

## Bible Study Psalm 91

### **The Text: READ Psalm 91**

Verse 1 answers the question of to whom these promises apply: they apply to the person who “dwells in the shelter of the Most High,” and for no one else. The word “dwell” means “to remain, stay, tarry, endure, have one’s abode.” This word expresses permanence and perseverance. The New Testament counterpart to this is found in Jesus’ teaching about those who abide in Him, as branches abide in the vine (*John 15:1-8*). In verse 2 the psalmist confesses his faith that this is indeed the truth because he has experienced this himself.

In verses 3-13, the psalmist expositis all that God will do for the person dwelling in Him. These metaphors convey the psalmist’s assurance in different ways. First, the psalmist teaches that God’s protection is available from all the deadly dangers of life. Second, he also tells us that God’s protection is not limited to certain times and places. God gives his protection in the dark of night, as well as the brightness of noonday; whether the believer is at home or on a journey.

The four perils listed in verses 5-6 have been interpreted by some commentators to represent demons or malevolent spirits which are often associated with illness. Even so, if such events do transpire, the one under God’s protection will simply look on as these things come to the “wicked,” for they have chosen not to abide in God (v. 8).

God replies, in verses 14-16, that the psalmist’s testimony about Him is true. **Read these verses again.**

Donald Williams, a former pastor of Hollywood Presbyterian Church, wrote in his commentary on this psalm, “This is both a triumphant and a troubling psalm. It is triumphant because it guarantees that God will be our guard and guide through the evils of this life. It is troubling because it seems to be based on an unworkable theology: a theology of glory. What about suffering? What about the martyrs? What about the Cross? What about Christians who pray for healing only to hear silence?” [*Mastering the Old Testament, Psalms 73-150*]

John Mays (Old Testament scholar) echoes Pastor Williams’ warning. He writes, “The psalm itself poses a danger. Because its assurance of security is so comprehensive and confident, it is especially subject to the [type of] misuse that

[turns] faith into superstition” [*Interpretation Commentary, Psalms*, p. 297]. In fact, both of these teachers, as well as others, have pointed out that Jews and Christians through the ages have worn bits of text from this psalm on amulets believed to have magical properties to protect the wearer.

Ironically, Satan’s use of this psalm (vv. 11-12) as a temptation of Jesus (*Matthew 4:5-7*) was an invitation for Jesus take the promises of God into His own control and will. Jesus did readily accept God’s provision, protection, power, and the fulfillment of God’s promises but only when they provided strength for service and sacrifice (*Luke 22:42-43*), but he refused such for self-advantage (*Matthew 26:53*). [*Derek Kidner, Psalms 73-150*, p. 365]

The question for us then is, how do we appropriate this psalm for ourselves? How can we, like this psalmist, pray and praise and declare with absolute confidence that God protects US in ways just as comprehensive? How can we live into these promises of God and experience them for ourselves? Because we live in a broken world, and often experience that brokenness and pain personally, Psalm 91 can balance our faith on a razor’s edge: we may read it (as some have) as a mockery of our personal experiences, or we can read it as a call to faith and hope.

We must be careful not to read into any one psalm, or single passage of scripture, as positing a complete and self-contained doctrine. Psalm 91 must be read alongside scriptures like Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, and the Book of Job before we form doctrines around how, where, why, and when God fulfills His promises. If our greatest desire is intimacy with God (vv. 1 & 9), God promises to be intimate with us (vv. 14-16). If we, like our psalmist, “dwell, abide, and take refuge” in God alone, then God’s promise is that we will experience his presence as the “shelter” that He truly is.

Walter Brueggemann (*The Message of the Psalms*) helps by pointing out that the psalm ends (vv. 14-16) with words spoken *to* us, rather than *by* us. In this world of danger and tribulation (*John 16:33*) it serves as a source of confidence and assurance for those that abide in Him, that God has the last word.

Psalm 91 is a testimony and psalm of trust in God that also exhorts and encourages others to trust God’s protection and security. Paul echoes the central message of this psalm when he wrote (*Romans 8:31*), “What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?” And also, “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (*Romans 8:28*).

The hill, though high, I covet to ascend;  
The difficulty will not me offend,  
For I perceive the way to life lies here;  
Come, pluck up, heart, let's neither faint nor fear;  
Better, though difficult, the right way to go,  
Than wrong, though easy, where the end is woe.  
[John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*]

The key is as the psalmist experienced it: He who dwells (*permanently and with perseverance*) in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow (*protection*) of the Almighty.

### **Psalm 91**

#### **Questions for Further Reflection**

When you hear the word “shelter,” what comes to mind? Is there a person or place, a thing or institution that is a shelter for you? What does it mean to shelter, rest in, or take refuge in something or someone? What does it mean to make God your refuge and fortress, to dwell with permanence and perseverance (v. 2)? What names of God does the psalmist use in verses 1-2? What other names might you add to the psalmist's list?

What types of calamities are discussed in verses 3-8? What do you think the psalmist means by “terror of night,” and “arrow that flies by day”? Do these things still plague us today? In verses 3-8, the psalmist lists several metaphors to describe God's protection: deliverer (v. 3), healer (v. 3), mother hen (v. 4), shield (v. 4), fortress or rampart (v. 4). Which image of God most resonates with you? Why?

Is God's protection available to everyone (vv. 1, 9-10, 14)? Who joins God in this work of protection (vv. 11-12)? What is the scope of protection that God promises in verses 14-16? If God promises such perfect protection, why do evil and calamity befall believer and unbeliever alike?

This psalm has been employed by Jew and Christian alike as protection against demonic influences, so it is rather ironic that Satan uses it (vv. 11-12) in his attempt to corrupt Jesus (*Matthew 4:5-7*). Jesus saw it as a way to test God, not as a way of trusting God. What is the difference between trusting God's promises, and testing Him to prove the veracity of those promises? What confidence and assurance in God's promises do you receive knowing that God has the last word (vv. 14-16)?