

Superstitious Or Secure

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[0 : 00] Well let's now turn and read Psalm 91. Psalm 91. You might want to have your Bibles open to follow along over the next few minutes. It'll also appear on the screen.

Psalm 91. He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust. For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence.

He will cover you with his pinions and under his wings you will find refuge. His faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You'll not fear the terror of the night nor the arrow that flies by day nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness nor the destruction that wastes at noon day.

A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place, the Most High who is my refuge.

[1 : 11] No evil shall be allowed to befall you. No plague come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up lest you strike your foot against the stone.

You'll tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. Because he holds fast to me in love I will deliver him. I will protect him because he knows my name. When he calls to me I will answer him. I will be with him in trouble. I will rescue him and honour him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.

While Psalm 91 is one of the most famous Psalms in the Bible. You can find verses from that Psalm on posters, on bookmarks, on tea towels and just about everything else that you want to print a Psalm on. And it's one of our favourite Psalms to sing as a church and in churches across the country.

That's because the Psalm contains wonderful promises of protection and security. He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High. He who abides in the shadow of the Almighty.

[2 : 25] I will say to the Lord my refuge, my fortress, my God in whom I trust. Shelter, refuge, fortress, all of this imagery, the paint, the picture that the Psalmist paints is one of total security.

And it's something we crave. It's no surprise really that this Psalm has been precious throughout history. However throughout history this Psalm has also been, there's also been a lot of confusion about how this Psalm is to be applied.

Can it really be true? A legend has it that in World War I the commander of the US 91st Brigade gave all his soldiers a card with Psalm 91 on and they agreed to recite it daily and the story goes that as they went through three of the bloodiest battles in World War I they suffered no casualties despite battalions around them suffering almost a 90% mortality rate.

Or a bit further on after the attack on the Twin Towers in 9-11, lots of bumper stickers appeared on cars in America with Psalm 91 verse 1, 9-1-1.

Psalm 91 has also been cherished in the face of illness. I don't know if you remember all the way back in the pandemic, there was a Psalm that appeared a lot on the internet.

[3 : 40] And New Zealand pastor, Ryan Tamaki actually assured his listeners, he said these words, for Bible believing born again Christians who pay their tithes, God assures them protection from the virus in Psalm 91.

You will not fear the terror of the night nor the arrow that flies by day nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness nor the plague that destroys at midday. We needn't fear it.

Now that's an example of kind of name it and claim it. Name a promise from God and claim it from for yourself. But the problem is there was actually never a 91st Brigade, US Brigade in the World War I.

And that plenty of questions still got COVID. And lots of people who are trusting in Jesus still face and suffer from all the dangers we see in Psalm 91.

So what do we do with a Psalm like this? What do we do with a Psalm that offers all these promises? Can we pray this Psalm? Can we even trust in the promises of this Psalm?

[4 : 46] Can we even finish singing this Psalm at the end of the service? Or is it just superstition? Is it does this Psalm offer security or superstition?

Those are the options in some ways that we're given. Is it true or is it false security or superstition? To work that out, we need to first look at what the Psalm is promising and then who the Psalm is for. And then we can first look at what is the Psalm promising? It's a promise of complete protection. The Psalm begins with that wonderful promise of all-encompassing protection. He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. Now that kind of imagery might sound a bit strange to us, but it would have made sense for the original readers.

If you build your house in a city or build your house next to some fort or castle or tower, you're trusting in that ruler, that king, the person who owns that real estate to protect you.

[5 : 50] You're taking shelter under their power, under their influence, under their strength. You might even think the shadow cast by the castle walls kind of lays out, marks out this protected territory.

The lesson is simple. The one who makes their home in God's protection will be completely secure. And in verse 2, that's exactly what the Psalmist says he is doing.

He's giving his testimony throughout this Psalm. He says, I will say to the Lord, my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust. In the face of danger, the Psalmist says, I trust in God.

I'm dwelling in him. I'm making my home with God's protection. And as he goes through the Psalm, he encourages us to join him by explaining just how comprehensive, just how complete this protection is.

Now, if you look at verse 3, in some ways it summarizes the dangers. First, we have danger from people. In the first part of verse 3, he speaks about the foulest snare. That image of a foulest snare, where you can get different types of snares, but often it would be some kind of thin mesh net that's stretched out between two trees.

[7 : 01] And so as the birds fly in, they get caught, they get tangled in the net, and then all it takes, and then the foul can just come along, take the birds, kill them, eat them, whatever comes next.

