

## **Psalm 91:1-16 New Living Translation**

- <sup>1</sup> Those who live in the shelter of the Most High  
will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
- <sup>2</sup> This I declare about the Lord:  
He alone is my refuge, my place of safety;  
he is my God, and I trust him.
- <sup>3</sup> For he will rescue you from every trap  
and protect you from deadly disease.
- <sup>4</sup> He will cover you with his feathers.  
He will shelter you with his wings.  
His faithful promises are your armor and protection.
- <sup>5</sup> Do not be afraid of the terrors of the night,  
nor the arrow that flies in the day.
- <sup>6</sup> Do not dread the disease that stalks in darkness,  
nor the disaster that strikes at midday.
- <sup>7</sup> Though a thousand fall at your side,  
though ten thousand are dying around you,  
these evils will not touch you.
- <sup>8</sup> Just open your eyes,  
and see how the wicked are punished.
- <sup>9</sup> If you make the Lord your refuge,  
if you make the Most High your shelter,
- <sup>10</sup> no evil will conquer you;  
no plague will come near your home.
- <sup>11</sup> For he will order his angels  
to protect you wherever you go.
- <sup>12</sup> They will hold you up with their hands  
so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone.
- <sup>13</sup> You will trample upon lions and cobras;  
you will crush fierce lions and serpents under your feet!
- <sup>14</sup> The Lord says, "I will rescue those who love me.  
I will protect those who trust in my name.
- <sup>15</sup> When they call on me, I will answer;  
I will be with them in trouble.  
I will rescue and honor them.
- <sup>16</sup> I will reward them with a long life  
and give them my salvation."

NOTES for Sunday Morning Worship with Kailua Christian Church

Online Zoom Service at 10:00 a.m. or viewing Zoom Service at KCC at 10 a.m.

Kailua Christian Church sermon 7.18.21

Psalm 91:1-16 NLT

### **Psalm 91: When the future falls apart**

Good morning Kailua Christian Church! It's a privilege and a joy to share this message with you as we look into Psalm 91 together. Thank you to Dennis Fong for doing our scripture reading. As we go along, we'll be focusing more closely on certain parts of Psalm 91 in the New Living Translation, so you're welcome to follow along in your phones or Bibles if you have them. But while you're turning there to Psalm 91, let me just affirm what a blessing it is to be here with all of you today, albeit digitally and not in person. I bring greetings and blessings on behalf Wellspring Covenant Church. My wife, Pastor Rebecca enjoyed being with you recently as well as Pastor Cheryl and Pastor Yumiko too. Apparently means I'm the only pastor left from Wellspring who hasn't taken a turn yet! As we open up God's word today, I'm so thankful to be here with my family and with my family. **As we now open up the scriptures, let us pray.**

Psalm 91 is filled with assurances of God's protection from danger. It's packed with declarations of God's rescue from devastation, God's victory over disaster, and God's shelter from deadly disease. It almost feels like a lullaby from the way it begins, something you could pray with a child who's scared at night. Notice the first 2 verses:

**“Those who live in the shelter of the Most High, will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare about the Lord, ‘He alone is my refuge and my place of safety; He is my God, and I trust him.’”**

Wouldn't that make a nice good night prayer?

It's important to remember that the Psalms were essentially the prayer book of Israel's life. The people of Israel couldn't live without the psalms and neither can we. You don't have to read very far in the Gospel narratives about Jesus before somebody quotes a psalm. In fact, you can't tell the story of Jesus without the psalms, at least not the way it's told by Matt/Mark/Luke/Jn.

The psalms were on the lips of Jesus as he breathed his last.

- My God, my God why have you forsaken me? (Ps. 22:1)

- Into your hands, I commit my spirit (Ps. 31:5)

There's something very special about the Psalms. Notice how when Bible publishers release a pocket edition of the New Testament and they can only choose one Old Testament book to include with it, which book do they choose? Psalms. If they have room to add a second book, they pick Proverbs, but Psalms is always first. You can't buy a New Testament with just Proverbs.

One of my favorite quotes about the Psalms comes from the Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis, who writes: **"the psalms are the single best guide to the spiritual life currently in print. They will likely still be on the shelf long after everything else in the spirituality section of the bookstore has gone out of print. Anything you could learn from the other books is already there, at least in kernel form, in the Psalter."**

Many of the Psalms are packed with vivid expressions of raw emotion. We love the Psalms because they do not deny the experience of suffering and injustice that we find in the world. The Psalms are about life as it really is, not some sugarcoated fantasy where the endings are always happy. Yet when we come to Psalm 91, **it sounds unbelievably naïve**, especially given the vast scope of all it seems to promise from God in terms of protection and safety and rescue.

As we look at verses 3 to 6, notice the phrases that describe a broad spectrum of threats and afflictions.

