

Sermon 15, Refuge Unassailable, Psalm 11

Proposition: The king insists on taking refuge in Yahweh despite compelling earthly reasons not to do so.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this evening to Psalm 11. As we have seen, we are in the midst of a sequence describing the combat between the righteous and the wicked. That power and ravages of the wicked are especially in focus in Pss 10-14, and indeed, we spent the last two Sunday evenings looking at Ps 10's profile of the wicked. Since the wicked are powerful and so evil, how should we protect ourselves? The answer is provided here in Ps 11. We should take refuge in the LORD. All right; we all agree that that's the obvious answer. But now comes the further question: how? I would suggest to you that the entire rest of the book of Psalms provides a relatively complete answer to that question. The King takes refuge in God by praying and crying out to Him all through the book. Indeed, the whole Christian life could be one long process of learning to take refuge in God.

But the question that our text specifically addresses this evening is not how to take that refuge, but whether, in view of the threat posed by the wicked, God is really a sufficient refuge. The king engages with an alternative proposal for refuge, and really grapples with the size of the threat posed by the enemy. The threat is extreme, catastrophic, crippling. The righteous can't do anything — that's how awful the wicked are and how much damage they've done. I think these objections resonate with many of us. Surely refuge in God is not enough! But the king, though he grapples with these compelling reasons to say that God is not enough, ultimately rejects them and reaffirms the true state of the case: Refuge in God is indeed enough, because the sevenfold character of God is our guarantee of protection. The helplessness inflicted on us by the wicked is

a test — but it is only a test. The righteous are beloved and they will see the face of God, a reward that will make up for everything. So beloved, take refuge in God like your king does. There are reasons not to do so, but they're not good enough. In the Lord our king takes refuge, and despite everything, we do too.

I. The King's Refuge Identified, v. 1a

Our psalm begins with a confession of faith: “In the LORD I take refuge.” As in all the Psalms, the king speaks, and he tells us that his hiding place is in Yahweh.

What does it mean to take refuge, to hide? We speak frequently of “refugees,” that is, of people who have fled a dangerous place in order to find a measure of safety and freedom. Many people have fled fighting in Sudan and come to Egypt, for instance. Many people in Gaza have fled from the attack on Gaza City and tried to find a safe place in the southern part of the strip. They are refugees, looking for a safe place. In our congregation, we are privileged not to be refugees — but we must never forget that many of our Christian brothers and sisters are. They have been driven out of their homes, particularly in the Middle East, in Israel and Lebanon and Gaza and Iraq, and forced to seek safety in new lands. They take refuge in an earthly location — say, in New York City or in Sydney, Australia.

The king is also a refugee, in a certain sense. But his refuge is not geographical, but spiritual. Indeed, the issue in the psalm is the conflict between geographical refuge and spiritual refuge. He emphatically does not say “In Egypt I take refuge” or “In Lebanon I take refuge.” The biblical writers were aware of such things; Jeroboam fled Solomon's wrath and took refuge in Egypt. David himself fled Saul's wrath and took refuge in Gath. That is not necessarily wrong. But it is wrong when the geographical refuge becomes a substitute for spiritual refuge.

To take refuge in God is, as I already said, described throughout the psalter. It means putting your trust in God, looking to Him for everything, trusting that He will protect you, taking your issues and problems and enemies to Him to be dealt with. Every psalm, in that sense, provides us a further illustration of taking refuge in God. Like this psalm, both Pss 7 and 16 begin with the king saying that he takes refuge in God.

Brothers and sisters, this needs to become your habit. Your refuge is not your tongue and your ability to talk your way out of any situation (Ps 12). Your refuge is not your bank account, your home, your ethnic and cultural identity, or anything else other than God.

II. The King's Refuge Assailed, vv. 1b-3

But that said, there are obvious disadvantages to taking refuge in God, and someone — perhaps one of David's friends, perhaps a false counselor like Ahithophel — takes the opportunity to point out those disadvantages in the first part of this psalm. I've titled this section “the king's refuge assailed” because it presents reasons for the king to reject or at least supplement refuge in God with physical flight.

A. An Alternative Refuge Proposed, v. 1b

That is indeed the proposal, as we see: the unnamed interlocutor of the king says to his soul, “Flee like a bird to your mountain.”

Physically speaking, the mountains are a great place of refuge because the rugged and broken terrain prevents the movement of large bodies of troops and heavy equipment. Mountains go a long way toward equalizing the odds between state power and individual initiative. The unpredictable weather, the impossible terrain, the giant cliffs and the avalanches and all the rest of the physical features prevent armies from bringing their full force to bear on individuals or small guerilla bands.