It's a picture of deadly deception, of invisible and invisible danger. I mean, maybe for the Psalmist, he'd be thinking about bandits going to ambush the traveler as they're going along the road.

I mean, for us in the 21st century, you might think of bank fraud, the con man, someone who's abusive and gets, and brings someone into a manipulative relationship, even school bullies.

And in some ways, the Psalmist is painting a picture. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we never had to worry that that email, that phone call, that claim to be from the bank, wasn't actually from the bank? Wouldn't it be wonderful if you didn't have to be guarded when you got to know someone, but you didn't have to fear that they would manipulate and twist and abuse your trust?

We go from danger from dangerous people to a dangerous world in the second part of verse 3, deadly pestilence.

[8 : 18] If there's one thing that everyone is afraid of, it's a threat to their health. Why did COVID-19, why did the plague throughout the ages strike such fear into people's hearts?

It's because it's indiscriminate. It's invisible. It's deadly. I mean, there's even stories in the Middle Ages of a whole town being put under quarantine, and the residents going out to fight to the army that is trying to keep them in quarantine because they would rather die by the sword than be stuck and face the plague.

Nothing has changed. For many of us, our greatest fear is that we, or a loved one, faces illness, some terminal condition or disease.

Just this past week, there was anxiety ramped up in Lewis as it was reported that last Saturday there was a case of a possible contact with the measles for anyone who went to the sports centre in Stornoway on Saturday.

That's not to make you scared. No, that's a good thing to know if you were there. And if you're vaccinated, you should be absolutely fine. But the point is that human beings are frail creatures.

[9 : 29] In 2021, the UK government spent over 280 billion on healthcare. That's 4,188 pounds per person if you're wondering where your taxes go.

We spent an enormous amount of money trying to stay safe, to protect from enemies, to protect our lives. And it's worth saying that we are immensely privileged compared to many parts of the world and many people throughout history.

But each one of us, we still face danger on every side. And that's why we face danger because we live in a world that is broken, where people are broken, where we hurt one another, where we face danger, where this world doesn't function as it should.

That's why if you want some more figures, the government spent 46 billion on defence, 3 billion on fire services, 25 billion on policing, and of course that massive 280 billion on healthcare.

We do all we can to try to stay safe. But while that money has done an awful lot of good, fires still happen, families still die, an average of two people in the UK are murdered every day, and over 400,000 people are diagnosed with cancer every year.

[10 : 53] Are we really safe? Are we really secure? But it's into a world that's far more dangerous than even our own, that the psalmist gives this promise of complete protection.

Maybe you think by this point, this is wishful thinking. Verse 4 picks up on this image of once again dwelling in the shadow of God's protection. We move from the imagery of dwelling in the shadow of a fortress to the shadow of a bird.

He will cover you with his pinions. Under his wings you will find refuge. I've never seen a bird protecting their young. I've seen some videos from a live webcam of a bald eagle protecting their young.

First of all from the elements and they just spread themselves out those massive wings, and the rain and the hail beats down and their chicks absolutely fine. Well there's predatory birds that at one point kind of circling and eagles out there.

Eagles wings outstretched, protecting their chicks, nothing can get at them, nothing can harm them. And the psalmist says that God provides 360 degree protection, protection on every side.

[12 : 04] And the second part of verse 4 reinforces that point. His faithfulness is a shield and a buckler. Literally it's an encircling shield. It's the kind of picture that danger approaches on every side, but every single direction that you turn, there is God.

There is his faithfulness protecting you. If the psalmist has watched sci-fi films, he might have said, you know, God's protection is like a force field or something like that.

That's the kind of picture. Protection on every side. And it's not just 360 degree protection, it's 24-7 protection. Look at verses 5 and 6. You'll not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noon day.

Day and night, intense darkness, and the heat of the noon day sun. God's shield is there, an ever-present protection.

And verses 7 and 8 show the result. While one person is the one who's standing under God's protection, well they remain standing even when a thousand and ten thousand fall on either side.

[13 : 15] We've mentioned the danger from people, we've mentioned the danger from the world. There's actually a third element of the danger that runs through this psalm. And that is protection against spiritual evil.

The Bible tells us that we live in a world where there is a real spiritual enemy. The Bible talks about Satan, talks about the devil and his minions who are out to oppose God and who are out to deceive people and whose goal is to take people away from God, to blind their eyes to the reality, to the truth about God in this world, to tempt them to reject God and to think that they know better than God.

And it's a path that the Bible tells us only leads to destruction. Some commentators think that verse 4, that language of the pestilence, stalking in the darkness, maybe describes demonic forces.

