

God the Protector

Does God protect us in times of danger? Most assuredly yes! This is the consistent testimony of both experience and divine revelation in the Scriptures, the Fathers and the Saints. The questions I wish to address here are somewhat different and dig deeper into the issue. For example:

1. Is God's protection physical and/or spiritual? personal and/or communal?
2. Is God's protection for believers only? the righteous only? for everyone?
3. Is God's protection always and exactly the protection we would like or think that we need?
4. Can we rely on God's protection as unconditional without contributing anything ourselves?
5. Is God's protection "supernatural" – that is without regard to the natural order of things?

Is God's protection physical and/or spiritual? personal and/or communal?

The answer must surely be all of those options are true and valid. However, our physical safety, albeit something we should ordinarily strive to maintain, is not an absolute value in Christian terms. People voluntarily risk their own lives to save others. Martyrs voluntarily surrender their lives rather than deny their Christian faith.

The key ethical concern here is that the sacrifice must be voluntary, and it must always be for the safety and wellbeing of others, or to witness to a belief that must not be compromised by any other commitment. God expects us to put Him first and then our brothers and sisters, including even our enemies, rather than prioritise our own comfort or even survival.

Voluntary sacrifice for others redefines God's protection as essentially spiritual. If we are to survive any dangerous situation physically, it will be because our work here for God is not yet complete. What we can never do as Christians is endanger others by our own risky behaviours. So, going on a mountain hike in mid-winter without the proper equipment and endangering the lives of others who are called out to rescue us is immoral. It is no use protesting that it is our human right to do this. We have no right to endanger the lives of others or to take their heroic and sacrificial altruism for granted.

Mostly today when people think of safety, they will assess risks either in personal terms or in the impact of personal choices on the circumstances of family and close friends. Even if this risk assessment is poorly informed, there is usually no intention of harming anyone close or engaging in wilful negligent behaviour. Of course, there are exceptions. An example might be when the freedom to choose is compromised by addiction. An alcoholic does not intend to disrupt family life and cause suffering to loved ones as well as himself; but of course, this is what happens anyway. Nonetheless, since the arena of risk for personal relationships is more immediate and better known, dangerous behaviour is more easily corrected. However, can voluntary sacrifice be extended to communities and even nations? Clearly, this is possible, and it has been proven time and time again in history.

During the Plague of 1665, the inhabitants of the village of Eyam in North Derbyshire, England, voluntarily decided to lock down their plague infected community; allowing no one in or out until the infection had spent itself ... killing most of the villagers in the process. Only 83 survived out of a total population of over 350. They made this decision as a community to protect other nearby villages and visitors from further afield. However, this sacrificial communal act for the welfare of others demanded unity of purpose and spiritual leadership. Both were in evident supply in Eyam with villagers considering their sacrifice to be their Christian duty.

Examples such as these show that, whether the voluntary sacrifice is personal or communal, there must be a noble and humane cause which transcends all other selfish and self-orientated impulses and ideas. For Christians, God's sacrifice of Himself in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God-Man, for the salvation of the world, is always the energising core of Christian behaviour in unconditional love and altruism. We should conclude, therefore, that physical safety is not guaranteed by God when He calls us to make the ultimate sacrifice of our lives for the health and wellbeing of others. Sacrificing our lives, however, to destroy others or indulging in behaviours which endanger them is, of course, absolutely forbidden.

If physical safety is not always guaranteed by God according to His will, what kind of safety is afforded by Him in such self-sacrificing circumstances? The gospel makes the answer very clear: -

*He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.
(John 12:25)*

"Eternal life" acquired by martyrdom, spiritual or physical, is the only protection and promise that God guarantees to all who take up their own cross and follow Christ. Physical protection is always conditional on the fulfilment of this higher principle of sacrifice for others. Spiritual protection without the cross is just not possible. With the cross, it is guaranteed.

Is God's protection for believers only? the righteous only? for everyone?

