

Our Refuge and Fortress  
Psalm 91

Isn't noisome pestilence supposed to be a thing of the past? Sure, people used to die from yellow fever outbreaks – we mark their graves on our local cemetery tour. But that's just history, right? After all, it wasn't long after the Civil War when Louis Pasteur taught us that germs of various kinds were the real cause of infectious disease, and he taught us how to make vaccines to help us fight them off. Walter Reed discovered that mosquitoes carry yellow fever, and we began draining the swamps that allowed them to breed. And Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin way back in 1928, and since that time we've developed more and more powerful antibiotics to kill all those disease-causing microbes.

Yes, we modern Americans have come to trust our modern medicine and environmental regulations to keep us safe. We look to our scientists and doctors for answers, and they've always come through for us. Just like when Jonas Salk came up with the polio vaccine in 1953, we expect successful new treatments to be developed for every disease that comes along.

But what happens when a new infectious disease, a new "noisome pestilence," pops up and spreads more quickly than a vaccine against it can be developed and distributed? What if it's a virus and no antibiotic can fight it? What if the only methods we have to slow it down are social isolation, quarantine, and keeping things clean?

That seems to be where we are today, and it's really nothing new. We went through the same sort of situation during the great flu epidemic of 1918 and 1919. Over the course of about a year, one-third of all the people in the world were infected and 50 million people died – 675,000 right here in the US.

Now, don't get me wrong – I'm not trying to scare anyone. We are blessed that this new coronavirus is much less severe than was the 1918 flu. The symptoms are much more mild and the death rate is much lower. According to what I've heard, it seems that the main danger it poses to American society is the potential for overtaxing our health care capacity in the short run. If we all avoid handshakes and hugs for awhile, if we avoid unnecessary social gatherings and travel for a month or two, if we can slow the spread of this disease down so that there will be enough ICU beds for the folks who really need them, we should be able to get through this.

But our current feelings of helplessness and fear can perhaps do us some good if we'll learn one of the main lessons of Psalm 91 – as verse 3 says, it is ultimately God Who delivers us from the noisome pestilence. That means that however helpful and welcome scientific breakthroughs may be, it is ultimately God Who is our refuge. However necessary social isolation and handwashing may be, it is ultimately God Who is our fortress. He is the One Who stretches His wings over us as a hen covers her chicks. He is the One Who keeps evil from befalling us.

And so if we'll allow our current crisis of confidence in science and medicine to direct our attention and our devotion back to the One Who keeps plague away from our dwellings, we may find a tremendous blessing even in the coronavirus.

Such a thing has happened before. Many of y'all remember the terrible tragedy that hit the Gulf Coast in the form of Hurricane Katrina. People lost everything. But two of our EPC congregations there,

First Pascagoula and First Ocean Springs, went through that disaster and came out stronger, revitalized, energized for mission and ministry. They are growing and thriving now – and the same thing could happen to our whole country, if we'll abide in the shadow of the Almighty. Even the President of the United States agrees, calling all of us not to look to government for all the answers, but to look to God in prayer today, to seek God's protection and strength in times like these.

But what if God doesn't deliver us? What if we end up getting sick? Does this mean that we are wicked, and not righteous, as verse 8 seems to imply? What would that say about Rev. Samuel Reading Bertron, a Presbyterian minister and first President of the Board of Chamberlain-Hunt Academy who died in the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878? What would that say about my grandfather who got the flu in 1918? Did they get sick because they were wicked?

And taking a step back, how do we square all these promises of God's protection with so many other harsh realities of human history? From the apostle Stephen to Andrew Brunson, many Christians have suffered precisely because of our faith in Christ. How can we say God is our refuge and our fortress when wars and famines and plagues keep happening to us?

Now, make no mistake. Many times, God protects us from physical distress. After all, 2/3 of the people in the world did not get the flu back in 1918. And we are already reading stories about people who have survived an infection of this coronavirus, and who wonder exactly why everyone seems to be stocking up on toilet paper!

And can't we all tell stories about how God answered our prayers for healing for ourselves and for our loved ones in the past? I remember when Mr. Robert St. John was first diagnosed with diabetes, and he had to be hospitalized with a bad infection. God answered our prayers and gave him many more years of effective service for the Lord.