In the mountains, Saul cannot catch David. In the plains, in villages and towns, the army can walk right in, surround him, and take him. Thus, the interlocutor is saying, “Be smart, O king. In the mountains you are safe. Yahweh is a great refuge, for sure. But take an additional step; head out to the mountains where your enemies will have much worse odds and your chance of escape is much better.”

So this is the alternative refuge. Physically leave the presence of your enemies and find a safe earthly place where they can no longer pose a threat to you.

The image is really cool, and interlocks with David’s other use of the same metaphor in 1 Sam 26, where he says, “Now then, do not let my blood fall to the ground away from the presence of the LORD; for the king of Israel has come out to search for a single flea, just as one hunts a partridge in the mountains” (v. 20). Shortly after David made the statement to Saul, the narrator of Samuel tells us, he determined that he actually did need to physically take refuge outside the land of Israel and so he fled to Achish, King of Gath.

That historical-literary context helps us recognize that this alternative proposal for refuge, then, is not primarily about physical location. It is about the spiritual act of taking refuge in God or not. David did not want to die when he was away from God’s presence. He did not want to forsake refuge in God in order to find refuge in Gath or in the hill country of Ephraim.

The psalm is not saying that you must always make a choice between physical refuge in a safe geographical location on the one hand and spiritual refuge in the safety of God’s keeping on the other. But it is most definitely saying that sometimes, the king has to make that choice and you will too. Sometimes, you will have to keep serving God in a physically dangerous place. You will not have permission to leave. To leave will be to stop trusting in God.

When that is how the choice goes, as described in this psalm, then the choice is clear: the king and all of those united to Him by faith must choose to keep taking refuge in God, despite the level of physical danger that it might bring upon them. How can our friends and counselors, no matter how well-intentioned, urge us to stop taking refuge in God?

B. A Determined Enemy Described, v. 2

Well, the answer is not far to seek. The interlocutor presents two compelling arguments. We, far more than David, live in a culture of physical safety and risk-aversion. These arguments are going to sound even more sensible to us than they did to David. The first reason to prioritize physical safety over refuge in God is the mortal danger posed by the wicked!

In our modern era of weaponry, we are all familiar with the concept of a man with a gun training it on his victim and bossing the victim, who obediently does whatever the man with the gun says because the victim doesn’t want to get shot. We’ve all seen it a million times in the

movies. But precisely because we are so familiar with that image, we don't even recognize that that is the exact image deployed by the interlocutor here in v. 2.

When I read this psalm, I tend to think naively that the interlocutor is describing some harmless archery practice. Sure, the wicked is bending his bow and nocking an arrow, and he's a bad man who should not be allowed to carry weapons. And he wants to shoot at the righteous — oh, that's bad. I might even think that's very bad. But that's not the image here.

The image is of the wicked with drawn bow covering the righteous and actively threatening to put an arrow in his guts. As I said, it's the picture we're all familiar with, of the bad guy training his gun on the Lone Ranger and telling him to slowly draw his guns and drop them. That's the situation; that's where the conflict between the righteous and the wicked stands. Maybe the only difference is that the wicked are not interested in making you drop your gun and do what they say; they simply want to shoot you in the dark and ride away, leaving you for dead.

This is why, the king's friend urges, he needs to go find a geographical refuge, a safe place where the wicked can no longer do this.

Is this argument relevant to us? Sure it is. The sexual revolution is very much interested in corrupting and/or assassinating anyone who stands effectively against it. The wicked have their bows drawn and they are covering us, just waiting for us to do anything effective against their wicked cause. If we do, they will rain broadhead-tipped shafts upon us. At least, this is the picture that the interlocutor draws for the king.

C. A Disabled King Challenged, v. 3

He takes it further in the next verse, this time with a question rather than an assertion. The question is about the extent of the capabilities of the righteous when the foundations are destroyed. What exactly do you think you can do, O king? What do you think that your followers can do? How do you propose to rebuild human society along righteous lines when the foundation of civilization has been shattered by the rampant evil of the wicked?

The interlocutor seems to be saying "There is no point in attempting to challenge the wicked when they have the drop on you. Do one little thing they don't like, and a hail of arrows will rip your guts out. And anyway, they have so polluted and corrupted our society and culture that the foundations of godliness are gone. Even if you patiently build your own church, your own school, your own little community of godliness, the tsunami of wickedness will come flooding in and wash it away. There is nothing solid to build it on. Give up now, your majesty."

The king has his own disability thrown in his face like this. According to the interlocutor, the foundations of godliness have been bulldozed by the heavy equipment of pagan lawlessness. Baal, Ashtoreth, and Mammon have dynamited the foundation of the house of God, and His temple is in the dust.

Now, as I elaborate on the case that this interlocutor is making, I hope your alarms are going off. Are the wicked really standing there all the time, holding drawn bows and ready to loose flying shafts of death if we step out of line? Do the wicked genuinely hold the power of life and death over us? And have they successfully obliterated the foundations of God's temple, destroying His place of worship and thus His presence in the world?

