

What Can Psalm 91 Teach Us?

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We live in a time when people's theology is being vigorously tested, especially in how we think about God's protection in our lives. In the past few weeks, I have seen highly respected individuals saying and doing things that show that they have had to radically adjust their thinking about sickness and God's protection over us as His children.

One of the Scriptures that many Christians have turned to for encouragement is Psalm 91 because of the promises it has regarding 'deadly pestilence'. In fact, it is a great passage to turn to in almost any crisis!

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What I would like to consider in this article is what truths we as New Covenant believers can appropriate for our own lives from Psalm 91. Do we have anything to gain from this Old Testament passage? I believe we do. So let us have a look at the context of the passage and see what encouragement we can gain from it today.

Context of Psalm 91

The psalmists who wrote Psalms loved to remind all who read and sang them of God's covenant faithfulness. This particular psalm is a good example of that, because under the Mosaic covenant God had promised His people that if they were faithful to keep the covenant, they would enjoy His blessing in the form of land, security, prosperity, long life and good health.

A Reminder of His Promises

They needed these song reminders because they (like us) tended to forget the promises of God and often turned to self-reliance instead.

As we read the life story of David, we see how many desperate situations he found himself in, and I

am quite sure he stirred up his faith by singing the psalms and reminding himself of the faithfulness of God.

Will we choose to continue glorifying Him with our lives even when we don't understand what is going on around us?

Bad Things Still Happened

It would be a mistake to think that righteous Israelites (like David) did not experience suffering and tragedy under the Old Covenant. They asked the same questions that we often do, 'Why do bad things happen to good people?' In fact, the whole book of Job was given to addressing this very question!

They faced the same challenge that we do: when all seems lost, when we are surrounded by enemies and danger, when we are suffering through life's afflictions, will we choose to trust in the faithfulness and goodness of God? Will we choose to continue glorifying Him with our lives even when we don't understand what is going on around us?

Not An Insurance Policy

In light of this, we must not think of Psalm 91 as an insurance policy which guarantees that nothing bad will ever happen to us. Rather, it is a promise that says, "I [God] will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him." (vs 15)

The Life and Teachings of Jesus

As New Testament (NT) believers, we need to handle Old Testament (OT) scriptures carefully, because although these Scriptures were written *for* us they were not written *to* us. What I mean is that the Old Covenant is not our covenant and so it was not given *to* us. Nevertheless, it preceded and foreshadowed our covenant and so it gives us wonderful insight into the nature of God and His kingdom.

The best way to benefit from the OT is to read it through the 'lens' of the NT, and in this way see how it applies to our lives.

So let us begin with Jesus and see how Psalm 91 can edify us in our faith.

His Redefinition of 'Blessing'

Jesus spoke a lot about trusting God, about prayer and about God's care for our lives (see especially Matthew, chapters 6 and 7). At the same time, Jesus radically redefined what 'blessing' will look like in the New Covenant:

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:19-21)

We know that OT heroes were often very wealthy in material goods (look at Abraham, David, Solomon, etc). This was a sign of covenant blessing. But in Jesus' teachings, we find Him constantly

redirecting our attention to eternity. He taught that by our good deeds done for the glory of God we would store up treasures in eternity with God.

Material Possessions Won't Last

Secondly, Jesus implies that it will be a normal experience for believers to experience the ruining of their worldly possessions through corrosion and theft! What are the implications of this for the kind of protection spoken about in Psalm 91?

It would seem that Christ doesn't want us to get too precious about our material wealth. He would rather have us give our attention to the advancement of the Gospel and living the kind of lives that draw attention to Christ.

Kingdom Before Providence

Jesus often spoke about God's care for us in words reminiscent of Psalm 91. Consider this passage:

*"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. **Are you not of more value than they?** And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, **and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.** But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and **all these things will be added to you.** Therefore **do not be anxious** about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." (Matthew 6:25-34)*

All Jesus' needs were provided for as He went about bringing the kingdom to earth.

What is crucial to notice in Jesus' teaching about God's providence for us as NT believers is that it is framed within the context of kingdom service. We see this again in the 'Lord's Prayer', which begins with *"let your kingdom come, let your will be done"* before we begin praying for our personal provision – *"give me this day my daily bread"*.

With Jesus, the emphasis is on our partnership with God to bring His kingdom on the earth, rather than on personal comfort and enrichment. We are servants of the kingdom – as we care for God's kingdom, God takes care of all of our needs.

We see this modeled in the life Jesus lived on earth as well. All Jesus' needs were provided for as He went about bringing the kingdom to earth.

Jesus Was Killed By His Enemies

We do see God's protection on Jesus' life for the duration of His ministry, despite His many enemies who were consistently plotting to kill Him. But when He had fulfilled His time on earth, He actually was killed by His enemies! This was also true of the apostles. Even so, God used their deaths to

glorify Himself and advance the kingdom.

What is the point here? We have a calling to fulfill. We are on earth for a purpose. The purpose is not to set up camp and make ourselves comfortable. Our bodies, our abilities, our possessions, our love are what we put into the service of God to fulfill His mission on earth.

Satan Quoted Psalm 91 to Jesus

What is quite sobering to consider in the life of Christ is the interaction that He had with Satan in Matthew chapter 4. Satan actually quotes from Psalm 91! He says,

"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, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" (vs 6)

Through this passage, Satan is encouraging a presumptuous attitude towards God, as though this Psalm were some kind of magic formula which made Him immune to all danger.

Healing in the New Testament

Apart from Christ, are there any other teachings in the New Testament that pick up on the message of Psalm 91? Yes, there are. Have a look at James chapter 5, which is a remarkable Scripture about healing and prayer.

In our prayers for healing, we are to have the expectation for the kind of miraculous, dramatic and glorious deliverances that Elijah experienced (vs 17). And we are to have the kind of *'patience in the face of suffering'* (vs 10) that Job had!

When we are sick, we can go to the elders for prayer and expect healing resulting from a prayer of faith (vs 15). And we can pray for each other as believers and expect the miraculous (vs 16). But as we trust God for healing, we need to keep in mind the things which Christ has taught us: kingdom advancement is the goal, not our creature-comforts.

At other times they suffered all things and *through their suffering* saw God glorified in their lives.

When we look at the life experiences of the apostles, we get a sobering picture of what it truly means to live for the kingdom. At times they experienced remarkable deliverances of God from danger, sickness and death. At other times they suffered all things and *through their suffering* saw God glorified in their lives.

In Galatians 4:13 it was *'because of an illness'* that Paul preached the Gospel to them. We read that Epaphroditus contracted an illness and almost died *'for the work of Christ'* and was honoured for his courage.

Psalm 91 in Our Current Crisis

So what can we take from Psalm 91 in our current crisis? We can take heart that as we remain in the will of God for our lives, we have nothing to fear from our enemies or from any 'deadly pestilence'. And why is that? It is because as we take care of God's kingdom, He takes care of us.

Does this mean we will never experience suffering or death? No, it doesn't. But it does mean that even through the trials we endure (which Satan intends for our harm) God will work all things for our good.