

## Psalm 91

### Introduction

Psalm 91, because of its promises of protection, is most probably quoted more than any other section of the Bible in these days. In my discussion of it I do not want to question the fact that God can protect His children in times of peril. Neither do I question the fact that God, because He is who He is, can supernaturally communicate with the individual believer in any way that He chooses to do so. One cannot therefore question the fact that the Holy Spirit can supernaturally use Psalm 91 to promise protection to a specific individual in a specific dangerous situation. This type of Divine communication, however, is highly personal and subjective and its authenticity can only be judged by the individual who believes that he or she has received it. It cannot be made applicable to believers in a general way. Supernatural communications and other forms of Divine manifestations fall under the sovereign will of God and it cannot be prescribed how they should happen.

### Bible exposition

Studying and interpreting the Scriptures, however, fall in a different type of category and must be done according to accepted principles of hermeneutics. It is against this background that questions must be asked about the general way in which Psalm 91 is sometimes interpreted and applied. So for example, on a certain website it is proclaimed that Psalm 91 is God's "Covenant of Protection" which must be "joined" in order to be protected from all diseases and dangers:

*"In Psalm 91, God lists all the things from which we are protected, and we can easily see that it covers all of the evils of humankind. It includes all the evils that come through another person, such as robbery, murder, terrorism or rape. It also includes epidemics and deadly diseases, and all natural disasters such as tornadoes, floods, hurricanes and other things that man has no control over. Verse seven plainly says, 'A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, BUT IT SHALL NOT COME NEAR YOU.' He even has angels standing by us to help us. **This is God's Covenant of Protection.**" "The premise is you just need to "join the covenant" by loving and serving God and all the threats listed in Psalm 91 will be neutralized."*

(My emphasis)

(<https://sidroth.org/gods-covenant-protection>).

Is this a legitimate interpretation of the psalm and why, if it is so important, is there no mention of this "covenant" in the epistles?

### The seemingly contradictions that exist when certain texts are compared

There are many promises in the Bible concerning Divine protection and except that God in His all-knowing wisdom allows certain negative things to happen to His children, they will be safe guarded . It is illogical, though, to ignore all the facts and information concerning this psalm and what is revealed in the rest of Scripture and then dogmatically declare that all believers will be protected in a general way. Before one can come to a conclusion

concerning the interpretation of a certain piece of Scripture, it must be brought into harmony with what is revealed about it in the rest of the Bible. When all the facts are considered, it becomes difficult to accept the declaration that Psalm 91 is a “Covenant of Protection” which protects believers from “*all of the evils of humankind.*” Before one can conclude that this psalm protects believers in a general way, it must be asked, why for instance Peter was miraculously set free from prison by an angel, whilst a few passages further on in the Bible we read of how Stephen was stoned to death (**Acts 5:19, Acts 7:58**). Also, what about the suffering of Christian martyrs throughout the ages and the things Paul had to go through during his life time? (**2Cor.11:23-30**). Many more examples can be given from Scripture and from history of how believers had to suffer because of “*all of the evils of humankind.*” Did they not know about the “Covenant of Protection” which they could “join”?

### **Passages of Scripture that seemingly contradict each other**

Why does it seem that Jesus contradicts the promises of Psalm 91 by stating that believers will have trouble in this world (**Joh.16:33**). The same question can be asked about scriptures like **Ps.34:19** and **Acts 14:22** which state that:

*“A righteous person will have many troubles...”*

and that

*“We must endure many hardships to get into the kingdom of God”*

Does God not keep His promises or do we not always consider all the facts when interpreting the Bible? In order to have a fuller understanding of certain passages we must gather as much information about them as we can from Scripture.

