

Safety in the Shadow of the Lord

September 28, 2025

Psalm 91:1-6 and 14-16

¹Living in the Most High's shelter, camping in the Almighty's shade, ²I say to the Lord, "You are my refuge, my stronghold! You are my God — the one I trust!" ³God will save you from the hunter's trap and from deadly sickness. ⁴God will protect you with his pinions; you'll find refuge under his wings. His faithfulness is a protective shield. ⁵Don't be afraid of terrors at night, arrows that fly in daylight, ⁶or sickness that prowls in the dark, destruction that ravages at noontime...

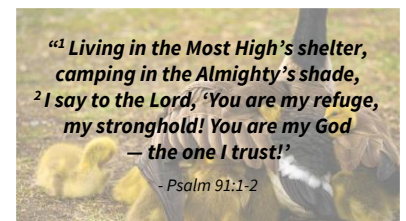
¹⁴God says, "Because you are devoted to me, I'll rescue you. I'll protect you because you know my name. ¹⁵Whenever you cry out to me, I'll answer. I'll be with you in troubling times. I'll save you and glorify you. ¹⁶I'll fill you full with old age. I'll show you my salvation."



The opening verses of Psalm 91 provide the thesis statement for the entire Psalm: *"¹Living in the Most High's shelter, camping in the Almighty's shade, ²I say to the Lord, 'You are my refuge, my stronghold! You are my God — the one I trust!'"* There you have it. It is that simple.

Choose to live in the shelter of the Lord our God and be blessed with refuge and protection, be covered with strength and assurance. Yes, God will take care of you. Alleluia and amen...

If faith and life were only that simple. It would be wonderful, wouldn't it? We know it is not that simple. With this in mind, we look again at verses 1 and 2. This is important because these two verses are the lens through which we should read the rest of the Psalm. So, let's take a minute to dig a little deeper, to unpack what the psalmist is saying beyond our quick read and simple assumptions.



First of all, what is the psalmist's understanding of living in God's shelter, of camping in God's shade? We might prefer to jump to the second part – the refuge, the strength, the trust – but these things come when we live in God's shelter, when we camp in God's shade. To live in God's shelter, to camp in God's shade is to invest our whole lives in our relationship with God. It is to truly live out our baptismal vows to always offer up and give to God our “prayers, presence, gifts, witness, and service.” It is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. It is to love neighbor more than self. It is to die to self, daily picking up our cross as we strive to serve God and neighbor in humble, sacrificial service. To live in God's shelter, to camp in God's shade is to walk the walk of faith each moment of each day.

This relationship that is to be our all in all is founded upon, supported by, and sustained by God's love for us. Living and camping within that love, one can say to God, *“You are my refuge, my stronghold! You are my God — the one I trust!”* Because of God's great love for you and for me, we can trust that God will be our refuge and our stronghold. Surrounded by a love that is almost indescribable, we can trust in our God to be present to us in all situations and circumstances. To live in God's shelter, to camp in God's shade, to know God's love for you and for me – this is what enables us to faithfully live out our days in this broken world.

Because the world is broken and sinful, there are and there will be times when we feel disconnected from the love of God. There will be times when we find ourselves in the wilderness. Now, the wilderness that we think of is not the wilderness that the psalmist would have in mind. It is not the wilderness that John the Baptist went into to offer a baptism of repentance. It is not the wilderness that Jesus would have gone into to face the temptations of Satan. When we think of wilderness it tends to be a place with trees and vegetation so thick that one cannot see through it. Our wilderness tends to be filled with creepy crawlers and with creatures dreamed up in scary movies.

For the psalmist and for Jesus, though, the wilderness was the desert. It was filled with rocks and sand. The sun beat down upon you, sapping strength and energy and life. It was dry and parched. Instead of teeming with life, life seemed non-existent in the desert. In the desert, you felt exposed and vulnerable. Psalm 91 would be read, then, as a blessing. To live in God's shelter, to camp in God's shadow, it meant relief. In the physical sense, relief from the blazing sun. Standing outside recently at a cross-country meet, the sun was shining brightly. It was starting to get hot. And then, a cloud would pass over. The relief was instantly felt. All of us have experienced something similar. This is part of what the psalmist is referring to here.