But if we go to verses 11 and 13, that's certainly speaking about angelic protection against demonic adversaries. The lion and the adder, they might be, in verse 13, they might just be animals, but more likely people commentators say that they're probably speaking about evil spiritual powers.

The psalms often speak about enemies as lions, and they often, this imagery about the devil as the serpent, and evil powers as serpent-like, runs all the way through the Old Testament.

[14 : 55] In Genesis 3, for example, God promises that one of Eve's descendants will crush the serpent's head. In the face of the danger of dark spiritual forces, the psalmist says the one whose

dwells in God's protection is safe.

And actually the point of verse 13 is that they're not, they don't just merely survive, they're victorious. The psalmist is making this point, dwell in the shelter of the most high, because he gives complete protection. That's what he's urging us, dwell in the shelter of the most high, because he gives complete protection. Well, how can the psalmist be so confident of this?

Well, first, just look at who he's talking about. It's because of who God is. If we're just looking verses 1 and 2, we see three titles for God that will be repeated throughout the psalm.

He calls God the most high. That's essentially a title that flattens any opponent. It reminds us of God's supreme power as the creatinine ruler of the world. He is unrivaled.

There's no opponent that can stand up to God. There's no one who outranks him or is even of equal rank. There's no cosmic struggle between good and evil, yin and yang.

[16:15] God has been unrivaled throughout eternity. He's the one who always was, who always has been, who always will be. There's not some kind of arm wrestle between the devil and God throughout history.

God is unrivaled. He is the most high. He's also the almighty. You'll see there in the second part of verse 1. That reminds us of God's power. He isn't limited in what he can do.

He isn't limited in the promises he can make. What God says, what he promises in his word, what he decides to do, he has the power to do it.

However unlikely it might sound. The third title we get is The Lord in verse 2. The Lord there in capital letters is how our translations represent Yahweh in Hebrew.

The name that God gives his people, the covenant name. It's a name that seals the relationship between God and his people. He says, I will be your God and you will be my people.

[17:14] And he gives them his name. This is the name you will know me by. It's like the seal on the relationship. This promise of complete protection is wonderful, but it's only as strong as the person signing as it were.

But we don't need to be concerned on that count. God is the one who is the most high. He's the almighty. He's the Lord. He's the guarantee. And that's why in the last three verses we move from the psalmist giving his testimony of God's protection to God speaking himself.

God pledging his protection in verses 40 to 16. Let me read them again. He says, because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him. I will protect him because he knows my name.

When he calls to me, I will answer him. I will be with him in trouble. I will rescue him and honor him. With long life, I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.

I don't know how many, do you notice how many actions God does in those verses? I count it, you count seven or eight, depending on how you count them. It's God, God, God, God who is promising this protection.

[18:23] It's nothing that we do. Again and again, the God is the one who makes the promise and seals the deal. He is the one who protects his people.

Those who make their home with God are completely secure. But the question is, is that true?

When we read this psalm, this psalm sounds wonderful, but, well, at best you might think this psalm sounds superstitious.

At worst you might think it's just a bare-faced lie. Because even in just this room, we have a room full of Christians who suffer. We cross this world and we have people who trust in Jesus and who still die for their faith.

Every day, people have a face, well, they face illness, they face enemies.

They face almost the opposite of this psalm, you might say. Throughout history, history is full of Christians being martyred and catching deadly diseases and dying.

[19:28] So is Psalm 91 true? We need to answer that question because otherwise we'll be reading this psalm in a glib way and going, well, I hope so. I'll just name it and claim it and hope it's true.

So we need to ask the question, not just what is this psalm saying, but who is it for? And that helps us to understand it. Second, who is this psalm for? Well, very simply, this psalm is for the one who trusts in God.

Look back at verse 1. He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. The psalm says, I say to the Lord, my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.

And just so that isn't misunderstood, let me explain. Psalm 91 and 2 in some ways function as the summary of this psalm. In verse 1, God promises complete protection for the one who dwells in his shelter.

And the psalm says, we do that when we trust, when we call on God to be that refuge, when we shelter in him and trust in him.

[20 : 33] When the psalm says, I trust in God, he's saying he's picking God alone as his king. He's not kind of hedging his bets, building his house between two castles and, you know, hoping that one of these rulers is going to protect him.

He's saying, I'm all in with God. This is where I'm building my house. This is where I'm dwelling. This is who I'm trusting in death and life. This is my hope in life and death.