### **Ps.91 and Israel**

A point of view that must be considered about this psalm is the fact that some Bible commentators are of the opinion that it was written by Moses and that much of its content probably refers to Israel’s unique covenant relationship with God in the Old Testament. According to this covenant between God and Israel, whenever they carefully obeyed the law, they could depend on the supernatural blessings and protection of God (**Deut.28:1-14**), but should they fail to fully obey the law, the curses of **Deut.28:15-68** would strike them. This Old Testament situation cannot be applied to the church because **Gal 3:13** clearly states that Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law

### **The possibility that Psalm 91 contains prophetic statements concerning the Jews.**

Considering some of the verses in this psalm, the possibility exists that it, like **Ps.83** and **Ps.22**, contains prophetic statements which point to a period in the future when after the time of “Jacob’s Trouble” God will destroy Israel’s enemies and that they, the Jews, will be able to witness it with their own eyes:

*“Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble; but he shall be saved out of it. And it shall come to pass in that day, saith Jehovah of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off thy neck, and will burst thy bonds; and strangers shall no more make him their bondman...” (Jer.30:7-8)*

*“Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, Nor for the arrow that flieth by day; For the pestilence that walketh in darkness.... A thousand shall fall at thy side, And ten thousand at thy right hand; But it shall not come nigh thee. Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold, And see the reward of the wicked” (Ps.91:5-8).*

It seems that in this time of judgement in the form of pestilence and war, although many will fall around them, a remnant of the Jews will be kept safe. The reference in verses 1-2 of somebody taking refuge in a “secret place” (KJV) reminds one of what is written in **Rev.12:6-12** describing how this remnant will be led to a safe place in the wilderness in order to escape the persecution of the antichrist during the time of the tribulation.

### **Messianic references in Ps.91**

The fact must also be considered that some of the promises for protection in **Psalm 91** prophetically refer to the Father's protection of His Son while He was here on earth. Satan obviously knew this, because he quoted **Psalm 91:11** when he tried to tempt Jesus in the wilderness:

*“For he will give his angels charge over thee, To keep thee in all thy ways.”*

Jesus did not try to correct Satan by saying that the promise did not apply to Him. The apostles also understood the fact that certain scriptures in the Old Testament were prophetic references concerning the Messiah who would come. So for example Matthew quotes **Hosea 11:1** when he writes in his gospel:

*“Out of Egypt did I call my son.”*

### **An unacceptable interpretation of the “secret place” referred to in Ps.91:1-2**

Some preachers who realize that there is sometimes a discrepancy between what is experienced and what is promised in Psalm 91, try and explain it away by emphasising what they think the words “*He that dwelleth in the secret place*” mean. By making use of tabernacle symbolism they explain that there are two classes of believers; firstly, those who dwell in the secret place of God are those who, symbolically speaking, have managed to get into the most holy place of the tabernacle, which in their relationship with God, is being in His presence. Secondly, there are those who in their relationship with God have never managed to get any further than the outer court. The deduction is then made that the promises of Psalm 91 are applicable to only those who are in the “sacred place” of God's presence. This they explain, is why all Christians do not experience the fulfilment of the promises. This type of explanation is not acceptable as it does not consider the symbolic implications of the tearing of the veil in the Jewish temple at the moment of Christ's death on the cross (**Matt.27:51**) and neither does it consider **Heb.10:19** which clearly teaches that

through the blood of Jesus Christ we have confidence to enter into the presence of God. **Eph.1:3** also confirms that believers have been blessed with all spiritual blessings through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the cross. A heavy burden is placed upon believers by declaring that experiencing God's blessings depends on one's own performance!

## **Conclusion**

Psalm 91 should inspire us to ask for God's protection at all times, but in the light of what is revealed in the whole of Scripture, we must realise that God in His sovereign wisdom, will sometimes choose not to do what He is able to do. But like Paul, we can declare that in spite of what happens to us, we can experience peace through Jesus Christ who strengthens us (**Phil.4:11-13**):

*"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (Rom. 8:35-38).*

Jesus Himself promises us that nothing will happen to us unless it is not first permitted by our Heavenly Father:

*"Stop being afraid of those who kill the body but can't kill the soul. Instead, be afraid of the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell. Two sparrows are sold for a penny, aren't they? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's permission. Indeed, even the hairs on your head have all been counted! So stop being afraid. You are worth more than a bunch of sparrows" (Matt.10:28-31).*

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