

Psalm 11 “What Can the Righteous Do in Desperate Times”
Psalm 11A
2 Thessalonians 1

January 15, 2023

I want to give you a roadmap for the next few weeks.

Psalms 11-14 deal with a series of problems.

In Psalm 11, we deal with violence and the destruction of the foundations of society.

In Psalm 12, we deal with words – lies and flattery – the sins of the tongue.

In Psalm 13, we see the absence of God – when my enemies prevail
because God does not answer!

In Psalm 14, we look at practical atheism – when we forget the LORD our God.

Psalm 15 then brings all these themes together in asking,

“Who shall dwell on God's holy hill?”

describing the character of the *one* who will dwell with God.

And then Psalm 16 shows us how God will raise up the Son of David -

so that *he* will be that one who dwells with on God's holy hill!

And Psalm 17 is the *prayer* of David – where the Davidic king asks God to deliver him –
which all leads up to Psalm 18,

the song of David celebrating God's faithfulness (from 2 Samuel 22).

I lay all this out here because I want you to see that while we can sing each Psalm separately,
they are also designed to be seen in their larger context.

Books 1-2 of the Psalter (Psalms 1-72)

set forth a picture of what the kingdom of God should look like.

Indeed, at the end of book 2 – in Psalm 72:20, we hear these words:

“The prayers of David, the son of Jesse are ended” (72:20).

That doesn't mean that David wrote all of books 1-2.

After all, there are lots of Psalms of Asaph and the sons of Korah in books 1-2.

Psalm 72 itself is said to be “Of Solomon.”

Rather, when Psalm 72 refers to the “the prayers of David, the son of Jesse”

it is referring to the prayers – the songs –

that speak of the Davidic kingdom in its integrity.

Psalms 73-89 (book 3 of the Psalter) will be all about the Exile –

when the Davidic kingdom was overthrown –

when God's people wondered whether God would be faithful to his covenant with David.

I say all this because I want you to learn how to read and sing the Psalms.

Many commentaries and sermons will focus on the “original author”

and try to figure out the “original context.”

But here's the problem!

All we do is guess at “author” and “context.”

“Of David” does not mean “by David.”

It *could* mean “by David” - or “about David” - or “for David.”

But even more importantly, the Psalms were brought together and collected into a songbook for Israel.

A “book of common prayer.”

Books 1-2 are profoundly *about David* –

but they are designed for all Israel to continue singing with David –
and particularly with the Son of David.

When I first started preaching on the Psalms I tended to break them down into three parts:

- 1) “What it would mean for Israel to sing this Psalm,”
- 2) “What it would mean for Jesus to sing this Psalm,”
- 3) “What it means for us today to sing this Psalm.”

But that approach separates out things that the Psalms keep together.

The Psalms are about *David and Israel* -

and therefore they are about Christ and the church.

As we see how Israel sang these songs with David,

we also see how we are to sing these songs with Jesus.

Sing Psalm 11

Read 2 Thessalonians 1

Sometimes you hear people say that God hates the sin but loves the sinner.

But Psalm 11:5 says that “the LORD tests the righteous,
but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.”

God’s soul – the deepest part of him –
hates the wicked.

How can that be?

Doesn’t God love everything that he made?

Yes!

It is entirely possible to love the sinner and hate the sinner at the same time.

How?

Well, insofar as this person is made in the image of God, God loves him!

And insofar as this person is in rebellion against God, God hates him.

Why does God hate?

God hates because God is love!

And because God loves all that he has made,

therefore he hates whatever is trying to destroy that which he loves!

This is important for us as we think about how we are to live
in a crooked and perverse generation – when the foundations are destroyed!

Psalm 11:3 asks, “when the foundations are destroyed,
what can the righteous do?”

Psalm 11 opens with the inscription:
To the Choirmaster. Of David

Book 1 of the Psalter sees David and his sons on the throne –
the world as it should be
(and the laments and complaints focus on disruption *within* the world as it should be)

David was supposed to fulfill all that Israel failed to do and to be
(just like Jesus *has* fulfilled all that *we* failed to do and to be),
but also, when David (and his sons) do justice from the throne of Israel,
that makes Israel whole –
just like Jesus makes us whole.

And Psalm 11 opens with the line “In the LORD I take refuge.”
Refuge is a key theme in the opening Psalms.

The Psalter begins with the blessed man of Psalm 1,
the one who walks in the way of the Lord—and not in the way of the wicked.
Psalm 2 then speaks of the Son of God, the Davidic King, the Messiah,
who is the heir of all things.
And Psalm 2 closes with the call, “blessed are all who take refuge in him.”

