually and trusting Him at all times. It means living all of life 'in God.' Martin Luther wrote that this refers to 'one who really dwells and does not merely appear to dwell and does not just imagine that he dwells' in God."

It's in this context, where the LORD is a person's real constant dwelling place, that the Psalmist says

Psa 91:10 no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent.

There is a beautiful little contrast in the promises of this verse. That is the laying side-by-side this blessed person's temporal "tent" in verse 10 and his eternal "dwelling place" in God in verse 9. His real constant dwelling place is God, and that being true, his present tent is secure. If all is fundamentally well, it is surely well in the here and now.

Psa 91:11 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

Psa 91:12 On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.

Psa 91:13 You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.

This is, of course, a passage partially quoted by Satan at the temptation of Christ. If you compare **Matthew 4**, you'll find that Satan quotes verses 11 and 12, but purposely leaves out the phrase "in all your ways." That is because it is understood that "all your ways" for

a person whose dwelling place is the LORD, are ways ordered and directed by the LORD. They are not ways chosen by a person to suit his or her whim. The temptation for Christ to toss Himself off the temple and to test God's care was a temptation to step outside a life "in God." It was a temptation to leave off making the Father His dwelling place.

In some sense, it is perfectly obvious that if God is who He says He is, and one's life is hidden in Him--is truly lived in complete reliance upon Him--one is effectively "invincible" in a proper understanding of the word. Whatever comes, pleasant or unpleasant, is meant for and will produce good, both for an individual and for the kingdom of God, bringing glory to God. For the child of God, things are exactly as the answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism asserts:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.

Our frailty and fallen natures make the "all your ways" phrase of verse 11 impossible for you and me in and of ourselves. The good news of the Gospel is that our lives are Christ's life, His righteousness is our righteousness. All of Christ's virtue, His perfect willing obedience to the Father, all of it is ours. All His ways are the Father's ways, and because of this, in Him we are perfectly protected from all harm. We are completely safe.

We have a hard time keeping all this straight and in focus. We know that God miraculously and graciously spares His children many hard things, and in fact He spares us *all things* that would crush us. We know that in all things He graciously gives us strength. We sometimes have sense enough to recognize His care for us and give thanks for His daily "ordinary" mercies, and our hearts soar as we read the great Biblical promises of a Psalm like this. We rejoice as we read **2 Kings 6:15-17** and remember Elisha's words to his servant when the Syrian army surrounded Dothan and threatened to arrest the prophet "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them" and recall the young man's eyes being opened to see an army of fiery angels on the surrounding mountains. We remember the Apostle Paul in **Acts 28** shaking the venomous snake off of his hand into the fire without harm (after the shipwreck on Malta) and say "Amen!" We praise God when we hear of modern miracles of God's deliverance of His persecuted saints and rightly give Him thanks.

But we then lose focus and jump to the incorrect conclusion that universal freedom from difficulty and the misery of the present effects of the fall is promised, that such deliverances are our right. This is not so. What is promised is that fundamentally all is well. What is promised is that when lives are "in God" there is truly nothing to fear, that God's purposes for us and for His creation will not be thwarted. Truly, in His purposes and His contexts and His time, His people will tread on the lion and adder, the young lion and serpent, the most subtle and strongest of opposition. The angels of God will aid and protect His own. The very gates of hell will not prevail against His church, for His purposes, and in His time. This is true at the same time that it is true that some of His people will suffer and die hard deaths in difficult circumstances for His sake.

We are further tempted to treat the promises of verses 11-13 presumptuously, exactly as Christ did not.

Derek Kidner said, "It was characteristic of the devil to read this promise (11f) as an invitation to arrogance. It was characteristic of God, Father and Son, that angelic help was sent when it was most needed, accepted as strength for service, and refused for self-advantage."

We don't call the shots and cannot presume upon God's validation of our random foolishness. If we jump off the pinnacle of the temple to demonstrate our "faith," we'll break every bone in our bodies. But humbly walking the ways He leads us, trusting Him in everything, no real harm can come to us.

