

Reading Through the Bible Week 11: Psalm 91 (Deuteronomy Part 2)

Song of Protection

Overview:

Psalm 91 is a "Psalm of Protection," a chiastic masterpiece of biblical poetry, in the same vein as the Pentateuch overall as well as within each book of the Pentateuch, expressing absolute confidence in God's security.

While the author is not explicitly named in the Hebrew text, Psalm 91 is widely regarded by the Septuagint, biblical scholars, and Jewish tradition as a companion to Psalm 90, which is also attributed to Moses

Psalm 91 celebrates God as an absolute refuge, fortress, and protector against all dangers, including pestilence, terror, and warfare. It assures that those who "dwell" in God's presence find secure, 24-hour protection under His wings, encouraging faith over fear.

Theme:

The primary theme of Psalm 91 is the absolute security, protection, and refuge found in God by those who trust in Him and abide in His presence.

It serves as a confession of faith, assuring believers that God is a shield against fear, danger, and evil.

Narrative Arc of Numbers:

Structurally, the theme of Psalm 91 is frequently analyzed through a chiastic lens, where the central axis emphasizes the shift from human profession to divine promise.

Chiastic Structure

- ❖ **A: Personal Profession of Divinity (vv. 1–2):** Personal profession of trust in the "Most High" (*Elyon*) and "Almighty" (*Shaddai*) as a refuge.
 - **B: Specific Protections (vv. 3–4):** Deliverance from the "snare of the fowler" and refuge under "His wings".
 - **C: Victory over Fear (vv. 5–7):** Not fearing the "terror by night" or "arrow by day," even as thousands fall.
 - Central Axis (v. 8):** "Only with your eyes shall you look, and see the reward of the wicked." This pivot point marks the transition from witnessing judgment to receiving divine confirmation.
 - **C': Reiteration of Refuge (v. 9):** "Because you have made the LORD... your dwelling place".
 - **B': Renewed Protections (vv. 10–13):** No "plague" near the dwelling; angelic protection; victory over "the lion and the cobra".
- ❖ **A': Divine Response (vv. 14–16):** God's first-person confirmation of deliverance, long life, and salvation.



Study Points & Commentary

Psalm 91, which directly follows Psalm 90 in the Psalter (structure of the Book of Psalms organized into five books), is often studied in conjunction with the end of the Torah (Deuteronomy).

Psalm 91 thematically and lexically overlaps with the final words of Moses in Deuteronomy with the "Song of Moses" (Deut. 32) and Moses' final blessing (Deut. 33). In addition, El Elyon, translated in English as "Most High," is the specific title for God and a key feature of Deuteronomy 32:8, where the *El Elyon* divides the nations, a concept Psalm 91:1–2 uses to establish God's absolute sovereignty over all other powers.

And Psalm 91:9 says God is "refuge" and "dwelling place," mirroring the language in Psalm 90 (attributed to Moses) uses *Ma'ōn* (dwelling place) as a title for God in Deuteronomy 33:27.

Other unique lexical references are in the promise of deliverance from hidden snares (*pach v.3*) and pestilence (*deber v.6*), words closely linked to the Book of Deuteronomy and the broader Mosaic tradition through shared vocabulary regarding wilderness dangers and covenantal judgments. And the promise that "no sickness will come near your house" (Ps 91:10) closely parallels the covenantal blessings of health and removal of diseases in Deuteronomy 7:15 and Deuteronomy 28:61.

Chiasmic Outline

A: The Secret Place & Shelter (vv.1-2): Dwelling in the shadow of the Almighty.

"The Secret Place" is a posture of intimate, abiding trust in God, where believers find supreme security ("refuge and fortress") under the shadow of the Almighty (Shaddai). This "dwelling" signifies a consistent, heartfelt relationship, rather than a temporary visit, offering protection, comfort, and peace during life's trials.

