

One legal dictionary defines protective custody this way: "An arrangement whereby a person is safeguarded by law enforcement authorities in a location other than the person's home because his or her safety is seriously threatened.

Under the program, the U.S. attorney general is authorized to offer security to key witnesses who have physical safety concerns. The program, which is administered by the U.S. Marshals Service provides a new social security number and other documents to enable the person to establish a completely new identity. It also provides housing, transportation of household goods to a new residence, payments to meet basic living expenses, employment assistance, and other services necessary to assist the person in becoming self-sustaining.¹

Our Psalm today is Psalm 91. Most of us will never be in legal protective custody, but Psalm 91 celebrates that each of us can live in the protective custody of God. If you haven't gotten there in your Bibles, turn there now. Psalm 91. While you're finding it...let me give you a little background on this Psalm.

Background on Psalm 91

Psalm 91 is one of the so-called "orphan psalms." Reason is, we don't know the author of this psalm. Some say this is David's work, others say it's Moses, but no one knows for sure.

Some of our Psalms we've looked at this summer are tied to historical events that inspired the Psalm's writing. Not this one. Nothing in the psalm points to its historical background. Even the structure of this psalm is somewhat hard to decipher, as multiple voices apparently speak in this

¹ <https://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Protective+Custody>.

psalm. Yet the message of Psalm 91 is clear: ***The Lord has committed to protect the one who trusts in him.***

Psalm 91 is considered a messianic psalm that finds its primary fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ. In Matthew 4:5-6, Satan applies this psalm to Jesus. Jesus does not deny that it is about him, even though he resists Satan's temptation to put God to the test. The promises of God in this psalm are ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

But Psalm 91 is good news for everyone who trusts in God. Psalm 90 is a warning about the reality of death, but Psalm 91 is a promise of protection for life. Martin Luther called this psalm "the most distinguished jewel among all the psalms of consolation."

What are we protected from?

Now, we need to clarify something about this Psalm right here at the beginning. At first reading, it can appear that it's promising the believer that he or she will be guarded throughout life from all struggles, hardship, disease, attack, and all manner of horrific evils.

I mean at first read it's like, "Wow, awesome...as a Christian, God's going to protect me from any and all threats in my life." I mean, doesn't that sound so good. Raise your hand if you'd like that to be true. Who doesn't kind of hope it's true? Be honest. I'm gutless...I do. I think that would be awesome. 😊

But, if you take that from the Psalm, it won't be long and you will end up dismayed, disillusioned, and annoyed at God. Or you'll live with low grade guilt all the time because every time something bad happens you'll think, "God's punishing me." "God's getting me back for my feeble prayer life, or my lack of obedience in this matter or that situation." So, you'll either be annoyed at God or annoyed at yourself.

So, please hear this: Psalm 91 does not promise a trouble-free Christian life! This is so important...Let's say that together.

The Bible teaches quite the opposite: (Andrew...put all three on one slide)

- *"In this life you will have trouble."* - Jesus.
- *"Consider it pure joy when you encounter various trials..."* - James
- *"We ... glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope."* -Paul

So, not only does the Bible teach that you in fact will encounter trouble and trials...it teaches us that God will use them to strengthen us, mature us, and deepen our trust in him. Sometimes this may take way longer than you'd want, but that is the promise. When you feel like quitting...you can root yourself in that truth and let it strengthen your resolve to persevere.

[Transition] - Now, that I've burst all our bubbles, if we're not protected from trouble and trials, what are we protected from? What is this Psalm celebrating?

To understand this Psalm properly, you must understand that the protection described in it is fundamentally protection from God's judgment and punishment. The key is in verse 8, after listing a series of potential threats, the Psalmist writes, *"You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked."*

Psalm 91 assures us that Christ followers will be protected from God's judgment in any and all ways. The Lord will watch over...the Lord will protect...the Lord will guard the one who trusts in him. You will be subject to God's judgement or punishment.

So...part of the good news in this is for those who struggle with low grade guilt and feeling like God is punishing us when bad things happen. This Psalm assures us, that while true believers will experience difficult things, they are not God's punishment on you. They are not God getting you back for your feeble prayer life, the bad attitude you displayed this morning, how fast you drive, your lack of consistent church attendance, or because of the little ways you are not being "a good Christian." Plenty of true believers died of COVID—Yes, or no? God wasn't punishing them. The Plain truth is, solid believers are not insulated from the hard things in life.

[Illustration] - Here's a classic, well-known example: In 1952, the American missionary Jim Elliot traveled to Ecuador to share the gospel. (Solid believer? Yes, or no? Sold out believer? Yes, or no?) On January 8, 1956, the natives he was visiting brutally murdered Elliot and four of his fellow missionaries. Elliot was 28 years old, with a young wife and a daughter who was not yet one year old. Six years after his murder, Jim Elliot's widow Elisabeth published the life and testament of her husband. She called it *The Shadow of the Almighty*. That title is a reference to the opening stanza Psalm 91 and helps us to properly understand the message of the psalm.