In the spiritual sense, to be in God's shelter, to camp in God's shade, it meant to feel relief from the trials and temptations of this world. When we are going through something hard or difficult, negative feelings can quickly build. Stress or worry, fear or doubt, anxiety or depression – these can all ramp up quickly when we try to deal with things on our own. But when we choose to step into God's presence, to call upon God's love for you and for me, then we can even more quickly feel that stress or anxiety or whatever begin to fade away. This too is something that we all experience. When we take our trials or struggles to God in prayer, or when someone does so on our behalf, we have all felt that weight drop off of our shoulders, we have all felt a sense of relief. The trial or struggle is not instantly gone, but God is instantly right there with us, taking us under that shadow of God's wings.

Yes, whether physically or spiritually, to step into God's love and presence in a time of need brings us relief. In that presence and love we can feel safe and assured. We can feel a sense of belonging and of worth. We can stand up a little straighter instead of being bent over by the weight of the world or by the strain of our trials and struggles. Yes, God is our refuge and our stronghold. Yes, our God is a God in whom we can trust. This eternal truth is definitely at the heart of Psalm 91.



As we continue into verses 3 through 6, we find a list of things that God will save, rescue, and protect us from. “Us,” of course, includes those of us who live in God’s shelter and who camp in God’s shade. In these verses we read that God will protect us from the hunter’s trap and from deadly sickness, from terrors in the night and arrows in the day. While we do not have to work very hard in today’s world to avoid the hunter’s traps or the arrows that fly in the day, in our time we might include protection from those who might scheme against us, from those who might try to oppress us, and from those who sling gossip or aim lies in our direction, intending to bring us harm. There are times, of course, when we feel that sickness prowls nearby or when destruction seems to be just around the corner. In this sense, the Psalm does feel a bit dangerous.

Psalm 91 also feels a bit conditional. As in, God will save, rescue, and protect those of us who live in God’s shelter and who camp in God’s shade. What happens, then, to those who do not know God because they have never been told of God’s love and care and protection? And what happens to those who have heard of God’s love and care and protection but did not hear it in a way that made it feel accessible to them? Or maybe even heard about it in a way that made them feel excluded from or unworthy of God’s love and care and protection? Are all of these people just on their own, either temporarily or permanently?

Reality is the other conditional aspect to the picture painted by the psalmist in relation to receiving God’s love and care and protection. It’s hard not to read into this Psalm our desire to avoid suffering. We think, ‘If I’m God’s faithful believer, surely God will protect me from suffering, right?’ That was the very temptation Jesus had to wrestle with in the desert when Satan tempted Jesus to test God’s love for him. The devil quoted from Psalm 91, verse 12, saying, *“They [the angels] will carry you... so you don’t bruise your foot on a stone.”*

Of course, Jesus rejected that temptation, leaning into God's promise from Deuteronomy instead. Later, at the end of his life, he wasn't saved by any angels when he was crucified. In our own experience we know that we do at times get sick. We lose those we love. We endure suffering at the hands of wicked people. So, a part of us wants to ask, is the promise that *"no evil will happen to you; no disease will come close to your tent"* just a hollow promise? Because if it doesn't mean that, then what does this Psalm really mean?

While in our gut, during times of great trial or suffering, we may sometimes wonder about God's love and care and protection, in our heads – we know better. We know that it is God's nature to love and to care for and to protect us. We know deep down in our soul that God's love is unconditional and constant. Psalm 91 simply says that there is nothing that can happen to us to take away God's love for us. This truth runs throughout the scriptures.

In the New Testament Jesus lived out this truth – loving one and all. The early church lived out this truth too, opening the waters of baptism and the table of grace to all who believed in Jesus as Lord and Savior. And Paul emphasizes this truth in Romans 8, where he writes, *"Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?... But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: ... not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created."* There is nothing in this world that can separate us from the eternal, unconditional love of God.

"Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?..."

- Romans 8:35

"... But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: ..."

- Romans 8:37-38a

"...not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created."

- Romans 8:38b-39

Maybe, then, this Psalm and the eternal, unconditional love of God is about more than our physical comfort. Yes, in this world, we can suffer and yet the core of who we are still remains intact. We are the beloved of God, so our personhood, our being, our soul is protected, even if our body or our reputation is wounded, even if our situation is miserable. It is only in our deepest suffering that we can discover this mystery: that we can be both suffering and whole, both wounded and beautiful. Yes, our physical bodies may get hurt and may suffer, but God will keep our soul safe, protected, and secure in the shadow of God's wings.