God guarantees spiritual protection for ALL who call upon His Holy Name and Mercy. All means all. God knows whose heart is genuinely inclined toward Him. It is outrageous that some, purporting to be Christian, presume to guard the Gates of Heaven with their own criteria of admission, confidently assuming who will be saved and who will not. Even when those criteria are derived from the Holy Scripture, presuming to know the mind of God in these matters is blasphemy. God is the Judge; we are not.

Is God's protection always and exactly the protection we would like or think that we need?

We have already discovered that God gives no guarantee of physical protection unless it is His will that our lives be spared for some reason. We should never presume on that generosity and providence. Every day is a gift to be thankful for; an opportunity to serve the Lord in some way, either small or great.

For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. (Romans 14:8)

So, if we expect physical protection (avoidance of suffering or death) even while doing a Godly act of worship or service then we are sorely mistaken.

Many years ago, I was serving the Eucharist (not in my present church) when a faithful servant of the Lord dropped down dead halfway through the service. God could have spared Him perhaps until Communion or the end of the Liturgy; but He did not.

The only divine protection that we need and should expect is contained in that petition of the Lord's Prayer ... "deliver us from the evil one." Any other expectation of protection is both foolish and presumptuous. None of us knows when we shall be called home to our heavenly mansion. "Deliver us from the evil one" should be on our lips when we die.

Can we rely on God's protection as unconditional without contributing anything ourselves?

Absolutely not! In that great Psalm of divine protection and guidance, Psalm 23(22), verse 4 declares: -

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

What is the psalmist doing here? – a simple but disarming question indeed! He is *walking* through the valley of the shadow of death. That is why he needs the Lord's rod and staff ... because he is walking - with difficulty - but also confident in the Lord's guidance and provision towards his heavenly goal.

God will not guide, strengthen and protect us unless we are prepared to walk by faith ... to be active. If we are not prepared "to do our bit" then we should blame not God when (not if) we flounder and sink beneath the waves (as St Peter did in the storm). As the old English proverb has it: "God helps those who help themselves."

There is another great spiritual truth which falls under the heading of this question: do not ever tempt God! What do the Scriptures mean by "tempting God"? It means putting God to the test, our test of course. God is not to be bargained with and His protection and mercy are not to be presumed upon. We cannot take for granted our safety for example when we do stupid things; even justifying this by a misreading of Scripture to our own purpose and liking. Remember, even the devil can quote Scripture!

The classic example of this tempting of God in the New Testament is in the account of the Temptations of Christ when the devil takes him to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem. Here is the account: -

Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.' Jesus said to him, 'It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"' (Matthew 4:5-7)

The devil was of course quoting Psalm 90(91): 11-12 - which teaches our *spiritual* protection but *not* our physical protection – pursued irrespective of what we might be doing to compromise that physical safety ourselves through reckless behaviour. Such behaviour transferred to the gospel would be if Christ had actually jumped, testing His Father. "After all," the devil probably thought, "if I can persuade Him to jump then He either dies or lives. If He dies then there is no Cross. If He lives, then the Cross will be meaningless because He will rely on those angels to save Him again." Of course, Satan is utterly stupid because He does not know the counsel of God and, fancying himself tempting God without consequence, he reveals his habitual corruption. He could not corrupt Christ, of course. However, he can and often does try to corrupt us in similar ways. How about this example from a time of pandemic?

"I don't need to wear a mask. I believe in God. He will protect me. He won't let me infect anyone else either, especially when I am about His business in church. I can kiss that icon; my guardian angel will kill any virus on its surface before I touch it. Sharing a Communion spoon with others is perfectly OK. Everything in the church is holy, including the spoon. You can rely on that 100%. Whoever heard of anyone catching anything in church?! After all, we don't need medicine and science do we when we have God to protect and heal us in His House?"

All of this is tempting God, presuming on His protection when we do things that are contrary to the laws of the natural world as if we were isolated from that in our own little "divine bubble of immunity". When we think like this, we are not only endangering our own lives (which would be bad enough) but also endangering those of others. God is not pleased by this reckless behaviour. It is not a testimony to faith

but rather to folly. He does not protect those who will not take reasonable steps to protect themselves and others.