Psalms 3-7 then explore the theme of refuge,
showing that the Lord is our refuge, who delivers us from all our enemies.

Psalm 8 (which is quoted in Hebrews 2) speaks of man in the glorious language of creation.
“You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings” (literally Elohim,
God/gods)
“And crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over all the works of your hands;
You have put all things under his feet.”

What you have in Israel is a picture of the Kingdom of God,
a picture of the new creation.

And so in Psalm 8, David rejoices in that picture.
He sees by faith that the kingdom of God is being restored.
He sees the son of man sitting on the throne in the midst of the Promised Land,
and sees the fulfillment of what God had promised to Adam.

“O Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouth of babes and infants, you have established strength.”
Israel is a puny, feeble nation—and yet because the God of heaven and earth dwells here,
because he has put all things under the feet of the Son of David,
this will stop the mouths of the wicked.

And that day has now come.

Hebrews 2 understood that Psalm 8 was not talking about Genesis 1-2.

Hebrews 2 sees that Psalm 8 was talking about the Davidic king (Hebrews 2:5-8)

And in Jesus Christ, what was spoken of by faith in Psalm 8 has begun to come about.

2:8 admits that “at present, we do not yet see everything subject to him—
but we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels,
namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death,
so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”

What is man, that you are mindful of him?

What is the son of man, that you care for him?

In Jesus, man is now the obedient and the blessed one.

Jesus has been made perfect through suffering.

Jesus has been crowned with glory and honor as the Second—indeed, as the Last Adam,
the one who restores humanity to the fellowship of God
and the dominion over creation.

And that vision of the King as the Son of Man – the Son of David –
is essential for understanding Psalm 11.

But Psalm 11 reminds us that we do not yet see everything under his feet.

Because right now we've got two problems.

Verse two shows us one of them:

1. Two Problems (v1-3)

a. First, the Wicked Are Shooting at the Upright (v2)

In the LORD I take refuge;

how can you say to my soul,

“Flee like a bird to your mountain,

2 for behold, the wicked bend the bow;

they have fitted their arrow to the string

to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart;

How often has this scene been portrayed in the movies?

A sniper lying in wait in the dark –

the good guy walking innocently into a trap.

You sit there on the edge of your seat saying, 'Stop! He's going to kill you!'

But there's nothing you can do.

The sniper pulls the trigger – the good guy dies.

The reason why it makes such good theater is because it plays on one of our most powerful fears:
the sneak attack – the ambush.

When you are walking alone in the middle of nowhere you can get a little jumpy.

When you are alone – isolated – then you are most vulnerable.

Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan works on the same fear.

A man was on the road to Jericho – alone – isolated –
and he was attacked by robbers.

But the problem in Psalm 11 is more specific.

Yes, it is a sneak attack – a sniper in the dark –

but it is not a random attack – like the Good Samaritan.

It is *the wicked* who are particularly focused on shooting in the dark
at the upright in heart.

Psalm 11 draws a line between the “righteous” and the “wicked.”

Other passages point out that this line may also be drawn in our own hearts.

God made man upright but he has sought out many schemes.

The good guys aren't quite as good as they should be -

and the wicked are more complicated than “pure evil.”

In many cases there are no clear cut “good guys” and “bad guys” -

as both sides may have good intentions (in some sense)

but also may simply be engaged in a power struggle.

But in other situations it is okay – indeed, it is important and necessary –
for us to talk about the “righteous” and the “wicked.”

It's right to say that ISIS and Al-Qaeda are wicked.

They are trying to destroy the upright in heart.

They are murdering and enslaving the innocent.

That would be one of the most literal and obvious cases in our world today.

But the scriptures often use the language of the “upright” and the “wicked”
when referring to a particular situation.

In this situation, when one person is plotting to murder another,
that is a wicked person who is seeking to kill an upright person.

We hear so many stories of violence these days – we can sometimes get overwhelmed!

We hear about the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

We hear about innocent children shot in the streets of our cities.

So the first part of the problem is that the wicked are trying to destroy the righteous.

What do you do about that?

But there's more:

in each case we see a lack of justice – a lack of righteousness.

Because the problem is not simply a matter of occasional wrongs
that are being corrected by a righteous community.
The problem is much deeper.

And this is where the *second* part of the problem comes into focus:

b. Second, the Righteous Are Discouraged (v1, 3)

*3 if the foundations are destroyed,
what can the righteous do?"[a]*

Remember what I said earlier:

books 1-2 of the Psalter *presuppose* a functioning Davidic kingdom.
The Son of David is sitting on the throne.
There is a temple (verse 4), where the name of the LORD dwells.
At least in theory, the kingdom of God is among you.

