

How Does God Care for Us in Perilous Times?

~Psalm 91

Pastor Tom
March 22, 2020

Well my friends, here we are. Life continues to dramatically change as the COVID-19 pandemic spreads around the world and into our community. It has impacted everyone's life and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Tens of thousands worldwide have had their lives permanently altered through the death of a loved one; over 13000 this morning.

Sometimes, it can overwhelm us. I know there are times, I need to turn off the news, close my tablet and click off my phone. My head begins to hurt unless I stop trying to take it all in. Many of you have dealt with tough realities this week. Maybe you've had your hours cut back or you've been laid off. Some of you have had to lay off others. Some experienced the challenge of coming back to the country amidst the frenzy of travel. Many are concerned about their savings and retirement. Parents have to figure out child care with no school and come up with activities since many public places have closed. And some of you may know or live near someone who's sick.

Yet, God does not leave us during a time like this. Today, we are going to go to a most comforting Psalm 91. We're going to discover several ways God cares for His people during perilous times. I pray that these words will bring calm, encouragement and hope to everyone joining in today. So if you have a Bible or you're following on You Version, please find Psalm 91. I will read from the English Standard Version.

Psalm 91 (ESV)

91 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 refuge¹—

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.”

How does God care for those close to Him during perilous times? He brings us under His protection (1-2). The Psalm himself speaks to begin the Psalm. He talks about how those close to God receive the protection of God. “He (or she) who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.” So this is both a condition and a promise. First, you and I have to dwell or live in the shelter of the Most High. To live under someone’s shelter means we have to be close to them. You can’t enjoy the shelter of someone if you’re a thousand kilometers away. You have to come close to experience their shelter.

So the first phrase of the Psalm reveals that we must come close to God to experience the care talked about. We can easily drift from God when life normally clicks along. We have so many other things we give our attention to or fill our time with. God often gets the scraps. But now life is not clicking along normally. If we’ve been far from God, we can come back to Him. We need to renew those practices of ongoing fellowship with Him – time in His Word; responding in prayer; worshipping Him in song and our actions; talking about Him with others. All these practices help bring us close to God where we find shelter.

Then look at what happens for those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High? We will abide or live in the Almighty's shadow. All of us have faced our own frailty and limitations these past days. We have realized that so much is beyond our control. Yet as we heard last week, God is sovereign and in control. Though much craziness goes on around us, He casts a long shadow over those who draw near to Him. Shadows can be comforting when they originate from someone there to defend us.

The Psalmist goes on in verse 2 to declare His trust in the Lord. But he also paints another picture of protection. He declares that the Lord is his refuge and fortress. In ancient times, when an invading army approached a region, all the people went into the local fortress. This was a built up stronghold that could withstand extraordinary threats and assaults. Spears and arrows would not make a dent into the fortress. Those inside experience a protection they could not produce themselves. This Psalmist sees the Lord like this. Though the Psalmist is weak, the Lord is strong. Though the Psalmist is vulnerable, the Lord is a fortress. In declaring this trust in the Lord, we gain a sense that this Psalmist speaks from some experience. Or at least he strongly believes what he declares to all who listen. So in times of trouble or peril, the Lord brings those close to Him under His protection.

The Psalmist then changes his focus. He moves from his own expression of faith to directly encourage his readers. He speaks directly to each individual reader. Whenever we see the word "you" in verses 3-13, it comes in the singular form. So the Psalmist is not saying this applies to "you all." He speaks directly to each one of us and declares "this applies to you."

So in verses 3-4 the Psalmist declares that **The Lord shields us from life's deadly dangers (3-4)**. Verse 3 "For he will deliver you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence or disease or plague or virus." The Psalmist paints an image of the Lord rescuing his people from a trap or snare. We can't release ourselves but the Lord comes along to rescue us from the trap.

But there is also a very relevant promise in the latter half of verse 3. (He will deliver you) *from the deadly pestilence.*" For some of us, this verse directly applies to our lives for the very first time. This virus has killed over 13000 people. In the last three months. Yet it reminds us that deadly pestilence has occurred before in history. The Lord has the power to deliver His people from such disease. This verse was probably written 3000 years ago. The people of that time also faced deadly pestilence.

Yet this verse begs some deeper thought. Does it promise that the Lord will deliver everyone close to Him from deadly pestilence? Does it say Christians don't have to fear since the Lord guarantees our protection? If so, this verse seems to promise too much. We have received no news that the only people who have succumbed to this virus are "non-Christians." I believe it careless to use a verse like this to promise blanket deliverance for God's people.

We must read such a verse in light of the whole Scripture. God never promises us complete deliverance from all our troubles in this life. Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation (trouble). But take heart; I have overcome the world." Even in Psalm 91:15, the Lord says "I will be with him in trouble." I will be with him *in trouble*. Therefore, I believe we cannot conclude that this verse guarantees deliverance from all pestilence.