This psalm does not guarantee immunity from trouble in life or tragedy in death. It celebrates the benefits of confident trust in God. Trust in God will not keep you from experiencing bad things in life, but it will keep you as you experience bad things in life.

[Transition] - Now, with that clarity of understanding, let's unpack in more detail what it means to live in the protective custody of God. First, it means you can live with a confident trust in God. Look at verses 1-2.

You can live with a confident trust

Psalm 91 begins with a general statement of trust in God: "*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High / will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.*" Notice what this safe place is... It is a person, not a place!

This divine person is described in two ways in verse one:

-He is called "*the Most High*"—the possessor of heaven and Earth. He is higher than the kings of the earth and superior to the false gods of the nations.

-He is also called "*the Almighty*"—the living God who alone has omnipotent power.

It's reminding us, safety and security cannot be found in self-defense, sinful people, ideal circumstances, material resources, or defensive weapons. Safety and security are only found in God.

-Likewise, God's presence casts a shadow in which the trusting can rest. Like a child hiding behind mom or dad's leg for safety and security, God is near to provide relief and enable rest. Big deep breath...resting in the shadow of the Almighty is what our souls long for.

[Quote] - Warren Wiersbe wrote: "*The safest place in the world is a shadow, if it is the shadow of the Almighty.*" But you must dwell in the shelter of the Most High to abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

God is a homemaker, not a hotel manager. You cannot merely check in with him on Sunday mornings. Rather, you must dwell and abide in him every day. The protection of God is accessed through communion with God.

[Transition] - Now, notice verse one is a general statement of trust in God. Verse two is a personal testimony of trust in God: "*I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, / my God, in whom I trust.'*"

It is one thing to be able to *talk about* the Lord. It is another thing to be able to *talk to* the Lord. When you live a life of confident trust, you

naturally come to use possessive pronouns: "*my refuge and my fortress, my God.*"

To refer to the Most High, and the Almighty with such intimacy and personal language was actually provocative speech for the Psalmist. That language virtually upends the master-servant relationship humans have with the divine. But the Psalmist is assuring us, the Lord graciously condescends to be the possession of the one who trusts in him.

[Application]- Is this your testimony? Have you sought to dwell in the shelter of the Most High by running to the Cross to put your trust in the death, resurrection, and righteousness of Christ for salvation? Can you call the Lord "my God" through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

When you're exhausted, stressed, and tired of trying to make life work on your own, it's time to open your heart to Jesus. When you call out to him and invite him to be your forgiver and leader he saves you, and he places you in his protective custody.

Because he forgives your sin, you no longer face his judgment and punishment for those sins. You are placed in Christ; you are placed in the protective custody of God. 1 Thessalonians 5:9 says, "*9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

At the end of this message, I'm going to explain to you exactly how you can call out to God today and begin to live in his protective custody.

[Transition] - The opening two verses of this Psalm boldly declare the Psalm's big idea to us: ***the Lord will protect the one who trusts in him.*** Now, Verses 3-13, list out more specifics of this protection. It explains in greater detail how the one who lives in confident trust enjoys a life of complete security.

You can live with total security

A life of confident trust is a life of total security. No evil can harm the one who trust in the Lord unless it is permitted by the Lord. The fact that the Lord permits it is proof that he reigns over it. The follower of Christ is untouchable, then for two reasons.

1. **The Almighty is watching over you**

What does it mean to have the Lord watching over you?

a) God provides perfect protection.

Verse 3 says, *"Surely he will save you / from the fowler's snare / and from the deadly pestilence."* The snare of the fowler refers to the plans and plots of the enemy. It is the hunter who stalks his prey. The deadly pestilence refers to diseases, plagues, and epidemics that touch everyone in their path. But God can deliver you from enemies and epidemics.

Verse four says, *"He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; / his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart."* The image is of a mother bird who protects her fledglings from severe weather and stalking predators.

[**Transition**] - Not only is God's protection perfect, it is perpetual.

b) God provides perpetual protection.

Verses 5-6 say, *"You will not fear the terror of night, / nor the arrow that flies by day, / nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, / nor the plague that destroys at midday."*

In the face of terrors, arrows, pestilence, and destruction, the believer can choose not to succumb to fear. This is not personal courage; it is confident trust. This is why it's been said, *"Courage is only fear that has said its prayers."*

[Transition] - In addition to perfect, and perpetual protection, God provides prevailing protection.

c) God provides prevailing protection.

Verses 7-8 say, "A thousand may fall at your side, / ten thousand at your right hand, / but it will not come near you. / You will only observe with your eyes / and see the punishment of the wicked."

During a raging battle of any kind, the spreading disease of any sort, or the tumultuous storm in any situation, a thousand fall dead around you. Or ten thousand may fall at your right side. But the death and destruction does not come near you. You will only be a spectator of the judgment of the wicked.