But I also remember Mr. Robert telling me that all healing in this life is temporary. And that's true too. After all, if the Lord tarries, we will all one day die one day of something. For all of us, one day the words of Psalm 91 won't apply to us, at least not in the physical world. One day, God won't be our refuge and fortress, protecting us from the death that awaits us all. So what do all these promises really mean?

Well, what did they mean for Jesus? Think about our New Testament reading from Matthew chapter 4, the time when Satan was tempting Christ in the desert. Satan urged Jesus to prove He was the Messiah, taking advantage of God's protecting power by jumping off of the highest pinnacle of the Temple. In fact, Satan quoted from Psalm 91 to prove that Jesus would not be harmed by performing such a stunt. For surely, someone as perfectly righteous as Christ would be able to claim the literal, physical promises of this passage, right? Surely the angels would have kept Jesus from crashing to the ground, right?

But Jesus refused to do it. He said He would not put the Lord to the test in such a way. And that's at least in part because He didn't understand this passage purely in a physical way. After all, He knew that it was not God's plan for Him to avoid pain and suffering in this world. That's why He went into the desert to fast for 40 days and 40 nights. That's why He refused to break His fast by using His divine powers to turn a stone into bread. Regardless of His righteousness, He knew that God's plan for Him was not physical comfort and wellness, but the pain and shame of the cross.

So, how were the promises of Psalm 91 true for Jesus? Well, the Father did give Jesus all the things promised in verses 14-16 – but only after the cross. For wasn't Jesus delivered from the tomb on the third day? Wasn't Jesus set on high when He ascended into Heaven and was seated at the right hand of the Father? Wasn't Jesus honored when He was given all authority in Heaven and on Earth? And even though Jesus died on the cross, because of His resurrection He wasn't just given long life, but eternal life, a life in which He will reign forever and ever.

And the good news is that Jesus promises to share this eternal life with all who trust in Him. He promises to extend His salvation to all who seek refuge under His wings, to all who consider His faithfulness our shield, to all who rest in His shade, no matter what may happen to us in this life, no matter if we have to face beatings or imprisonments or wars or famines or hurricanes – or even noisome pestilences. In the midst of all of these things, God is our refuge and our fortress.

And that brings us to perhaps the most difficult thing we can learn from Psalm 91. For if God is in fact our sure and certain deliverer from all the difficulties and problems in this world, but if God sometimes chooses to give us this deliverance in the next world instead of in this one, how can we go on living in the face of the terrible problems that come our way?

After all, it would be easy to give in to the sort of fear that fills so much of our media today. It would be easy to hoard hand sanitizer and face masks and toilet paper. In their terror, some people have even gone so far as to gargle with bleach! But on the other hand, if we don't give into fear, we could lapse into the kind of hardened, bitter stoicism that so many of our ancestors adopted, to try to suck it up, to keep our noses to the grindstone, to keep a stiff upper lip, etc., etc.

But what do you do when there's nothing you can do? What do you do when you are helpless in the face of addiction or grief or war or famine or noisome pestilence? Stoicism only works in the face of manageable problems, so what do you do when you are completely overwhelmed?

Well, what did Jesus do when He was at the end of His rope, after 40 days and 40 nights of nothing to eat? How did Jesus face all those temptations that hit Him when He was so weak? Every time, He appealed to what was written in the Scriptures. Every time, He relied upon the Word of God. And even though He knew it would cost Him His life, He was determined not to presume upon God's protection, and not to insist on His personal comfort and safety, but to worship and serve God alone. In spite of His present suffering, in spite of the pain He knew was coming His way in the future, He continued to trust in God.

And because we worship and serve the same God, we can have the same kind of trust, no matter what problems we face. For what did the Lord promise us at the end of this Psalm? "He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him." The good news is that even if God grants us deliverance only in the next world, He continues to be with us in this world, even in the midst of our troubles. And so just as Jesus relied on God's Word during His temptation in the desert, and just as Jesus called on God while He was nailed to the cross, we can be sure that God will hear us and God will answer our prayers, in His way and in His time.

So yes, some of us may get sick from this new virus. Some of us may die from it, and all of us will die from something, if the Lord tarries. But because our God is with us, we need not be afraid, even of the terrors in the night, even of the pestilence that walks in the darkness. For all of us can trust the

God Who is our refuge and our fortress, the God Who chose to die for us so that we might live with Him forever.