Verse 1-The Dwelling and the Shadow: *"He who dwells in the secret place of Elyon (the Most High) shall abide under the shadow of Shaddai (the Almighty)."*

- **The Secret Place (Satar):** This signifies more than a physical location; it represents a "hidden" place of close communion and heartfelt pursuit of God. It is an intimate relationship accessed through faith and time spent in His presence, often likened to the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle.
- **The Act of Dwelling:** To "dwell" (*yashab*) implies a permanent residence or continuous living, rather than a temporary visit or a "Sunday morning" acquaintance.
- **The Shadow (Tsel):** This imagery represents divine protection and comfort. Just as a great tree or rock offers refuge from scorching heat in the ancient Near East, God's "shadow" provides a boundary of safety where fear loses its power.
- **The Names of God:** Two specific names are used here:
 - **Most High (Elyon):** Stresses His supreme power as the sovereign ruler above all threats.



- **Almighty (*Shaddai*)**: Highlights His omnipotence and ability to fulfill every promise.

Verse 2-The Personal Affirmation: *"I will say of Yahweh/Jehovah (the LORD), 'He is my refuge and my fortress; Elohim (My God), in Him I will trust.'"*

- **Personal Declaration:** This verse shifts from the third person - "He who dwells" - to the first person - "I will say." It is the individual's active choice to recognize and proclaim God as their personal protector.
- **Refuge and Fortress:** These terms depict God as both a sanctuary for rest and an impenetrable defense against attack.
- **Implicit Trust:** Dwelling in this place means trusting in God's love and wisdom to provide exactly what is needed—whether in life or in suffering. It does not guarantee an exemption from all earthly pain, but it guarantees that nothing can separate the believer from God's eternal presence.
- **Trust:** A deeply personal, active reliance on God. The Psalmist calls Him Elohim "My God."
- **The Names of God:** Two specific names are used here:
 - **LORD (*Yahweh/Jehovah*)**: The personal, covenantal name of God, often translated as LORD in all caps. It signifies "the existing One" or "I AM."
 - **My God (*Elohim*)**: This comes from *'elōhîm*, a plural noun denoting God's supreme power, might, and His role as Creator. It also represents the Triune nature of God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

B: The Promise of Protection (vv. 3-4): Deliverance from snares and pestilence, under wings.

In the chiasmic structure of Psalm 91, verses 3-4 form a core narrative of divine rescue and tender protection. While scholars propose various chiasmic models, these verses often function as a primary unit of specific promises that transition from the general declaration of trust in verses 1-2.

Verse 3-The Promise of Deliverance: *"Surely He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler, and from the deadly plague."*

- **"The Snare of the Fowler":** This refers to hidden, unexpected dangers, traps laid by enemies, or subtle, deceptive temptations by Lucifer. It signifies protection against malicious, unseen plots.
Just as a bird is lured into a hunter's net, believers face deceptive spiritual and physical schemes and God is portrayed as the one who breaks the snare, allowing the "bird" (the believer) to escape even after being entangled.
- **"Perilous/Deadly Pestilence":** This covers both literal, widespread diseases, plagues, and, metaphorically, any fatal destruction or spiritual evil. While often taken literally (e.g., epidemics), it is also viewed metaphorically as the "plague of the heart" or moral corruption.
- **"He shall deliver you":** This indicates God's active role as a rescuer and protector of those who dwell in His presence. Theologically, this is not an absolute guarantee of physical immunity but a promise of ultimate safety and divine presence in the midst of suffering.



Verse 4-The Imagery of Protection: *"He will cover you with His feathers; under His wings you will find refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and rampart."*

- **"Cover you with His feathers/pinions":** This evokes the image of a mother bird shielding her young (similar to Matthew 23:37), emphasizing divine tenderness, warmth, and close, personal care.
- **"Under His wings you shall take refuge":** This describes a place of security and comfort. It suggests a place of warmth, comfort, and safety where the enemy cannot reach without first going through the Protector. This imagery echoes Deuteronomy 32:11 and Matthew 23:37, highlighting God's desire to gather His people to Himself.
- **"His truth... shield and buckler":** To ensure the reader does not mistake the "softness" of feathers for weakness, the psalmist adds military metaphors:
 - **Shield (*tsinnah*):** Large, full-body armor used for primary defense.
 - **Buckler (*socherah*):** A small, maneuverable shield for close combat or a "bulwark" (surrounding wall).These defenses are specifically identified as God's **faithfulness** or **truth**, meaning His consistent character is what makes the protection reliable. God's faithfulness and promises act as defensive armor symbolizing total protection.