In Exodus 14:13, Moses said to the children of Israel at the Red Sea, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again." This is key to Psalm 91. As we've been saying...This Psalm is about more than protection from bad circumstances; it is about protection from divine judgment.

[Transition] - Not only is God watching over you, but he uses his angels to watch over you.

2. His angels are watching over you

Verses 9-12 say, "If you say, 'The Lord is my refuge,' / and you make the Most High your dwelling, / no harm will overtake you, / no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you / to guard you in all your ways; / they will lift you up in their hands, / so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

Now, there are some who believe that every person has a guardian angel to watch over him or her. Psalm 91 is often cited to support that theory.

But the psalm does not say believers have a personal angel to guard them: it says God commands his angel armies to be the believer's bodyguards in the unseen spirit world.

Fun fact about Psalm 91. It is the only passage in Scripture quoted by the Devil. In Matthew 4:5-6, Satan quotes; well, actually misquotes this verse, tempting Jesus to climb the pinnacle of the temple and jump down. Jesus did not take the bait. Quoting Deuteronomy 6:16, Jesus replied, *"Do not put the Lord your God to the test."*

This is an important lesson. The Lord honors trusting obedience, not sinful presumption. God watches over those who do his will. If you jump out there on your own, you are on your own. But if you seek to walk in the will of God, God will take care of you. Verse 13 says, *"You will tread on the lion and the cobra; / you will trample the great lion and the serpent."*

The lion pictures violence. The serpent pictures craftiness. Whether it's obvious danger or hidden peril, you can tread over and trample them as you seek to do God's will. Don't be concerned about whether there are snakes and lions along the path: stay focused and daily seek to walk in God's ways. He will get you through it. No matter what the enemy might be up to, you're in God's protective custody.

[Transition] - Now, as we come to the end of the Psalm, I want you to notice, the speaker changes in verses 14-16. God is now speaking. This is the way it ought to be because, this is the way it is: God always has the last word. God gives his assurance that all these things are true, teaching you that you can live with divine assurance. Look at verses 14-16.

You can live with divine assurance

In these closing verses, notice, the Lord is not speaking to the one who is trusting in him. Rather, he speaks about the one who trusts in him. It is an

open declaration of divine assurance that's rooted in a mutual devotion between the Lord and the believer.

These concluding verses are filled with the promises of God. But, as always, these are not blanket promises to all humankind. Verses 14-16 teach us the protective custody of God is only available for those who seek to practice three things in their lives:

1. *Love God.*

Verse 14 begins with the first: "Because he loves me ... " This is not the typical Hebrew word for love. This word refers to zeal, passion, or deep longing. It is the difference between loving someone and being in love with someone. This love is evidenced by what you do, not by what you say. Consuming love causes the believer to hold fast to God and this is the one the Lord places in protective custody.

[Transition] - Loving God is the first practice that opens the door to his protective custody. Next, knowing God's name qualifies one for protective custody.

2. *Know God's name*

Verse 14 ends with the second practice: "for he acknowledges my name." The Lord's name is more than a means of identification; it is his nature, character, and authority. To know God's name is to know God...to hold him dear...to cherish him and honor him. It means to speak of the Almighty in the personal and intimate terms of verse two: "my refuge and my fortress, / my God, in whom I trust."

[Transition] - Loving God and treasuring his name are the first two practices. And finally, God's protective custody is available for those who call on God.

3. *Call on God.*

Verse 15 says, "He will call on me, and I will answer him." It seems as if many professing believers are functional atheists. They claim to trust God,

but they do not call to him in faith, and they rarely experience answered prayer.

James 4:2 bluntly states: "You do not have because you do not ask God." Do you want to live with divine assurance of God's protective custody? Then call out to God in any and all situations. The Bible encourages us to pray continually, pray without ceasing. Call out to God. Draw near to him and he'll draw near to you.

The Psalmist assures us, you call out to God...he will respond to you. Notice, six times in these three final verses of the Psalm, God says, "I will." Six times he assures us of eight divine promises. God says, I will rescue, protect, answer, be with in trouble, deliver, honor, satisfy, and show him my salvation.

Conclusion

There was a man who was super nervous as he took his first airplane flight. He made it through the takeoff and started to relax, until the turbulence began to hit. Then he started freaking out a bit. Then he noticed a little boy calmly sitting next to him. He asked how the boy could remain so calm. He answered, "My father is the pilot of this plane. He knows that I'm on board. And he is not going to allow anything bad happen to me."

Those who call on the Lord, open their heart to love him, and seek to follow him enjoy God's protective custody.

Have you opened your heart to God? Do you need to do that today?

God, I'm tired or trying to make life work on my own. I know I have sin in my life that needs your forgiveness. I need you to be the leader of my life because I've messed things up. I trust you today, and I need you to save me, and place me in your protective custody.

