

Psalms of Trust: Psalms 91 and 139

Author: Dr. Bruce Waltke

Session 18

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Psalms of Trust, Psalm 91, Psalm 139, Bruce Waltke, Messianic King, Bubonic Plague, Omniscience, Omnipresence, Omnificence, Divine Protection

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Bruce Waltke explores two prominent Songs of Trust: Psalm 91 and Psalm 139. He analyzes Psalm 91 through a royal and messianic lens, identifying three distinct speakers—the king expressing trust, a prophet offering divine assurance of victory and protection over battle and plague, and God affirming the king's ultimate salvation. Turning to Psalm 139, Waltke outlines its four six-verse stanzas detailing God's omniscience, omnipresence, omnificence in creation, and the psalmist's personal commitment to righteousness amid hostile enemies. Together, these psalms demonstrate how ultimate confidence and security are grounded in the divine character and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Outline

Introduction: Transition from Lament Psalms to Songs of Trust

- A.** Poem by James Russell Lowell (“Careless seems the great avenger...”) closing the Lament Psalms section (Psalm 44).
- B.** Overview of Songs of Trust as biblical favorites expressing confidence, faith, and divine victory rather than lament.

I. Psalm 91: The Invincible King and Divine Protection

- A.** Genre and Setting
 - 1.** Characterized as a Song of Trust expressing deep confidence in divine refuge during crisis.
 - 2.** Translation source: Waltke's volume, *Psalms as Christian Wisdom and Praise*.
- B.** Divine Names and Attributes
 - 1.** Most High (Elyon / El Elyon): Transcendent name for God that cuts all earthly powers down to size.
 - 2.** Almighty (Shaddai / El Shaddai): Etymology uncertain; rendered Pantokrator in Greek and Almighty in Jerome's Vulgate.
- C.** Decoding the Three Antiphonal Speakers in Psalm 91
 - 1.** Speaker 1 — The King (Verses 1–2): Expresses personal trust in I AM as his shelter and stronghold (Metzudah / Masada).
 - 2.** Speaker 2 — The Prophet (Verses 3–13): Speaks for God to assure the King of victory and safety.

- a. Part 1 (Verses 3–8): Assurance of rescue from secret traps, round-the-clock arrows, and deadly plague.
 - b. Historical/Contextual Note on Plague: Interpreted as bubonic plague on the battlefield (e.g., Sennacherib's 185,000 Assyrian troops struck in 700 BC, documented by Herodotus).
 - c. Part 2 (Verses 9–13): Reprise of the King's confession; promises of angelic protection and treading upon the lion and cobra (symbols of Egypt, Babylon, and evil).
3. Speaker 3 — God (Verses 14–16): Divine oracle affirming rescue, exaltation, answered prayer, and endless salvation.

D. Christological and Messianic Interpretation

- 1. Limitation of universal individual application: Believers and saints throughout history (e.g., Psalm 44, John the Baptist, martyrs) have suffered physical defeat or martyrdom.
- 2. Ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ: Perfectly invincible and invulnerable throughout His ministry until He voluntarily laid down His life (John 10).
- 3. Satanic citation in Jesus' temptation (Luke 4): Satan recognized the psalm as messianic; Jesus accepted the messianic reference while rejecting testing God.

II. Psalm 139: Omniscience, Omnipresence, Omnificence, and Alignment

A. Structural Overview: 24 verses arranged into four distinct stanzas of six verses each.

B. Stanza 1 (Verses 1–6): God's Omniscience

- 1. Summary Statement (Verse 1): God's penetrating, diligent search knowing the core of human being.
- 2. Comprehensive Knowledge (Verses 2–4): Sitting/rising, public/private life, and unuttered words.
- 3. Human Reaction (Verses 5–6): Feeling hemmed in by incomprehensible, awe-inspiring divine knowledge.

C. Stanza 2 (Verses 7–12): God's Omnipresence

- 1. Summary Question (Verse 7): The impossibility of fleeing from God's Spirit or presence.
- 2. Vertical Axis (Verse 8): Presence in Heaven (height/bliss) and the Grave/Sheol (depth/hell).
- 3. Horizontal Axis (Verses 9–10): Flight on the wings of dawn (East/life) to the far side of the sea (West/death).
- 4. Overcoming Darkness (Verses 11–12): Darkness is as light to God; no chaos or danger obscures His vision.

D. Stanza 3 (Verses 13–18): God's Omnificence (Creation and Design)

- 1. Validation of Divine Presence (Verses 13–14): God created the emotional structure (kidneys/reins) and wove the psalmist in the womb.
- 2. Fearfully and Wonderfully Made (Verses 15–16): Woven in secret; all human days written in God's book beforehand.

3. Precious Divine Thoughts (Verses 17–18): Uncountable like grains of sand, yet infinitely valuable.

E. Stanza 4 (Verses 19–24): Reality Check, Zeal for God, and Search for Purity

1. Awakening to Reality (Verse 18b): Emerging from meditation to confront a hostile, wicked world.

2. Imprecation Against Adversaries (Verses 19–22): Complete hatred for murderers and blasphemers who misuse God's name.

3. Prayer for Inner Testing (Verses 23–24): Inviting God to search heart and anxious thoughts, remove offensive ways, and lead in the way everlasting.

III. Pastoral and Ethical Applications

A. Sanctity of Unborn Life: Psalm 139 establishes God's intimate involvement, sovereign planning, and personal dignity assigned to unborn infants.

B. Cultural Witness: Affirming biblical absolutes regarding God's creation over against moral relativism and societal decadence.