*<sup>3</sup> For he will rescue you from every trap  
and protect you from deadly disease.*

*<sup>4</sup> He will cover you with his feathers.*

*He will shelter you with his wings.*

*His faithful promises are your armor and protection.*

*<sup>5</sup> Do not be afraid of the terrors of the night,  
nor the arrow that flies in the day.*

*<sup>6</sup> Do not dread the disease that stalks in darkness,  
nor the disaster that strikes at midday.*

Beginning in verse 3, we read that God provides deliverance from **"every trap.. deadly disease.. terrors of the night.. the arrow that flies in the day... the disease that stalks in darkness... disaster that strikes at midday"**—and that's just verses 3 to 6. The psalmist has already covered a full slate of dangers, toils and snares!

But also notice how the dangers mentioned in this psalm are not listed in abstract categories or generalities like pain, violence, or suffering. Instead, we are given concrete examples from a particular context and culture. God's message always comes to us mediated through culture and context.

These prayers were written in a specific time and place in the ancient world where the life-threatening dangers people worried about were not car accidents, or gun bullets or malignant tumors. For the people who first prayed these psalms, the major risks on their minds were wild animals like wolves/cobras/lions. They worried about plagues of infectious disease that could wipe out a whole village in weeks. They worried about armies with chariots and arrows. They worried about walking

across treacherous terrain that could become fatal if you were in a canyon or on a mountainside at the wrong time.

The words of Psalm 91 were written in a society vastly different than ours, yet these prayers remain remarkably accessible and compelling to us in our time.

So the language used here to describe God's protection is vivid and comprehensive. Every type of danger is covered. In fact, the promises of God's protection and safety and rescue are so comprehensive in scope that the text is almost begging us to ask, "But what about when these promises don't work out?" What about people whose lives are cut short by injustice and violence? What about the human suffering we see in the news every day? Earthquakes, plane crashes, domestic violence. It doesn't take much imagination to think of situations where vulnerable people are taken advantage of, harmed or abused. Our planet is full of pain. Everyone who lives on this planet is impacted by pain in one way or another, sooner or later.

In my own life, some of you know that in 2010 we lost our second son Vincent, when he was taken from us by a cancerous tumor when he was 18 months old. This Nov. will make 9 years since he passed. Where was God when the chemo stopped working and we brought him home for the last time? Doesn't Psalm 91 say in **v. 6** that we don't have to fear any disease that stalks in darkness? Or in **v. 10**, it says: **no evil will conquer you;**

**no plague will come near your home.**

But if it says that no plague will come near our home, why did God allow Vincent to die? How can we trust God when the future falls apart?

When I graduated from Fuller Seminary 5 years ago, I wore a tie that belonged to my dad who was a dentist (hence it was a tie with teeth on it), and in my pocket I carried a drawing of our son Vincent that was created by our friend Ryan, a gifted artist who had died that year at the age of 37. Three people whose lives ended too soon: my son, my dad, and my friend Ryan.

I'd be willing to guess that ours is not the only family in this room who has lost a child, a parent or a close friend. I don't know everyone's story here, but I would imagine that most of us, if not all of us have been impacted by some form of deep loss, the kind of loss in which the future fell apart for us, or for someone very close to us.

Back when we lived in Southern California, Rebecca completed a clinical pastoral education program where she worked as a chaplain at Children's Hospital LA, where she spent her days and nights ministering to families in crisis. One of her chaplain friends tells the story of a dying patient's family member who asked, "How can I believe in a God who allows kids to die every day? I am just so angry at God." And in reply, the chaplain said, "I don't know how I could believe in a God who I **couldn't** be angry at. Any god who you can't be angry at is probably not worth believing in."

Death is not the only form of loss. There are many other kinds of loss: The loss of a marriage, a career, a homeland. The loss of one's health, or freedom, the loss of a dream.

When we lived in California, there was a particular sermon I heard that left an impact on me as I continue to process my grief. It was a sermon preached on October 11, 2015. The reason I remember that date is because exactly 10 years earlier on October 11, 2005, my father died at the age of 56 after battling an inexplicable brain disease for 7 years.

The preacher had no idea about the significance of that date for our family, but his sermon that day focused on how suffering impacts our faith in God. I took a lot of notes that Sunday, as Pastor Tim Dally spoke about the paradox of how **“suffering is the #1 reason for disbelief in God, and yet at the same time, it’s also the #1 way that people grow in their faith.”** He spoke about how the Bible doesn’t sweep suffering under the rug, so why should we? After all, Bethlehem is only a few miles away from Calvary. I love that line of his. Bethlehem is only a few miles away from Calvary.

Moving back to Psalm 91, the question still remains: What are we to make of God’s promises of protection when the future falls apart? Do the losses invalidate the promises?