That only with God will I be safe and secure. And he uses two other phrases to expand on what this trust looks like. In verse 1 and 9, we get this language of dwelling.

Dwelling in the shelter of the most high. And it's important that he uses that word dwell because it's not a temporary thing. He's not saying, I just, you know, this is where I go where I'm feeling, you know, a bit worried.

This is where I go once a year. This is the God I kind of sometimes trust in. He's saying, this is where I build my house.

[21 : 32] I'm a permanent member of God's household. This is where I lodge. This is my home. The one who dwells in the shelter of the most high. It's this picture of always trusting God.

The second phrase we see is in verse 14. The beginning, God says, because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him. It's the language of wholehearted devotion.

Some translators actually say this, translate this line as, because he's deeply in love with me. This phrase is used in other places in the Bible to describe just a romantic passion.

You might think that sounds strange, but the point that the psalmist is using and using this language is that this is a deep commitment. This is a kind of, this love is, yeah, because he's deeply in love with me.

It's a complete of wholehearted, picture of wholehearted devotion to God. Permanent devotion, wholehearted devotion. The problem is we can't do that.

[22 : 36] We can't trust in God completely every day 24-7. We can't trust in God wholeheartedly. Now that was true for the first readers of this Psalm.

For Israel who would have been given this Psalm, who would have sung this Psalm. God commanded them to love them. He said, Deuteronomy 6, verse 5, you shall love the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength.

That's a picture of this wholehearted devotion, but they couldn't do it. And Israel were given promises for, promises for blessing that if they obeyed God, they would be blessed and they were given these curses for disobedience.

And the thing is, verses 3-8 in some ways reads like an echo of those blessings and curses. It's kind of bringing to life, well this is, you know, the one who dwells in God, the one who perfectly loves him and trusts in him, they will be blessed in these ways.

Israel were commanded to trust in God, but you might say they weren't, they weren't the ones who sought shelter in God. They trusted in other things. They made idols and trusted in them.

[23 : 48] They looked to other kings and rulers and trusted in them. They looked to their own strength. And so the nation of Israel received the opposite of verses 3-8. They were taken over by their enemies.

They faced famine and pestilence and ultimately they were exiled. However, that wasn't the end of the story. Because this psalm, because God promised to send a king in the midst of exile, in the midst of, well, in the midst of all this looking like he was over, God promised to send one who would perfectly trust in him, who would perfectly obey him.

That's why this psalm, it's about the one who trusts, it's for the one who trusts in him, but ultimately it's for Jesus. Jesus was that king. He was the only person who was ever fully trusted God, fully God, fully man.

Jesus lived in this life and he, Jesus stood where Israel fell. When Israel was tempted to trust in other things, they turned very quickly.

And every other way, Jesus withstood the temptation. When he was tempted by the devil in the desert, he didn't sin. At no point, he was perfectly obedient to his father.

[25 : 06] He held fast to his father in love so much so that God broke, God tore heaven apart as it were, and spoke saying, this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.

Jesus dwelt forever through this whole life in perfect loving relationship with his father. Because of that, he's the only person in history who could claim the promises of this psalm for themselves. We actually see that proved in a rather unexpected place. In Matthew chapter 4 verse 6, it recounts Jesus' temptation by the devil. And the devil quotes this psalm.

He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and says to him, if you are the son of God, in other words, if you are the Davidic king, the Messiah, throw yourself down, it is written, he will command his angels concerning you.

On their hands, they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against the stone. If you recognize those words, that's because it's from verses 11 and 12 in Psalm 91. The whole basis for Satan's temptation was that Jesus had every right to claim the protection of this psalm.

[26 : 14] And yet he didn't. Jesus didn't claim that protection in the wilderness, he didn't test God. When Jesus became man, he took on the weakness, human frailty and weakness, and he obeyed and loved God perfectly in all that human weakness.

And not just that, ultimately Jesus faced the cross. Ultimately Jesus didn't choose to claim protection when the cross loomed before him.

On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus was praying in the Garden of Geth Semeny. He knew he was about to be betrayed and yet he didn't say God delivered me from the foul of snare.

He knew that shortly he would be stripped naked and beaten to a pulp and crucified and yet he didn't ask God to have no evil come against him. Rather he entrusted himself to God and said, not my will but yours be done.

So if Jesus suffered, does that mean Psalm 91 wasn't even true of him? No, Jesus did suffer, but not as a consequence for his own disobedience, but as a consequence of ours.

[27 : 34] Bible tells us that he took our sin and because he took our sin, he experienced the curse that we all deserve for not loving God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength.