This “bad faith” is not only tempting God but it is also refusing the brain that He has given us to live our lives with all the GOD-GIVEN wisdom of science and medicine at our disposal, to keep ourselves and others as safe and as well as possible. When we have done what is required of us, God does the rest.

It is not, therefore, a test of our faith to jump off our own personal temple pinnacle; it is an act of complicity with demonic temptation, dressed up in plausible pious sentiments. If you are going to jump off that pinnacle, (God forbid!), do not drag others down with you! You are not just responsible before the Lord for your own life, you are responsible also for the lives of others with whom you share your life at every level of society, near and far.

Remember also, if others will not jump with you, please do not call these brothers and sisters faithless and fearful. This is a classic projection of your own fears onto those whose prudence in the Lord you disdain. We will not be judged by you; but neither will we judge you either. We rather earnestly desire that you should refrain from tempting the Lord in these situations. You should not presume on His protection when you foolishly expose yourselves and others to dangers of your own making.

Is God’s protection “supernatural” – that is without regard to the natural order of things?

This final question follows on naturally from the previous one referencing the necessary use of science as God’s gift to us to understand the natural world.

It may surprise you to know that Orthodoxy does not believe in the so-called “supernatural”. A supernatural understanding of prayer, miracle and divine intervention in creation is based on the idea that God either suspends nature or acts against nature. The medieval Latin scholastics invented the idea of the “supernatural” as the realm of God’s activity in nature but from beyond or above nature and contrary to it in the breaking of its laws. By emphasising the autonomy of nature and reason, the scholastics had to conceive of the divine realm as over and against nature, hence SUPER-natural (literally from the Latin ABOVE-nature). When God heals in this account, He suspends all natural functions and works only “from outside” so to speak.

Nicholas Berdyaev ¹ has eloquently explained this as follows: -

Divine Energy is poured out upon the natural world, acts upon it and enlightens it. This is the Orthodox understanding of the Holy Spirit. Thomas Aquinas' teaching about the natural world, positing it in opposition to the supernatural world is, for the Orthodox, a form of secularizing the world. Orthodoxy is in principle pneumatological [Greek: Of the Spirit] and in this is its distinction. Pneumatism is the final result of Trinitarianism. Grace is not the mediation between the supernatural and the natural; grace is the action of the Divine Energy on the created world, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world. It is the Pneumatism of Orthodoxy which makes of it a more complete form of Christianity, revealing in it the predominance of New Testamental origins following those of the Old Testament. At its apex, Orthodoxy understands the purpose of life as the seeking and the attainment of the grace of the Holy Spirit, as a means of the spiritual transfiguration of creation. This understanding is essentially opposite of the legalistic understanding

¹ The Truth of Orthodoxy by Nicholas Berdyaev, referenced here: - <http://orthodoxinfo.com/general/truthoforthodoxy.aspx>

in which the Divine world and the supernatural world is the law and the norm for the created and natural world.

Orthodoxy, therefore, does not subscribe to this late Latin idea that God acts only from above and beyond Creation. We believe, as the Church has always taught, that the Divine Energies permeate Creation without absorbing or being absorbed by anything created.

When God heals someone, He heals THROUGH and IN the natural order of our bodies, minds and souls and not apart from these. When we speak of healing, answer to prayer, miracle and divine protection, we always glorify the Trinity who takes what is natural and created, yet broken and deformed, and refashions these according to their enduring and pristine nature (the *logoi* of St Maximos the Confessor). This means that works of healing including those of doctors, medics, nurses as well as the prayers of the faithful, ALL these have their source in God and are equally to be valued and not at all set in opposition to each other or prioritised one over the other in any way.

Conclusion

So does God protect us? Most certainly He does, but only if we also honour the human aspects of those gifts that are also part of his handiwork and providence, and which assist that protection. All truth belongs to Him because He is All-Truth.

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