

## ***3D Volume 1***

### *What does Psalm 91 really say about the coronavirus?*

I was listening to the religious news programme, 'Sunday', the other day. There was an item about some church leaders in America who were resisting the requirement to suspend their services due to Coronavirus. They misrepresented their flouting of the government guidelines as brave Christian resistance to the authorities' attempts to clamp down on the Gospel. There is certainly a proud history of brave Christian resistance to tyranny. This was not that.

Still more serious was their misrepresentation of Scripture itself. The pastor being interviewed said, 'Psalm 91 tells me I am safe under the shadow of God's hand, God teaches us I am safe, I cannot get the COVID – the Bible says God does not lie – Psalm 91 tells me to move out under God's protection'. (Thankfully, the other pastor also being interviewed pointed out that this was no way to 'love our neighbour')

I'm reminded of a parishioner during the swine flu outbreak 10 years ago complaining bitterly about having to take communion without wine (how much we would give for such minimal restrictions this time around!). Did I really think, he asked, that God would let the wine of communion – the blood of Christ - harbour germs?!

It is not hard to see why those who are opposed to faith, and especially Christianity, seize on such instances as proof that religion is a negative force. But if anyone should have their heads in their hands when they hear such nonsense, it's not the humanist and the atheist, but other Christians – you and I. For our scriptures and our faith are being twisted, mis-used, mis-represented.

Now, my point here is not to encourage us to feel superior at the expense of some of our more extreme, or foolish, brethren. It is to point out the very real danger when we fail to treat scripture with the respect it deserves. And we are most likely to do that when we force scripture to support our existing ideas or world-view; or even when we just read it lazily, without applying our God-given intellect.

The pastor referred to Psalm 91, which many of us have found very precious in these days. The words are quite striking:

You will not fear ...the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,  
nor the plague that destroys at midday.  
A thousand may fall at your side,  
ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near you.

So, let us take the opportunity to examine this Psalm, to ask what it does – and doesn't – say to our current situation; and in so doing, perhaps learn a bit more about how we should approach scripture in order to find, not what we want it to say, but what God wants to say to us through it. (Most of what follows is taken

from an excellent article on the Bible Society website; I commend that website to you for all kinds of helpful stuff).

Psalms 91 is a beautiful song that speaks of trust in God in the darkest of times. The psalmist talks about God's protection, likening him to a mother hen with its chicks – 'He will cover you with his wings; you will be safe in his care'.

These are lovely words. But just how are we meant to understand them? After all, Christians do get ill and die. A few of us will catch the coronavirus, and some of us – though a tiny minority – will not recover. So is the Bible just plain wrong?

There's a clue in the New Testament. We read about the devil tempting Jesus in the wilderness. One of the temptations is for Jesus to cast himself down from the highest point of the temple; quoting Psalm 91, the devil says, '...for the scripture says: "God will give orders to his angels about you; they will hold you up with their hands, so that not even your feet will be hurt on the stones.'" Jesus answers with another Scripture: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test' (Deuteronomy 6).

Jesus is refusing to let the devil turn Scripture into a sort of exam on God's faithfulness. He knows very well that God's word can be trusted, and he won't let the devil twist it to say something it doesn't – a hint to us that we're to read Psalm 91 in the context of the whole of Scripture, rather than just looking at a few verses by themselves. In my view this is the most common reason for misinterpreting scripture. Some of you recently did the Bible Course: its presenter said 'Take a Text out of its Context and you are left with a Con' – exactly the mistake being made by that US pastor.

And when we do look at the wider context of Scripture, we find that God's people often suffer harm. There's a striking list of sufferings in Hebrews 11: they '...were mocked and whipped, ... put in chains and taken off to prison. They were stoned... sawn in two, ... killed by the sword. They ...were poor, persecuted, and ill-treated'. But these martyrs all knew about God's faithfulness – and many of them, if not all, would have known Psalm 91, with its lovely promise that 'no violence will come near your home'.

So when we're thinking about Psalm 91 today, there are perhaps four things we can say.

First, don't tempt God. It is quite wrong, for instance, for Christians, taking these words literally, to refuse to stop meeting together in spite of the dangers posed by the virus.

Second, let's trust the experience of our elders. The martyrs who've died for the gospel – like the ones the author of Hebrews writes about – didn't feel the Bible contradicted itself or was not 'true', just because they suffered.

Third, let's hear the hope in Psalm 91. The psalm uses poetic language – vivid imagery, with striking comparisons and contrasts, to say something deeply meaningful: that God always intends the best for us and that he is always faithful. It doesn't just describe the world as it is, but the world as it ought to be. It's not a dry statement of fact, but a prayer.

So fourth, let's believe for the future. When God says in the last few verses, 'I will save those who love me ... I will reward them with long life; I will save them', we can take these words as meaning not just salvation for this life, but for eternity. Things may go well for us in the here and now, or they may not. But God's salvation is for ever.

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