

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
November 21, 2010

God Delivers and Protects

Psalm 91:1-6, 9-16

Key verse: “Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name” (Psalm 91:14).

Psalm 91 is a psalm of protection. It offers the assurance of God’s protection to God’s people who trust in the Lord and seek refuge in Him.

Actor Jimmy Stewart found great comfort in this psalm, according to an article by Victor Parachin. At the start of World War II, Jimmy Stewart signed up for the Army Air Corps. When it was time for Stewart’s father to say goodbye, he became too choked up to speak. So he gave his son a note to read later. Here are the words Jimmy Stewart’s father could not say out loud:

“My dear Jim boy. Soon after you read this letter, you will be on your way to the worst sort of danger. Jim, I’m banking on the enclosed copy of the 91st Psalm. The thing that takes the place of fear and worry is the promise of these words. I am staking my faith on these words. I feel sure that God will lead you through this mad experience. I can say no more. I only continue to pray. Goodbye, my dear. God bless you and keep you. I love you more than I can tell you. Dad.”

Jimmy Stewart returned home unharmed, having flown 20 combat missions. In the heat of battle, Stewart said he had leaned on the tattered copy of Psalm 91 that his dad had given him—especially verses 1 and 2: “You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.’”

Upon his return home, Jimmy Stewart told his father: “What a promise for an airman. I placed in His hands the squadron I would be leading. And, as the psalmist promised [in verse 12], felt myself to be *borne up*.” (from *Christian Reader*, Sept./Oct. 2000)

Psalm 91 is a powerful and poetic invitation to trust the Lord in all circumstances. Like much of Scripture, however, this psalm should not be read in isolation from the rest of the Bible. Psalm 91 should not be interpreted as a literal and *absolute* promise that nothing will ever go wrong for those who trust in the Lord. This is obviously not a correct interpretation because, for example, the preceding psalm, Psalm 90, tell us that our short lives are often filled with “toil and trouble” (Ps. 90:10).

Psalm 91 must be read in light of the entirety of Scripture. For another example, consider Daniel's courageous statement when threatened by the king's fiery furnace: "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Daniel 3:17-18).

Daniel's confident assurance was: (1) God was able to protect and deliver him, and (2) even if God did not save Daniel's life, Daniel would ultimately be safe in God's eternal care.

I am reminded of an incident from the life of former Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. As a young soldier, Holmes lay on the battlefield, severely wounded. A chaplain asked Holmes if he was a Christian. Holmes gasped, "Yes." Then the chaplain said, "Then you have nothing to fear."

So, while Psalm 91 should not be understood to promise complete, unconditional protection in every circumstance, this psalm is nevertheless a powerful invitation to trust God always. We trust God, knowing that he is always able to protect and deliver us, and that He often does! We trust God, knowing that whatever happens to God's children, we will ultimately be safe and protected in God's eternal care.

The descriptive, poetic images of Psalm 91 are especially powerful when read in light of their original context:

God's protection is described as like a "shelter" and "shadow" that protects from the hot Mid-Eastern sun (v. 1).

God's loving care is compared to that of a protective mother hen, covering her chicks with her wings (v. 4).

God's protection, wrote the psalmist, will cover God's people in times of war: "the snare of the fowler" (v. 3), "the terror of night" and "the arrow that flies by day" (v. 5).

God's people, urges the psalmist, should trust in God's protection when *disease epidemics* threaten: "the pestilence that stalks in darkness" and "the destruction that wastes at noonday" (v. 6).

God's protection extends to other deadly threats of that time period: "the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent" (v. 13).

In verses 14-16, the voice changes, and God now speaks directly, with these words of assurance: "Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation."

Maybe you, like Jimmy Stewart, have seen clear and convincing evidence of God protecting you from danger. No doubt, you have been the recipient of God's

protection on many occasions when you were not even aware of it—the near-miss car accident, the healing grace you never knew that you needed.

Psalm 91 is a challenge and invitation to us all: Trust in God. Make the Lord our “refuge” and “fortress.” Trust always in God’s love, care, and protection!

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