C: No Fear of Night/Day Dangers (v. 5-6): Security against terror.

Psalm 91:5-6 constitutes an emphatic point in the psalm's chiasmic structure, connecting the initial promises of shelter and protection (vv. 1-4) to emphasizing that the believer is shielded by God regardless of the time of day.

It calls believers to move from fear to faith, trusting in God's protection against hidden nocturnal horrors and overt daytime attacks representing a promise of divine protection amidst life's inevitable, often violent, perils.

Verse 5-Security Against Man-Made Terrors: *"You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day,"*

- **"You shall not be afraid of the terror by night,":** Night is traditionally the time of highest vulnerability to unseen fears, demonic activity, or hidden enemies. This includes nightmares, anxiety about the future, and sudden, unforeseen calamities. The promise is not just protection *from* the event, but deliverance from the *fear* of the event.
- **"nor of the arrow that flies by day,":** Arrows symbolize attacks that are visible, direct, and immediate, such as slander, conflict, or sudden tragedy. Charles Spurgeon wrote, "Such frail creatures are we that both by night and by day we are in danger, and so sinful are we that in either season we may be readily carried away by fear;" Spurgeon notes that "the shadow of the Almighty removes all gloom from the shadow of night," suggesting that God's presence renders the believer's spirit impervious to the dread itself, not just the physical danger.

Verse 6-Security Against Natural & Invisible Calamities: *"nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the calamity that destroys at noon."*

- **"nor of the pestilence that stalks in darkness,":** This phrase emphasizes silent, spreading disease or hidden, creeping evil that works unseen. Some interpret this



as demonic or spiritual, while others see it as metaphorical for contagious, uncontrollable, or hidden dangers that plague society.

- **"nor of the destruction that wastes at noonday.":** This refers to open, bold destruction—disasters that strike openly, such as catastrophic "acts of God" or blatant, direct attacks by the enemy. The contrast is between "darkness" (hidden, 6a) and "noonday" (obvious, 6b). The promise is that whether the danger is lurking in the shadows or attacking in the light of day, the believer is safe.

X: The Pivot - The Refuge (vv. 7-10): A thousand fall, but no evil befalls the one who trusts in Yahweh. The pivot of the chiasmic structure in Psalm 91 are verses 7-10, which centers on the promise that while widespread destruction may occur around the believer, the one who trusts in Yahweh is shielded by divine protection. This section marks the climax of the Psalm's safety theme, where the "refuge" moves from a promise to a realized, abiding presence, ensuring that no true evil can ultimately harm the one dwelling in God.

This verse acts as the internal hinge of the pivot. The protection is not a generic magic charm; it is active because the individual has chosen to make **Yahweh** their **machseh**, even **Elyon** their **mo'an**.

Verse 7-The Contrast of Scale: *"A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you."*

- The text uses hyperbolic imagery—to emphasize that even in a total collapse of worldly security, "it" (the plague or evil) does not breach the believer's secure position.

Verse 8-The Observer's Perspective: *"You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked."*

- Instead of being a victim, the one in the "Refuge" becomes a witness. They "only look with [their] eyes" to see the "recompense of the wicked," indicating a position of safety that is outside the reach of the judgment or calamity affecting others. Summary: the believer is not an active victim of the destruction but an observer of God's justice upon the wicked.

Verse 9-The Foundation of Trust: *"Because you have made Yahweh [the LORD], my machseh [refuge], even Elyon [the Most High], your ma'on [dwelling place]."*

- **"Because...":** This verse provides the "why" of the protection: a conscious, intimate, and continuous choice to make God the place of residence.
- **"...my refuge,":** *machsi* (my refuge), versus *machseh* (refuge), signifies a safe place to run when overwhelmed, offering emotional and spiritual covering.
- **"...your dwelling place.":** Dwelling place (*ma'on*) isn't just a synonym for the preceding use of refuge. It signifies something very different. *Ma'on* refers to an abode, dwelling place, or habitation, signifying a permanent home in God.
- **The Names of God:** Two specific names are used here are also in vv. 1 and 2:
 - **LORD (Yahweh/Jehovah):** The personal, covenantal name of God, often translated as LORD in all caps. It signifies "the existing One" or "I AM."
 - **Most High (Elyon):** Stresses His supreme power as the sovereign ruler above all threats.



