

*“Because you made the LORD your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge—no evil shall befall you, no plague come near your tent.”—Psalm 91:9–10*

If you do a Google search and type the word “Psalm,” Psalm 91 likely appears—algorithmic evidence that it is the most popular chapter in the Psalter. And why not? This passage speaks of Yahweh being a “refuge” and “fortress,” of God’s gracious deliverance from enemies of all kinds (snares, lions, adders). The vivid language drawn from nature and the battlefield conveys promises of blessing to whoever “holds fast,” who calls on God’s name. The person who trusts in him “dwells in the shelter of the Most High,” and will receive the most glorious benefits in Scripture: (v. 16) “Salvation” and “long life” (Literally, “length of days.” This latter phrase is often translated “forever” as in Psalm 23 “I will dwell in the house of the LORD **length of days.**”) God will not only protect you from all physical disaster, but will grant eternal life.

It should perhaps come as no surprise that the devil tempts Jesus by citing this very Psalm. In fact, verse 11 “*he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways*” directly follows the tenth verse’s promise of protection from a plague!

And here Holy Scripture meets contemporary life. Our nation is being ravaged by its own plague and Psalm 91 is trending.

If you’ve read the passage closely, you may be wondering how to rightly pray Psalm 91. I believe that Satan’s (mis)use of Psalm 91 to tempt Jesus is the key to both understanding and praying this Psalm.

One thing we cannot forget is that prayer is ultimately about knowing and communing with God. If we lose sight of this, we will find ourselves attempting to manipulate Him for our own ends. When we pray for protection and healing, it must always be for the purpose of God’s glory, not ours. As finite humans, prayer is a mystery that must be done in humility. When we pray “*Thy will be done,*” we acknowledge that God has plans we do not know about, that God’s will is “revealed” but also “hidden.” (Deut. 29:29) Did God *will* that the Coronavirus exist and spread across the globe? While our instinct is to shout “no!” The Bible’s answer is not that tidy. In an oracle of judgment, the prophet Amos asked rhetorically (3:6), “*Does disaster come to a city unless the LORD has done it?*” The answer is an inescapable (albeit uncomfortable) “yes.” Yahweh’s purpose in judgment was to discipline Israel for their good.

On the other hand, God desires what is consistent with his perfect goodness. When it comes to any disaster, it is appropriate to say God does not delight in what is destructive, harmful, and evil. God is unequivocally opposed to sin. As James (1:13) teaches, God is not the author of evil.

And this is where Jesus’ temptation illustrates the inherent tension in praying Psalm 91. Satan knew that Jesus’ divine status meant he possessed all power to avoid injury and death. Most importantly, he recognized that God the Father had sent his Son on a mission that would be accomplished only through death. There is a real sense that the adder and lion—two images Scripture uses to describe Satan—would prevail when Christ died at calvary.

In the garden, Jesus faced a greater temptation to doubt the word of God and love of his father. And yet, by submitting to the Father's will, of "allowing the plague to come near his tent," the curse of sin and death was broken—the adder's head was crushed (Romans 16:29).

We also face the twin temptations of claiming Psalm 91 as a surety that no physical harm will befall us and likewise, doubting whether he is able to protect us if we suffer harm. If we are afflicted or even lose our lives, Jesus shows us that only by losing our lives will we save it for eternal life. On the other hand, we can and should pray with confidence that God grant us bodily protection and not forget that "*to live is Christ*" (Philippians 1:21).

In the *City of God*, Augustine of Hippo asks the perennial question of why good and wicked persons suffer alike in this life. He comments that,

*...when one and the same force falls upon the good and the wicked, the former are purged and purified, but the latter damned, ruin and destroyed. Hence, it is that, under the same affliction, the wicked hate and blaspheme God while the good pray and praise Him. What is important then, is not what is suffered, but by whom.*

In prayer, what matters in affliction *and* deliverance, is that we are sanctified.

**Poem:**

In every condition in sickness and health;  
in poverty's vale or abounding wealth.

At home or abroad, on the land or the sea,  
as your days may demand may so my strength ever be. – "How Firm a Foundation" by John Rippon (1751–1836)

**Prayer:**

Lord, we come before your throne and acknowledge that you are God. You possess all power to answer our prayers in your perfect wisdom. May we never doubt your goodness nor fail to praise you for every good and perfect gift. Cause our own nation's trial to purify and increase your church. In the name of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.