Do the promises invalidate the losses? Is there a paradox somewhere?

This past Monday, Rebecca and I celebrated our 18<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Yay! We’ve actually known each other for almost 25 years because we met in 1996 at school in Manila for missionary kids. Faith Academy. We met thanks to a shared interest in music since we were both on the chapel worship team. Here’s a photo of us singing together in high school. Music has always been a big part of our lives. From a young age, songs were how I experienced God’s presence.

Many of the songs that impacted me most were songs I learned as a child which I still remember to this day and sing with our kids. One of the first songs I remember singing in church as a little boy was, “He’s got the whole world in his hands.”

Let’s think about this for a minute. Does God have the whole world in his hands today? Yes! Did God have the whole world in his hands yesterday? Yes! Did God have the whole world in his hands when the earth was formed? Yes! In fact, we can say that **God has never stopped holding a beautiful and broken world in his hands.** The world wasn’t always broken, but it’s been broken for a while, and yet it’s not like God stopped holding the world after it started to break.

Imagine an artist crafting an intricately beautiful globe made of glass, a multifaceted sculpture that reflects every possible color when viewed from different angles. Imagine the artist holding that exquisite glass globe in her hands. Now imagine the globe somehow beginning to crack and splinter. There are shards of glass breaking off from the globe in all directions. The fragments are razor sharp, so as the sculptor picks up the pieces off the floor, the glass slices her skin.

And for every part that she repairs and refashions, there are new cracks on the other side of the globe, and new fragments on the floor. But the artist doesn’t give up on what she’s making. She keeps working with her materials and re-creating the globe. And as the artist continues picking up the pieces, even with bloody hands, the globe begins to reveal new facets of beauty that couldn’t previously been seen. The light refracts of the splinters in new ways. And it’s beautiful.

Although the globe is broken, and even shattered in places where it seems to be barely hanging together, **the artist has never let go of it.**

In a similar way, I wonder if that's what that song is talking about when it says God has the whole world in his hands. It's a broken world, even shattered to dust in some places, yet always in God's hands. The brokenness doesn't mean God isn't still holding it. If anything, the scars on God's hands mean that he's holding the world even more, cradling the world even more, re-creating the world even more than if it had never started to break apart.

Psalms 91 points us to a God who has the whole world in his hands, a God we can trust when the future falls apart. This psalm is not making some sort of naïve guarantee of cause and effect—if we trust in God, we'll somehow become invincible against all danger. That would be misreading the psalm. Incidentally, that's exactly what the devil does with Psalm 91 when he quotes it at Jesus, challenging him throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple because God's angels will catch him and therefore prove to everyone that he is Israel's true King.

Psalms 91 is not an invitation to run into danger or manipulate God. **This psalm is not about how we can use God to rescue ourselves. Instead, this psalm is about how God alone has the capacity to rescue a beautiful and broken world!!** This psalm boldly and astonishingly declares that there is no danger that can take God's presence from us. There is no loss or sorrow or injustice that gets to have the last word. Not when we make our home in the shelter of the Most High.

Not when we choose to orient our lives in ways that say, "Our refuge and strength and trust are in God. And with God holding our future, we will rest in the shadow of the Almighty..."

Yes, there will be mortal dangers, deep heartache, blatant evil, shattered dreams and lives cut short by the inexplicable and inexcusable. Yet today, **we declare with the Word of the Lord that wherever we experience the beauty and brokenness of God's world, we will find that it's always still in his hands.**

Even when this masterpiece of a planet appears to be falling apart, God never lets go of it. He never lets go of us.

And as God has always done since the beginning, **God invites us** to join his mission and be part of putting it back together. **God invites us** to join in that mission of picking up the shattered pieces—until the day when every tear is wiped away and every valley is lifted up. **God invites us** to join in the restoration and renewal of all things—until everything that has gone horribly wrong is finally made right by the unstoppable love of God. For some of you, the future feels like its fallen apart.

If that's the case, God may be inviting you to simply be held, just like the sculptor holds in her hands those broken splinters of glass. Perhaps that can be your next step of faith, simply to entrust your own self into God's hands.

In closing, as we wrap up our look at this Psalm today, it's important to see how the psalmist brings this prayer to a close in the last 3 verses. There's something striking about how Psalm 91 ends. In the last 3 verses, there's a change of voice, a shift in who speaking. Instead of the Psalmist expressing trust in God, it ends with

God speaking. The last word doesn't belong to fear or sorrow or danger or injustice, but to the God who says "I will be with you in your day of trouble."

How appropriate that the last words of Psalm 91 are not spoken by any person, but by God. This what the Lord says:

**"I will rescue those who love me. I will protect those who trust in my name. When they call on me, I will answer; I will be with them in trouble. I will rescue and honor them. I will reward them with a long life and give them my salvation."**