

Does Psalm 91 Promise Disease Immunity?: Beware of the Devil's Hermeneutic

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In times of distress and calamity, we're reminded why the Book of Psalms is the most well-worn part of our Bible. All the psalms are from God and important; but some are especially comforting. Like Psalm 91, the great psalm of security and safety for endangered believers. Yet some of the same texts most treasured by the Church are most twisted by the heretics. Psalm 91 has long been a favourite of the Word-Faith movement and of prosperity preachers because of its extraordinary promises:

For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper and from the deadly pestilence. ...A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not approach you. ...No evil shall befall you, Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling. (vv. 3, 7, 10)

Bumper stickers read, "Protected by Psalm 91"; companies are named Psalm 91 Security. Soldiers are guaranteed that if Psalm 91 is prayed over them daily, they will never be injured.¹ Has any psalm faced more abuse than this one? Now, with the current COVID-19 crisis, Psalm 91 is back in the spotlight. Pastor Paula White said last week, "Maybe you'd like to sow a \$91 seed, putting your faith with Psalm 91."² Rodney-Howard Browne's church cites Psalm 91 as a reason for defying government orders and wise health precautions.³ A South African Christian magazine cited Psalm 91 last week, telling us to stand authoritatively on that text, commanding sickness to depart and refusing to be infected.⁴

Is that really what Psalm 91 teaches? Many teachers have already exposed the demonic and deadly doctrines of the Word-Faith movement, such as positive confession, power-words, and the little-gods complex.⁵ The point of this article is simply to help you see what Psalm 91 does and does *not* mean, so that you can build a sound theology of suffering that will weather the toughest storms. You don't need a Ph.D. on prosperity theology to understand God's true comfort in this psalm.

Ironically, the only Scripture we ever hear of Satan quoting is from Psalm 91:11-12, twisting it to serve his agenda in Jesus' temptation in the desert (Matt. 4:6). Jesus replied by rightly quoting Scripture about not putting God to the test. So when false teachers want to use this psalm for their 'name-it and claim-it, no-suffering' theology, they are borrowing the devil's hermeneutic, using Satan's tool for mishandling God's Word. Trusting God does not exempt us from acting wisely and responsibly.

How do we know that Psalm 91 provides lasting comfort for God's people and not a lucky charm? I will give you three reasons: context, context, context! This is the first rule of

¹ <https://www.kcm.org/real-help/prayer/apply/praying-the-91st-psalm-over-your-soldier>

² <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-03-19-beware-the-false-saviours-and-their-snake-oil/>

³ <https://twitter.com/rhowardbrowne/status/1238972586761076738>

⁴ <https://joynews.co.za/coronavirus-is-making-this-verse-famous-and-misunderstanding-it-can-be-deadly/>

⁵ <http://so4j.com/exposing-word-of-faith-justin-peters> ; <https://www.gotquestions.org/Word-Faith.html>

Bible interpretation. We cannot apply the scriptures rightly to our lives if we do not first interpret them properly in their context (Ezra 7:10; 2 Tim. 2:15).

Immediate Context

Psalm 91:15 shows that God expects the righteous to suffer: "I will be with him *in* trouble". God promises not security *from* suffering, but *in* suffering. Consider: The author of this psalm himself eventually had to succumb to death, the greatest enemy. Does that mean God failed him and broke His promise to rescue him? Of course not! The author even speaks of accepting death when it comes, "With a long life I will satisfy Him and let Him see my salvation" (v.16).

Verse 8 speaks of the dangers in this psalm as "the recompense of the wicked", not general suffering for the godly. As Boice states:

Psalm 91 is not a promise that those who trust God will never die of disease or even in some military conflict. It is a promise that they will not suffer those or any other calamities as God's judgment against them for their sin. Their sin has been atoned for by the blood of Jesus Christ.

None of the trials faced by God's people are punishment; they are only Fatherly discipline, always filtered through God's loving hands (Heb. 12:4-17).

Most fundamentally of all, we must realise that this psalm's comforts are only for those in vital communion with God, who "dwell in His shelter" and "abide in His shadow", who have "made" Him their refuge (v. 1-2, 9). It is impossible for the unsaved, or for those who believe a false gospel, to know a saving relationship with God. All the security He promises here is for those who "love" Him, not use Him (v. 14a). It is for those who have learned His attributes, not for those who try to force His hand (v. 14d, "I will deliver him... because he has known My name"). It is about learning who God is, not telling Him what to do.