But things are not as they should be.
Yes, there is a Son of David on the throne,
Yes, God is in his holy temple,
but the wicked seem to be winning.

The Davidic King is *supposed* to establish righteousness and justice.
Justice is seen in how you decide a particular case.
Righteousness has to do with how you order your community.
In a righteous community there may be occasional injustices,
but the way the community functions is *right*.
And so there are ways to deal with injustice – and makes things *right*.

But the problem in verse 3 is that *the foundations* are destroyed.
What can the righteous do when *unrighteousness* is in power?
When the system is broken – when injustice is allowed to flourish unchecked –
what can the righteous do?

It is very tempting to run for the hills.
“Flee like a bird to your mountain.”

The Psalmist reflects on the fact that his friends are discouraged.
They look around and they don't see righteousness and justice in Israel.
The Son of David may be sitting on the throne,
but wickedness seems to prevail in the land.

Don't you feel that way sometimes?
You know that Jesus is king.

You know that Jesus sits enthroned as Lord over all things for the sake of the church –

After all, Jesus *is* the great Son of David!

He is God and man in one person – who sits enthroned at the right hand of God
in the heavenly temple!

And yet, the wicked are still trying to destroy the upright in heart!

Never before, in all of human history, have we had it so good!

Since the Ascension of Jesus, there has been a Son of David at God's right hand.

Since Pentecost, the Spirit of the exalted Christ has been with his church!

And yet in every generation since Pentecost,

we still sing Psalm 11!

In our day it certainly appears as though the foundations of our society have been destroyed.

The sexual revolution has turned adulterers into heroes,

and anyone who refuses to bow before the new order can expect to be attacked.

“If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”

The Psalmist rejects the option of running away.

This is *not the time* to run.

There will be a time to run.

Jesus says in Matthew 24-25 that when judgment comes upon Jerusalem,

that is the time to run for the hills!

Likewise, Revelation 18-19 speaks of the fall of Babylon in similar language.

When God brings judgment upon the wicked,

that is the time to flee!

But for now, there is another solution.

And that solution is found in verse 1:

“In the LORD I take refuge.”

I trust in him – even when the foundations are destroyed.

2. One Solution: Take Refuge in the LORD and Do What Is Right (v4-7)

There may be two parts to the problem – but there is only *one* solution.

Take refuge in the LORD and do what is right.

Notice what is missing in the Psalmist's solution.

The Psalmist does not say that the righteous must *make things right!*

That is what God does.

What are the righteous to do when the foundations are destroyed?

Notice where the Psalmist starts:

Who is God?

When you are getting overwhelmed by the wickedness of the present age,

remember who God is! (verse 4)

It is tempting to try to play God - "I will make things right!"
That's why the Psalmist does not start with a plan for action.
The Psalmist starts with worship.

a. Who Is God? The LORD Is in His Holy Temple (v4)

*4 The LORD is in his holy temple;
the LORD's throne is in heaven;
his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man.*

And remember *where* God is!

The LORD is in his holy temple.

The LORD's throne is in heaven.

The faithful never confused the earthly temple with God's dwelling place!

At the dedication of the temple, Solomon said,

“heaven of heavens cannot contain you –

how much less this house that I have built”!

Heaven is God's throne – the earth is God's footstool.

The earthly temple was viewed as the doorway between heaven and earth.

The Holy of Holies was the place where earth and heaven met.

The high priest could go into the Holy of Holies once a year,

thereby entering into heaven – entering into the Age to Come –

the time when God would make all things right.

(That's why Hebrews 9:6-10 says that the holy place was symbolic of the present age -

because the priests did their ordinary priestly work in the holy place,

and only once a year did the high priest enter the Most Holy Place –

symbolically entering the Age to Come).

The Psalmist recognizes that the LORD is in his Holy Temple -

his heavenly throne is set above all the earth.

And because God dwells in the heavens

he *sees* all things.

But what does God do with his eyes?

He *tests* the children of man.

You do a lot of “testing” with your eyes.

You evaluate a situation by *looking*.

But with what eyes do you see?

A friend of mine was standing in his front yard.

A passerby shouted “what are you doing there?”

He said, “I live here!”

My friend is black.
Another friend told me that when he is in a store,
if he sees a white woman in the aisle,
he feels the need to make a little noise in order to alert her of his presence.
He doesn't want her to get scared if a big black man walks by!