In the last 3 verses of the Psalm, God speaks to the one who dwells in Him and personally graciously promises aid. The Psalm opened with the statement of facts and recitation of the Psalmist's experience. It proceeded to the Psalmist preaching to himself or us to believe the truth. Now God Himself pledges His loving protection.

Psa 91:14 "Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name.

God says that the one who dwells in Him **holds fast to Him in love**. This person sets his heart on/cleaves affectionately to God. This one who dwells in God "**knows my name**." This person understands what God has revealed about Himself. This knowing is knowing in truth and in person. This individual is not worshipping a figment of his or her imagination, but rather the real God of all that is. This person genuinely knows the I AM, the triune God of the Bible. Consistent with real whole-hearted and rightly-informed reliance upon God, God will deliver and God will protect.

We should not read this holding fast and having true knowledge of God in verse 14 as human causes of God's protection. Further, we should not read them as having human

origin. They are ours, not by our own effort, but in the mercy of Christ. Christ perfectly loves and holds fast to the Father and knows the Father. It's in Christ that Christian people fully hold fast to God and truly know Him. These are ultimately His gifts in Jesus to His people, and His deliverance and protection in this life are simply consistent with these gifts. Christ holds fast in love and we are blessed.

It is the testimony of the Scriptures and of the believing church in every age, that God protects and preserves His people, that finally all is well in this life and the next. He keeps His promise to deliver and protect.

Psa 91:15 When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him.

Those who dwell continually in God call to Him. They flee to Him in prayer. Those who have made the LORD their dwelling place will cry out to Him, and He will answer. He will be with His people in trouble. Jesus, God in the flesh chose to join the likes of you and me in our trouble and rescue us. This is basic Bible theology. The I AM is with His people and answers them when they cry to Him. The helpless will call to their only Helper, and in grace He will rescue, and He will honor those who are His.

Psa 91:16 With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation."

With long life He will satisfy those who dwell in Him and show them His salvation. Old Testament saints like the Psalmist could only see dimly what you and I know is the full gospel truth here, and the end of life described in this Psalm. Through and in Christ, His people cleave to Him, know Him in truth, and flee to Him in prayer. The triune God of the Bible delivers, protects, answers, joins them in trouble, rescues, honors, and ultimately saves them eternally and satisfies them forever in His own presence. Eternal life with God starts now and never ends ... such is truly long permanent blessed life.

Glory to the Holy One. This is exceedingly wonderful. In a few moments we are going to sing a closing hymn essentially confessing together that this is all God's doing and is most precious. But before we do so, let me do two other things. Let me first read a New Testament passage that comes to the same conclusion as this Psalm. Then let me leave us with some exhortations consistent with the Scriptures.

Hear the words of Romans 8, beginning at verse 28.

Rom 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Rom 8:29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Rom 8:30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Rom 8:31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

Rom 8:32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Rom 8:33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

Rom 8:34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Rom 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

Rom 8:36 As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

Rom 8:37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Rom 8:38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,

Rom 8:39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Psalmist didn't know the details, but He knew in general terms that this was coming. Thanks be to God!

In light of Psalm 91, hear these exhortations, first for those of us who believe, then for those who do not yet believe.

Christians, dwell wholly in God. Trust completely in His Son. Don't fear. Give thanks for His gracious protection and go about the life He gives you, doing what He puts before you in complete confidence that all is well. It really is. Talk to yourself and to others about this, and make the fame of God great.

If you are here this morning as an inquirer into the Christian faith and nothing that has been said here describes you or your experience, I urge *you* to flee to Christ. There is eternal safety in Him and only in Him. The wonderful condition of life "in God" described Psalm 91 is real. This is not some fairy story or mystical condition, or mind game, but is instead the way things are. So too is the eternal real danger outside His forgiveness and protection. I implore you to cast yourself on His mercy without delay. The invitation to dwell in the shelter of the Most High and to abide in the shadow of the Almighty is open to you through the work of Christ. Flee to Him while there is life.

Let me close in prayer, and we'll sing.

Father, again thank You for Your Holy Word. Thank You for Your constant care and gracious protection. Bring Yourself glory as we believe and live Your Word, we pray in Jesus. It's in His Name and for His sake we ask. Amen and Amen.