The rich comforts of Psalm 91 are for those who "call upon" God in reverent prayer, not who arrogantly command Him (v. 15). *God's protection is not a product you purchase; it is a relationship with the Protector Himself.* It is about knowing your heavenly Father, not rubbing a genie in a lamp. It is about a living faith, not a cheap formula.

The message and main point of Psalm 91 is clear: Our God fully protects His servants from the gravest dangers; His shelter and shade are the safest place in the universe. Because we can always trust His total protection, we have great reason to sing!

Wider OT Context

Nowhere in the rest of the Psalter or the entire Old Testament do we find any promise of a trouble-free life for God's people. On the contrary, often the psalmists speak of God-ordained suffering: "Many are the afflictions of the righteous", and "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 34:19; 23:4). Suffering is seen as inevitable and beneficial for the believer.

Look at all that King David suffered, or the sons of Korah or Asaph, the main authors of the psalms. From the life of Joseph (Gen. 37-50) to the entire Book of Job, we see that God's

plan for His people includes bitter trials. To say otherwise and deny that the righteous will suffer is to join with Job's "miserable comforters" and foolish counsellors (Job 16:2).

NT Context

We know that the Bible is a book of progressive revelation, given by God over many centuries. The Old Testament doctrines of God's sovereignty, righteous suffering, and the hope of the afterlife are more of a bud, which then blossoms into full flower and greater clarity in the New Testament.

The original hearers of Psalm 91 knew that God was absolutely faithful to protect His people from the fiercest foes. But in light of Christ's coming, we know more fully *how* it is that God guarantees our safety. The psalmist spoke better than he knew. We serve a Saviour who Himself desired to be spared from danger, but prayed, "Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done" (Lk. 22:42). When the Apostle Paul faced imminent execution, he declared the Lord would deliver him *through* death, not *from* death (2 Tim. 4:18). Our God rescues both in the physical and spiritual realm, from all threats seen and unseen; not for this life only, but forevermore.

These texts from Jesus and Paul illustrate a crucial lesson that Psalm 91 teaches: *Our sovereign Protector's great power is shown not only in delivering us from danger, but also delivering us through danger.* Our Lord is King, and in His perfect providence, any ill that we face must be filtered through His wise, loving and omnipotent hands. The same angels God sends to spare His people are the angels that escort His people safely home to Glory. When a believer does not have a category for both kinds of deliverances, their faith can be easily shaken (or shattered) when suffering comes.

The New Testament often shows how suffering serves the believer's good, both in spiritual growth in this life and in eternal reward (Rom. 8:28-39; 1 Cor. 3:21-23). Whatever calamity the Lord may have planned for our earthly lives, it will only promote our greater gain in Christ and the means by which we triumph (Php. 1:21; 2 Cor. 2:14; Rev. 12:11). Surely the hope of Psalm 91 for the Christian is: "If God is for us, who can be against us? ...in all these things (tribulation, distress, slaughter, et.al.) we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us" (Rom. 8:31,35-37). Plus, one day we will reign with Christ in our glorified body and enjoy the final fulfilment of Psalm 91 in total physical and spiritual immunity and deliverance (Rom. 8:31; 1 Cor. 15:50-58; Php. 3:20-21)!

Conclusion

For too long, Psalm 91 has been stolen from the Church and hijacked by the prosperity preachers. It is time for us to reclaim this wonderful psalm and show God's people how it is not a lucky charm, but is a source of lasting comfort amidst a chaotic world. Van Gemeren sums it up well: "In life the Lord may permit many terrible things to happen to his children (e.g., Job), as he did to his own Son, our Lord. But his children know that no power is out of God's control."

If all prayers for healing were answered in this life, most Christians would never die. Clearly God has a better plan. The message of Psalm 91 could be summed up in the famous saying of George Whitefield: "We are immortal until our work on earth is done." Or listen to how Pastor Spurgeon captures it:

It is impossible that any ill should happen to the man who is beloved of the Lord; the most crushing calamities can only shorten his journey and hasten him to his reward. Ill to him is no ill, but only good in a mysterious form. Losses enrich him, sickness is his medicine, reproach is his honour, death is his gain. No evil in the strict sense of the word can happen to him, for everything is overruled for good.

Scripture is clear that our three greatest foes are the world, the flesh and the devil. Every time we sing Amazing Grace, we are echoing the promises of Psalm 91, celebrating the life of complete safety in His shelter and under His wings, and praising our Almighty Deliverer:

*Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come.
Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*