

Introduction

It has been an extraordinary few weeks. It seems that just a couple of months ago, none of us had ever heard of Coronavirus and now it is possibly one of the most used words in our vocabulary.

A few weeks back we were enjoying our churches just the way we always have, then for the last few weeks more and more restrictions on the way we worship, and this week not meeting in person at all.

We are seeing unprecedented things across the nations of the world and unprecedented things even in this little quiet little corner of the world.

You would be forgiven for being a little anxious; maybe even a little afraid; and certainly confused and stretched by all that is changing at such a rapid pace.

So, this morning I wanted to speak to you from Psalm 91 which is a Psalm of assurance of God's protection; which places all of our apprehension in the context of some eternal rock-solid realities as one writer put it "anchoring the soul in the midst of anxieties" (Mays 1994:297).¹

If you have a bible handy it would be great to turn up to Psalm 91.

1. God is our Refuge vv 1-2

¹ *You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
² will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust."*²

Some writers think this Psalm was written in a time of war, when the nation was under attack. At the very least, a time of great anxiety. And these words reflect an assurance that God was in control, in the middle of that anxiety.

The names for God used here: "the Most High", "the Almighty"; are names expressing that God is King. He reigns. He reigns over the world. Nothing is out of his control. And because of that we live in his shelter; we abide in his shadow.

The image is a lovely one isn't it? The King Reigning; casting his shadow over his people. The King on his throne; gathering his people into his shelter, perhaps in his palace; a place of protection.

So that God's people can say: "My refuge and my fortress, My God in whom I trust". (v2) The psalmist personally finding the comfort that God is like a trustworthy fortress around him.

So, here is the first truth for us, in the middle of an anxious time; be it war, or virtual war, (and many have spoken of the Coronavirus in these terms); We can say "I Trust you God" because I see your overshadowing of me and I experience your shelter.

¹ Futato, M. D. (2009). [The Book of Psalms](#). In *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 7: The Book of Psalms, The Book of Proverbs* (p. 296). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

² Ps 91:1-2 NRSV

While the world is in chaos, God is on his throne; God is reigning. None of this has taken him by surprise. He is the Most High, the almighty!

But the Psalm says more than this, doesn't it? Look at the second section. There are some bold claims of deliverance here.

2. God will deliver us vv 3-13

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,
or the arrow that flies by day,
⁶ or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.*³

The snare of the fowler, like a trap for a bird. The deadly pestilence; that is disease and sickness. Throughout history plagues and disease, epidemics and pandemics have been regular occurrences. But the Psalm says he will deliver you and you don't need to be afraid.

We won't have to fear it in the night or the day (v5-6) the darkness or the noon day; that is – any of the time, day or night. Because he will look after us even if we stub our toe!

Verse 11 says

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,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.*⁴

The angels will catch us and protect us from falling. And v 13 even says, kicking a lion or treading on snake will not cause any harm to the people of God.

God is pictured here like the mighty eagle looking after its chicks in the nest; covering us with his pinions; that is – the outer part of his feathers, gently caressing the young under his wing.

His faithfulness, the Psalmist says is a shield and a buckler. A shield to defend them from the arrows of the enemy that come from far away; and a buckler, which is small hand shield, to protect them from close up hand to hand combat.

God's deliverance is total. Nothing can harm the people of God. The promise in the middle is this:

⁹ *Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,
¹⁰ no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.*⁵

³ Ps 91:3–6 NRSV.

⁴ Ps 91:11–12 NRSV.

⁵ Ps 91:9–10 NRSV

3. God will show salvation vv 14-16

The Psalm finishes with God's own words directed at the anxious; addressing us.

¹⁴ *Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.*
¹⁵ *When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.*
¹⁶ *With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.*⁶

God himself assuring the faithful of his deliverance; his active rule in the world. Did you hear the "I wills": I will deliver; I will protect; I will answer; I will be with them; I will rescue; I will satisfy them.

And perhaps the high point of the Psalm; the final line: "I WILL show them my salvation"

A wonderful Psalm of assurance "anchoring the soul in the midst of anxiety".

4. Psalm 91 and COVID 19

I want us to reflect for a moment this morning on Psalm 91 and COVID 19. How are we to read this?

I heard a snippet of a preacher this week, encouraging his people to shake hands, to hug and to kiss; assuring them that they would never stop meeting in a large group; because he said, "the church is the safest place on earth". His message was: because God protects us you cannot catch Coronavirus here!

And if we read this Psalm, out of its context in the Bible we might come to the same conclusion.

After all it says "he will deliver you from the deadly pestilence"; "no evil shall befall you"; "no scourge will come near you"; "you can tread on a lion or a snake".

Does that mean I can dispense with washing my hands? That God will protect me from COVID19 simply because I am a Christian?

To say that, would be to ignore other parts of the bible. What about the story of Job? An innocent man who loses everything; his wealth, his property, his family, and is afflicted with disease. What about the observation in Ecclesiastes, that the righteous sometimes die, and the wicked prosper? (Eccl 7:15) What about the church in Jerusalem, in the book of Acts suffering an intense famine so that people didn't have food to eat? What about those in 1 Peter who suffer for doing what is right? What about the apostle Paul, who was flogged and beaten and shipwrecked, and frequently in danger, who was often without food, cold and naked? And what of our Lord Jesus himself; trapped, scourged and mocked; beaten and crucified?

No, the world even for the believer is full of suffering and even death. Make no mistake, this virus pandemic is a serious threat, to the world, to the economy, and even to our lives. And that is entirely consistent with the Bible.

So how do we read Psalm 91, as "an anchor for our soul"?

⁶ Ps 91:14–16 NRSV.

It is pictorial language isn't it? The very first threat is the fowler's snare; a trap for a bird that might ensnare us. It is not to be read literally, but as a picture of how people might be out to entrap us. The Eagle's wings and feathers are metaphors for God's care. The Armour is not a literal shield and buckler, but the reassurance that God's faithfulness can bring.

So what kind of promises are they? Will God really protect us? I wonder if the clue is in the climax of the Psalm; the final line of the final verse: "I will show them my salvation". I think the point is: that our ultimate reality is beyond what we see and feel and experience in our world. The ultimate reality are things unseen and eternal.

The apostle Paul says: *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us* (Rom 8:18)

It is true that we don't have to fear the pestilence; don't have to fear the arrows or traps or difficulties, or illness and disease; tragedies and challenges. Because God has ultimately got us. My life is His. He overshadows me. He is the King working out his purposes. He reigns, and I nestle under the shadow of his wing.

One final thought. Keen eyes and ears would have recognized that part of this Psalm is famously quoted; by the devil in Matthew 4. He tempts Jesus.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' " (Matt 4:5-6) A temptation to test God's faithfulness; to say – show me how much God's word is true!

⁷ *Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "*

For all the promises of Psalm 91, there is no shelter for those who would tempt God and put him to the test. We need to live responsibly. At the moment this means to wash our hands and keep our distance from one another.

Martin Luther was facing the Black Plague when he wrote these words:

"I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbour needs me however I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God."⁷

My sisters and brothers, we can be confident even in these most anxious of days, because our lives are hidden with Christ in God. (Col 3:3)

Our salvation is secure because of all that Jesus has done for us. Our confidence comes from Him.

⁷ Luther's Works Volume 43 pg 132 the letter "Whether one may flee from a Deadly Plague" written to Rev. Dr. John Hess