He died on the cross for our sin, but Jesus dwelt in the shadow of the Most High. And so while it looked at that moment when Jesus was hanging on the cross, while it looked at that moment that he was caught in the foul of snare, that this was the moment of defeat, actually it was the moment of victory, because there on the cross he defeated Satan.

He crushed the serpent's head. That promise that God had made all the way back in Genesis 3, that one of Eve's descendants would crush the serpent's head, would undo the effects of the fall that happened on the cross.

Jesus was fulfilling Psalm 91 even at that moment when he trampled the serpent underfoot once and for all, but his victory doesn't end there.

As Peter tells in the sermon in Acts 2, death could not hold him. Jesus burst from the grave three days later. He ascended into heaven and one day he will return to make all things new.

[28 : 49] Ultimately, Jesus was safe and secure in life and even through death, because he dwelt in the shadow of the Most High. It's Jesus' experience of Psalm 91 that needs to shape our understanding and our experience of the blessings of Psalm 91.

In that great exchange in the cross, he took our sin if we're trusting in him and the curses that we deserve. In return, he gives us the blessings, he gives us his righteousness, his obedience, and all of the blessings that come with it.

It's only on account of Jesus' obedience that we can have the promises of Psalm 91. Jesus wants us to come and dwell in the shadow of the Most High.

In Luke 13, Jesus looks over Jerusalem and he weeps, saying, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you are not willing?

Jesus' mission in his life and his death was to bring people under the shadow of the Almighty. And there's no shelter outside of Jesus.

[30 : 08] We saw that with the kids. No one comes to the Father except through me. It's only by sheltering in Jesus. It's only by trusting in him that we can enjoy the promises of Psalm 91.

But what's crucial for us to understand is that because we experience Psalm 91 in Christ by dwelling in him, our experience of Psalm 91 is also like Christ.

Jesus experienced death before glory. He experienced the cross before the crown. And so we can expect nothing different. And that isn't me just twisting the Psalm.

God's promises in verses 15 and 16 rather have that future kind of perspective. With long life, I'll satisfy him. I'll show him my salvation.

The Psalm has envisages, not God needing to save a future perspective of God's salvation. So if you're in Jesus, Psalm 91 is for you.

[31 : 11] It's not for a prosperity and a protection from all things and perfect health in this life. It certainly isn't saying that the more we trust, the more we kind of build up some kind of protective force field from God that keeps us safe.

But one is a promise that if you are trusting in Jesus, you are ultimately and eternally secure. You're safe for all time.

Nothing can snatch you from God's hand. We read Romans 8 earlier on because in some ways Romans 8 is the lens through which we can interpret Psalm 91. It acknowledges the dangers that we are suffering.

Paul writes, for your sake, we are being killed all day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered, but simultaneously at the same time, Paul assures us of God's 360 protection.

He says, who can separate from the love of God? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness draw the sword? You can insert your own danger here.

[32 : 14] The point is though, if we dwell, if we shelter in the most high, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Paul is on knowing all who loved us, for I'm sure that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things that are not present, nor powers, 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.

Brothers and sisters, if you commit your life to God, if you're trusting in him, if you're dwelling in Jesus, you are eternally secure.

And while we will face suffering as we follow in Jesus' footsteps, the Lord is still our refuge in this life. When we face danger on every side, the best place that we can go is to him.

Under his wings, we will find refuge. Now God doesn't promise that he will immediately take away the harmful people or the harmful pestilence or whatever it is. But he does promise us that he will help us endure and that there will be nothing that we cannot go through, his help.

He doesn't promise to take away, when we're faced with evil, he doesn't promise to take away the limitation, but he does promise that if we resist the devil, he will flee from us because Jesus has won.

[33 : 44] In Psalm 92, God does not promise to protect us from every pandemic, from every sickness, from everything that comes our way. But as we walk through this life, Jesus does promise that all who follow him, that he is with us to the end of the age.

And that is good. And God is good and he will work all things to our good. Not only that, and it's not only eternal security, death is not the end.

When our lives end, when Jesus comes again, he promises that one day he will make all things new, that the dwelling place with God will be with man. And that we will dwell with him and we will have nothing to fear.

At that point, when God makes a new heavens and a new earth, Psalm 91 will be perfectly fulfilled. There will be no threat that can harm us. There will be no threat of sickness, there will be no evil, that will all be cast away.

There will be no mourning, no crying, no pain. And we will abide forever in the glorious shadow of the Almighty. Let's pray.