The Psalmist says as much in verses 14-16 as he or she begins to lean into the eternal. In verse 14, God says that because we know God, because we are devoted to God, that God *will* rescue us, that God *will* protect us. God does promise to rescue and protect us because we know God's name. Sometimes we think this is some kind of "get out of jail free" card for those times when we do fall into sin. This is not the case. We know from many stories in the Bible and from our own personal experience that God will allow us to make our own poor choices and then will allow us to live with the consequences. In time, yes, God *will* rescue and protect us. More on that later.

God promises presence in verse 15. Here we read that when we cry out to God, yes, God will answer. Sometimes it takes a while to see what God's answer was. But God always answers when we cry out. In this same verse God promises to be with us in "*troubling times*." Yes, we wish that God would just keep us from trouble, but that is not the reality of this created world. In those times when trouble does come, God promises to "*save you and glorify you*." This echoes what we read and studied last week from Psalm 14, where we learned that God's glory is most often revealed in and through those times when God is at work in our lives.

We should celebrate the fact that our God, the one who gave us free will, does not allow our stubbornness or our bad choices or even our attempts to take God's place to ever keep us from being in God's presence. God always loves us – even in spite of our sin.

Leaning more fully into the eternal, in verse 16, the psalmist writes, *“I’ll fill you full with old age. I’ll show you my salvation.”* Here the psalmist is writing of our ultimate “get out of jail free” card. In



this sense, the psalmist is reminding us that we are more than our bodies. We can struggle with this at times because we identify so deeply with our body that we can come to think that we *are* our body. We can assume that what “I” am is just what’s inside this human body. But we are so much more than that. What if, then, “old age” was not what we think of as our great number of years but as a spiritual maturity or even our place in eternity? Too often we think in terms of the temporal when God is thinking in the big picture.

As we walk faithfully with the Lord, we begin to see the big picture better. This is often in hindsight. In the moment of hardship or suffering, it can be really hard to see how God is at work in our lives. For example, when I first heard in 2016 that I was being moved from Rapid City First UMC to Winner UMC, I really struggled with this news. I moved through the stages of grief – from anger to denial to placing blame and eventually to acceptance. But later, as I looked back on my time in Winner as that was drawing to a close in 2020, I could see how God had worked in me to mature me in my personal faith and in my vocational skills as a pastor. I could see the lessons – both the hard ones and the good ones – that God intended for me to learn from. I could see how God used these lessons and experiences to grow and deepen my walk with God and to help me to be a better pastor. I believe that each time we go through this process, our trust in God grows as our relationship with God deepens and becomes stronger and more secure.

The big picture – that is the promise, that is the rescue, that is the salvation that Psalm 91 points towards. While this is a big picture verse, a verse that speaks beyond this world, it is also a verse that God invites us to live into every day. While this is God's preferred plan for us all, we do not reach spiritual maturity or one day enter God's eternal presence simply because God loves us. We have a role to play in growing our faith and in the development of our relationship with God. This is why, in the here and now, we are part of the body of Christ, called to be Jesus' hands and feet in the world.

As the body of Christ, living by the Spirit, we are aware that we're not just isolated individuals living on this earth, but are a community bound together by God's love. And because we know that God created all people, we know that all people are meant to be a part of this family of God. One of the roles we are called to play is to be disciples who share our faith. Disciples share faith with others so that the lost can come to know the God who desires to love, care for, and protect them. Sharing the love of God also enhances and builds our faith. When we live like God wants us to live, being God's light and love in the world, then we experience a life that is better, fuller, more alive. This way of living deepens our faith and our relationship with God.

When we give our hearts to God, to the Love at the center of our existence, we better reflect his son, Jesus Christ, to the world. As we live out this love of God, we will one day become a part of eternal life — something infinite and eternal, something that nothing in this world can ever separate us from. Psalm 91 does not promise that we won't get hurt or won't suffer in this life. The cross reminds us that we will. Psalm 91 promised that who we are at our core, that our souls cannot be destroyed. The resurrection reminds us that we too will one day experience the salvation of our souls. For this hope and for these promises, we say thanks be to God. Alleluia and amen.

GPS - Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. What personal experiences have led to the growth or deepening of your faith?
How have these experiences deepened your trust in God as refuge and stronghold?
- 2) *Pray*. Who do you know that currently needs to feel God's strong presence near them?
Take some time each day this week to pray for them to feel God near to them.
- 3) *Study*. Read Psalm 91:7-13 – the verses that the lectionary skipped over for today's reading. How do these words add to your trust in God? To your understanding of how complete God's presence, protection, and rescue can be in your life?