Verse 10-The Promise of Security: "No evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent."

- **"No evil shall be allowed to befall you, ...":** The pivot concludes with the definitive promise that "no evil" shall befall the truster. Theology often distinguishes between "evil" from "affliction." While not promising a life free from trouble (John 16:33), it guarantees that no calamity will ultimately conquer or destroy the believer's spiritual security. That is: everything that happens in our life is filtered through the hands of the Father. And God only allows trials that are for His glory and the believer's ultimate good.
- **"...neither will any plague come near your tent.":** This parallels the plague-free protection of the Israelites during their slavery in Goshen of Egypt. "
- **Hebrew Word Study:**
 - **Befall (*anah*):** To encounter or happen to. The negative particle used here creates an emphatic negation, meaning such evil is firmly barred from the believer.
 - **Plague (*nega*):** Beyond physical disease, this word can denote a "wound" or "plague of words" that attacks the heart or soul.
 - **Near (*qarab*):** To draw near or approach. The text promises that these afflictions will not even reach the vicinity of the faithful's habitation.
 - **Tent (*ohel*):** It literally means tent, reflecting the nomadic history of Israel and symbolizing one's home and household.

C': Protection by Angels (vv. 11-12): Angels guard in all ways.

Psalms 91 pivots from describing the dangers of life (vv. 3-10) to the specific, active protection of angels (vv. 11-12). This serves as a critical point of transition that shifts from God's passive protection (as a refuge or dwell place) to His active intervention through angelic agents. These verses describe a comprehensive "angelic charge" where the protection is not just a general oversight but a specific, mandated guardianship.

Verse 11-Divine Command: "For He will command His angels to guard you, to keep you in all your ways."

- **"For He will command...":** The Hebrew for "command" (*yəšawweh*) is a direct, legal charge or order from God to His heavenly host. The angels are agents carrying out a specific assignment on behalf of the believer. This highlights that the protection is proactive and ordained directly by God, not merely a coincidental act. The angels are tasked with a specific commission to watch over the believer.
- **"...His angels to guard you, ...":** In verse 11b, notice there is a plurality of guardians. The verse refers to "angels" (plural), suggesting a coordinated bodyguard detail rather than just a single guardian.
- **"...to keep you in all your ways.":** This signifies comprehensive protection across all aspects of life (spiritual, physical, emotional) as well as in all locations. However, it is notable that John Calvin's Commentary notes that "your ways" implies the path of duty: protection is promised for those walking in obedience, not for those tempting God through recklessness.



Also notable, this passage is famously misused by Satan, recorded in Matt. 4:6 and Luke 4:10-11, to tempt Jesus to act presumptuously reminding readers that this protection is promised to those walking in obedience.

Verse 12-The Care: "They will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

- **"They will lift you up in their hands,...":** This imagery suggests active, tender care, similar to how a parent supports a child traveling over rough terrain. It implies that angels are actively working to prevent harm from overtaking the believer.
- **"...so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.":** This metaphor suggests that angels physically or spiritually intervene to prevent even minor injuries that could lead to greater falls but it doesn't guarantee total immunity from suffering. Satan famously misquoted this verse during the temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4:6), omitting "in all your ways" to tempt Christ into a reckless act of testing God, similar to the tactics used by Satan with Eve in Eden.

Verse 12b also signifies that God provides necessary, and sometimes unseen, intervention. This protection is often invisible but constant, warding off obstacles before they can cause a stumble.

B': Victory Over Enemies (v. 13): Trampling the lion and serpent.

This verse proclaims total victory over spiritual and physical enemies, serving as a chiasmic high point of divine protection.

It is a direct parallel to Luke 10:19, where Jesus gives disciples authority to "tread on serpents and scorpions" and over all the power of the enemy.

It fulfills the promise of Gen. 3:15, where the seed of the woman crushes the serpent's head, symbolizing complete subjugation of evil through God's authority.