But this verse also reminds us not to underestimate God's ability to deliver us from pestilence. God has the power to intervene and protect in ways we cannot imagine. Instead of putting our faith only in isolation, hand washing, social distancing and government decisions, we must continue to say to the Lord, "My refuge, my fortress, my God in whom I trust."

Verse 4 contains a beautiful image of the Lord protecting His people like a mother bird puts her babies under her wings. I don't know why the English Standard Version inserted the word "pinions" rather than "feathers." I think in their desire to be literal, this translation makes the verse harder to understand. No one says "Oh, look at the bird flapping it's pinions." But we get the idea of feathers. This kind of protection cost the protector something. If a mother bird protects her babies from heat or cold, she has to endure the heat or cold. This portrays God's self-sacrificing love on behalf of His people. Jesus endured all threats, abuse and suffering so we wouldn't have to. That was the ultimate example of self-sacrifice. But God protects in similar ways in our lives today.

Then in verses 5 and 6, we see another way God cares for His people during troubled times. **He provides ongoing protection day or night (5-6).** Notice how these verse alternate between night and day, darkness and light. The Psalmist portrays God protecting without regard for the time or place. He doesn't protect us for an 8 hour work day and then shut protection down for the night. The threat could come in the middle of the night or the middle of day. It could come in our thoughts and night terrors. Or it could be a physical threat at daytime. Whatever and whenever the threat occurs, God protects. In verse 6, the Psalmist provides an accurate description of plague or pandemic. He talks about a pestilence that stalks in darkness. It's like it waits for an

unknown or unseen moment. But then it suddenly strikes. Yet this would not surprise the Lord. He is aware of all the threats and dangers we face. Though He may not deliver us from them all, He has delivered us from many more than we're even aware of. Think of the close calls in your life. Some of those could be from God's direct intervening protection to ensure your continued survival to this day.

Then in verses 9-10, the Psalmist alerts us to another way God protects us. **He guards us from evil and malignant forces (9-10).** Malignant means bad or something that harms. Evil forces do wage war against God's people. We are told in Ephesians 6:12 "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Yes, we have to take up the armor of God as described in Ephesians 6. But here, in Ps. 91, we are reminded that God does not leave us alone in this struggle. He wages war against evil and takes up our cause to protect us.

To that end, He sends His angels to help us. That's the next way God protects us. **He commands His angels to guard and guide us (11-13).** The Lord commands His angels to guard us in all our ways. So He commissions His angels to guard duty. They watch out and protect us. Their involvement extends to steps we take. Verse 12 says, "On their hands they will bear you up lest you strike your foot against a stone." So it's like they watch where we step and ensure that we not trip up or stumble.

But this does not mean we have permission to be reckless and trust angels to get us out of any situation. Some of you may recognize these verses from the New Testament. They are the only verses quoted (or should I say misquoted) by Satan. He uses part of these verses to tempt Jesus. He invites Jesus to throw Himself off the temple daring angels to catch him before he hit the rocks below. But Jesus refused and showed us we don't use such verses to test God and play games. No this protection is offered for those walking closely with the Lord and making their way on life's path. We're unaware of so many of the dangers and traps. But the Lord sends His angels to guard and guide us.

The last way God cares for His people in troubled times is found in verses 15-17. Here the one speaking changes. Now, the Lord Himself speaks. He reminds us that **He remains present with us in trouble (14-16).** Notice the Lord restates the condition we talked about earlier. We must stay close to the Lord. We who dwell in the shelter of the Almighty. But the Lord states this closeness in a different way in verse 14. – "Because he holds

me fast (or close) in love, I will deliver him.” God will protect those who come to Him. But if people want to try it their own way, they move beyond His protection to try to face life’s dangers alone.

But, then those who dearly love the Lord experience One who is ready to act with whatever we face. Listen to what the Lord says He will do – I will deliver; I will protect, I will answer; I will be with in trouble, I will rescue, I will honor and I will show him my salvation. So in the midst of this time of world-wide trouble, the Lord remains with us.

So we need to come close to God and then stay close to Him. If you once were close to God but have wandered far, now is the time to come back. He waits for you and desires to bring you under His shadow. If you have never come to God, now is the day of your salvation. You need simply to cry out to Him for His rescue. You need to turn away from doing life apart from Him and give the trust of your life to Him. He sent His Son so that you could be forgiven and brought into His family. So put your trust upon Christ today and you will be immediately placed under God’s protection. Then once we’ve come close to God, we need to stay close to Him. Each day, connect with God through His word, prayer and worship. Maybe share what you’ve learned or He said with others. Let us together remain close to Him as He cares for us through this time.