As I listened to these stories,
I began to realize that I was doing the same thing.
I was allowing the stereotype to poison my mind.
Now, living downtown, when I see a black man walk down the street,
I make a point of seeing – not a threat, not a risk – but a man.

Of course, I also live a block away from a liquor store,
so, regardless of his race, I am aware that he may be somewhat inebriated!

You use your eyes to test – to evaluate a situation.

And that is what God is doing.
God is watching.
He is testing – he is evaluating the children of man.

How will we respond to the destruction of the foundations of our society?

Will we worship him?
Will we take refuge in the LORD?
Because there is a second point to the *testing* that God is doing:

b. What Does God Do? He Judges Between the Righteous and the Wicked (v5-6)

*5 The LORD tests the righteous,
but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.*

God is testing you.
He is evaluating you.
He is watching to see what you will do in response to the destruction of the foundations.

Will you run away?
Or will you run to him?!

Because God *hates* the one who loves violence.
God's soul hates the wicked.
The soul refers to the inner part of a person.
At the core of who God is, *he hates the wicked.*

How can God hate people?
Isn't God a God of love?
John goes so far as to say that God *is* love!

There are two things that we must say about this:

First, yes, God *is* love.

Love is at the heart of who God is.

And second, God is *not* hate.

God only hates *because* he is love.

God created you after his own image.

Therefore he loves you.

God hates the wicked because the wicked have distorted his image.

And indeed, the murderer has destroyed God's image

by killing an image-bearer.

When you kill the image of God, then you are striking at God himself.

God *always* loves.

He only hates precisely because he loves.

If there was no evil – if there were none wicked –
then he would not hate.

And because God hates the wicked and the one who loves violence,

therefore, God calls *you* to hate the wicked and to hate the one who loves violence

After all, in verse 6, the Psalmist calls upon God to bring judgment against the wicked:

6 Let him rain coals on the wicked;

fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.

Raining coals – fire and sulfur and a scorching wind.

This sounds an awful lot like what God did to Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19.

The Psalmist is asking God to utterly destroy the wicked forever.

Bring eschatological judgment upon them.

Just like you did to Sodom.

Wipe them off the face of the earth forever!

This is what Paul prays in 2 Thessalonians 1,

“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God,

that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God,

for which you are also suffering –

since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,

and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us,

when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven

with his mighty angels in flaming fire,

inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God

and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction,

away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,
when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints..." (1:5-10)

But again, notice that this is what *God* does.

And particularly, this is what the Lord Jesus does.

Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay.

As we look at the injustice in this world –

as we see the foundations of our society being destroyed –

we need to recognize that *we are not God*.

We are not the ones who bring vengeance.

We are not the ones who *establish* righteousness in all the earth.

But remember that the Psalm *opens* with a rejection of the idea that we should run away.

So what is left?

Don't run away.

Just because you see everything falling apart around you does not mean that you give up.

But also, don't pretend that you are God.

You can't fix this.

That's not your job!

You cannot repair the foundations.

That's what Jesus does!

As Psalm 10 had ended:

“The LORD is king forever and ever; the nations perish from his land.

O LORD you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart;

you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed,

so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more” (10:16-18).

That's what God does.

So what do you do?

Well, we've already seen the first point:

take refuge in the LORD –

worship him!

Remember who he is –

that he dwells in his holy temple – his throne is in heaven.

He's in charge!

You are not!

But if you take refuge in the LORD and worship him,
then you must do what is right.

Notice how verse 7 says it:

c. Therefore the Upright Will See His Face (v7)

*7 For the LORD is righteous;
he loves righteous deeds;
the upright shall behold his face.*

Your job is not to fix society.
Your job is not to change the world.
Jesus has already done that!

Your job is to *be* the righteous!
And therefore to live according to God's holy and righteous standard –
the very standard that is being destroyed!
And yes, it means that you should stand up for those who are oppressed!
We should do what we can to protect the innocent –
to welcome into our homes and into our lives
those who are afflicted by the destruction of the foundations.

For the LORD is righteous.
And he loves righteous deeds.

What does that look like?

Well, just look at Jesus!
The Word become flesh and dwelt among us.
God himself entered our broken world.
The Creator became a creature.
The Lawgiver became subject to his own law.

And when Jesus entered our world – when he became present with us –
he didn't “fix everything” right away.

He sat down with us in the middle of our brokenness.

And
the upright shall behold his face.

We see Jesus – crowned with glory and honor – through the suffering of death,
which he endured for us!

We shall see him as he is!