Verse 13: "You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra; the young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot."

- **Nature of the Enemy:** The verse utilizes four distinct Hebrew terms to categorize every type of threat:
 - **The Lion (*Shacha*):** The Lion represents overt, roaring strength and frontal attacks. These symbolize visible dangers, persecution, or bold spiritual opposition. Represents open, violent, and aggressive foes. This highlights danger that comes at you directly, such as fear, worry, or persecution.
 - **The Young Lion (*Kephir*):** Also an overt threat, but different from the adult lion, the young lion refers to a lion in the height of its strength, indicating that even the most powerful enemies are overcome.
 - **The Serpent/Dragon (*Tannin*):** Often associated with sea monsters or the "dragon," symbolizing great cosmic evil or the devil himself.
 - **The Cobra/Adder (*Pethen*):** Represents hidden, insidious, and deadly treachery. It symbolizes sudden dangers and Satan's subtle schemes.
- **Narrative of Dominion:**
 - **Active Victory through Proximity:** "You shall tread..." indicates forward, triumphant motion, not just passive survival. It is a metaphor of complete conquest where the victor places a foot on the defeated foe.



And you are not merely escaping these predators; you are walking over them. This implies that the path to your destiny goes *through* the territory of the enemy, but their power is neutralized beneath your feet.

The believer is transformed from a refugee hiding in a secret place to a victor walking in authority over the most feared forces of the wild.

- **Total Subjugation:** To "trample" in the Ancient Near East was a legal and military gesture of absolute victory. It signifies that the threat has been rendered powerless to strike back. Within the Psalm's symmetry, this point proves that God's presence does not just keep us safe in a bubble; it equips us to conquer. Luke 10:19 echoes this term as Jesus directly invokes the authority of this verse when He tells His disciples, "*I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy.*"

A': The Lord's Promise of Salvation (vv. 14-16): God personally promises long life and deliverance to those who know His Name.

In Psalm 91:14-16, the narrative shifts as God Himself becomes the speaker, personally confirming the promises of protection and salvation described earlier in the psalm.

These verses outline a "divine contract" where God's commitment to rescue, honor, and satisfy His people is rooted in a deep, personal relationship. Psalm 91:14-16 serves as a divine oracle, where God directly promises personal protection, intimate fellowship, and ultimate deliverance to those who love Him, know His Name, and call upon Him. These verses promise that, despite inevitable trouble, God will rescue, honor, and satisfy believers with long life and salvation.

Verse 14-Foundation of Love and Knowledge: "Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will exalt him on high, because he has known My name (*Shmî*)."

- **"Because...":** The word "Because," Hebrew: *kî*, initiates the conditions for these promises, transitioning from a general declaration of trust to a specific, intimate promise for those who demonstrate a profound commitment to God. The promise is aimed at those who have an intimate relationship with God, not merely intellectual knowledge.
- **"...set his love upon Me...":** The Hebrew word ***chashaq*** (חַשַּׁק) translated as "love" in verse 14a appears in the phrase *Kî bî ḥāšaq* - "because he has clung to me." The primitive root means to cling, bind, or join together signifying a deep, passionate binding attachment, desire, or longing, rather than just an emotion.
- **"I will deliver him; I will exalt him on high, ...":**
 - **"I will...":** "I" is not a standalone pronoun, but rather, represents the first-person singular suffix appended to "I will" signifying God's personal, sovereign promise. Here YHWY Himself becomes the speaker, providing a divine ratification of the promises.
 - **"...deliver him...":** The word interpreted "deliver" is the Piel stem form of the verb root "*palat*" in Hebrew, which implies rescuing, escape, bypass, or setting free. It is in the Hebrew Piel stem form that intensifies the meaning of the root in the phrase "I will deliver him" (Hebrew: *ʾāpalletēhû*) marks a shift to God speaking directly, promising rescue to those who love Him, know His name, and abide in



Him. The "-hû" suffix indicates "I" (God) will deliver "him" (the believer) with an escape or rescue.

- **"...exalt him on high, ...":** The verb interpreted as "exalt" is from the Hebrew root "sawgav," literally meaning to be high, inaccessibly high, or loftily secure. In military context, it implies God placing the believer in a high tower or fortified place, out of reach of enemies, troubles, or perils. In the Hebrew Piel stem form in this verse is 'ăšaggēbēhû (אֲשַׁגְּבֶהוּ), a Piel imperfect verb denoting a definite, future action by God. The "-hû" suffix indicates "I" (God) will set "him" (the believer) on high.
- **"...because he has known My name.":** The Hebrew is *Kî-yāda' šəmî*.
 - **Yāda' (יָדַע):** This verb means to know, but in a Hebrew context, it signifies relational, experiential knowledge rather than mere intellectual acknowledgement. It is to have personal experience of God's power and character.
 - **Shmî:** *Shem* ("Name") and *î* (Suffix meaning "My") is literally "Name-of-Me." Shmi refers to the "I AM" in the tetragrammaton YHVH-HaShem/YHWH-Yahovah, the Hebrew name transliterated as "Hashem" (meaning "The Name"). This name, representing God's self-existent and covenant-keeping nature, is often replaced with HaShem (The Name) or Adonai (LORD) as a substitute developed in post-biblical Babylonian Talmudic period (the period in Jewish history from the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD to the Muslim conquest in 638 AD) as a way to avoid taking God's name in vain. Verse 14 emphasizes protection linked to knowing this sacred name Yahweh and refers the experience of abiding in God's character, power, and faithfulness personally, not just knowing *about* Him.

Verse 15-Promise of Presence in Trouble: "He will call on Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him."

- **"He shall call upon Me, ...":** The Hebrew root *qara* interpreted "call" implies an earnest, intentional invocation born out of trust, not just a casual request.
- **"...and I will answer him; ...":** God's "answer" (*'anah*) signifies active engagement; He is neither silent nor passive but heeds and responds to the petitioner.
- **"I will be with him in trouble":** This is a declaration of solidarity. The Hebrew *'immo* ("with him") denotes God's presence *within* the distress (*tsarah*), meaning a "tight place" or "anguish." God does not promise the *absence* of trouble, but rather divine companionship through it, providing strength to endure.
- **"I will deliver him":** The root *halats* means "to pull out" or "to arm for war." It is an active, powerful intervention to extract the believer from danger once the lesson of the trouble is learned.
 - Note:** The transliteration of "deliver" here in verse 15 has a very different Hebrew word from "deliver" in verse 14.
- **"And honor him":** The root for honor (Hebrew: *kabad*) is related to weightiness or glory. In ancient times, a king would honor someone by placing a "weighty" royal robe and crown upon them. To be "honored" by God is to be "weighted down" with divine glory and significance.



In this context, it highlights a shift from simply coming through a crisis (i.e., deliverance) to thriving and being glorified by God.

Verse 16-Fulfillment and Salvation: "With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation."

- **"With long life...":** The phrase in Hebrew, *orekh yamim*, literally means "length of days." This is the ultimate promise of security, suggesting not just duration but a "full" life, echoing the reversal of the brevity of life mentioned in Psalm 90:10. It promises that the believer will not die before their time, nor live a useless life. It is a promise of being satisfied with the time God grants, rather than a promise of never dying.
- **"...I will satisfy him...":** This emphasizes that "long life" is not merely a high number of years, but a life where the believer is *satisfied* (*sāḇa*) or "filled up." Charles Spurgeon noted that a believer will live "as long as he wants to live," meaning they will be preserved until their God-appointed work is finished and they are ready to depart.
- **"...and show him My salvation.":** The Hebrew word interpreted as "salvation" is Yeshu'ah. Many commentators, including Adam Clarke, see this as a prophetic unveiling of the Messiah, Jesus (Yeshua), whose very name means "God is Salvation". Also, "show" (*ra'ah*) means to cause to see or experience. God promises the believer will not just know about deliverance but will personally witness and feel His saving power throughout life and into eternity:
 - **Temporal:** Deliverance from the immediate "troubles" mentioned earlier in the psalm.
 - **Eternal:** The ultimate "salvation" of the soul, culminating in the radiant vision of God after our soul leaves this earthly body.