Well, those are good questions and worth exploring further. In fact, as we'll see, the king's response picks up on these same themes. But before we go on to hear the king's response, I want you to ask yourself whether you have the king's fortitude, or if you haven't entertained thoughts like this yourself. The counsels of despair, the counsels of learned helplessness, the notion that the efforts of the righteous must and will be ineffectual in the face of rampant, triumphant evil — these thoughts have passed through your brain and mine. I know they have. And the king knows it too.

We have seen the church steadily driven back first by liberal theology and then by the sexual revolution for the past century and more. We have seen more and more people becoming social justice warriors. We have seen the world, the flesh, and the devil do so many outrageous and evil things that with Ps 12 we cry, "Help, Lord, for the godly man ceases!" And that can make us want to physically withdraw, to say "What we really need is a good safe place where we don't have to take refuge in Yahweh any longer." If I can sum up this interlocutor's argument in a single phrase, it would be this: taking refuge in Yahweh is not working.

It's fine to take refuge in God, but how is that protecting children from pedophiles? It's fine to take refuge in God, but how is that growing the church? It's fine to take refuge in God, but how is that saving our nation, our culture, or our freedoms? That's the argument here. And it's an argument that finds many sympathetic ears among us.

This is why we have to go back again and again to the psalms and hear our king's way of thinking about the world, so that we can follow his faithful and godly leadership.

III. The King's Refuge Proven, vv. 4-7

You see, the king resumes speaking in v. 4, and he replies to this interlocutor with more compelling reasons than the interlocutor could give. The solution is not to seize political power, to withdraw entirely from the places where the wicked operate, or to otherwise "flee like a bird to your mountain." Rather, the solution is what the king already stated: to take refuge in the LORD. That's the only real refuge. Lebanon, Egypt, Gath — they all have major limitations as places of refuge. Only Yahweh can be a permanent place of safety. The king lists seven truths about the LORD. He does not specifically address the contention that the wicked have the drop on us, nor does he directly address the contention that the foundations have been destroyed and that the righteous are helpless in the face of this act of terrorism.

What can we learn from this? That the king does not let the interlocutor set the terms of the conversation. The one who would encourage the king's soul to flee like a bird to the mountains does not get to force the king to discuss his agenda. The king is a lot more interested in who God is and what God is doing than he is in discussing what the righteous can do when the wicked have dynamited the Temple's foundations. In the same way, I would encourage you to let the word of God, not the counsel of the wicked, set the terms of your conversation.

A. Yahweh's Location, v. 4a

The king responds to his interlocutor by affirming a key truth: Yahweh is in His holy temple.

Now, how does that relate to the question of taking refuge, of fleeing like a bird to the mountains? The answer lies, I think, in the interlocutor's contention that the foundations have

been destroyed. As I said a moment ago, these foundations are ultimately the foundations of the temple. They are the foundations of God's dwelling among men. Without these foundations, the interlocutor charges, the righteous can do nothing. Fair enough. But the king responds to the charge that the foundations are destroyed with the statement that God is in His temple. The foundations of the temple are hardly missing in action, for God is there. The foundations of human society are our connection to God and our reflection of God, as we saw in Ps 8. Now the king affirms that God is in His temple. If you want to update this with a New Testament reference, you can simply remind yourself — and your interlocutor — that Jesus Christ is the foundation and no other can be laid. Yes, if He were to be destroyed, then the righteous could do nothing. Agreed! But He cannot be destroyed. "The LORD has founded Zion, and in her the afflicted of his people find refuge" (Isa 14:32 ESV). Isaiah adds (28:16), "Therefore thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, A costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed."

So maybe the king and we the people would be utterly helpless if the wicked had indeed bulldozed the foundation. But they have not and cannot. Yahweh has founded Zion, and no one can un-found it. Yahweh has made His Son the foundation and cornerstone, and whoever attempts to move that stone and un-found God's kingdom will stumble, fall, and be ground into powder.

What can the righteous do with a firm place to stand? We can do everything that needs to be done. Above all, our King is Himself the foundation and He must and will prevail over all the kingdoms and wicked archers of the earth.

The king adds that Yahweh's throne is in heaven. Yes, the temple's foundations stood in David's day. As one of the astute commentators pointed out, this psalm is like Ps 73: only when the speaker entered the sanctuary of God did he understand the real vulnerability of the wicked. Only by removing his thoughts from the success of the wicked and putting them in heaven (cf. Col 3) does the king successfully refute the contention of his interlocutor here. Yahweh's location — in His heavenly temple — is a major reason to take refuge in Him! The heavenly temple is safe from all profanation, from all enemies, from all unholiness and evil. Yahweh is there, and even on earth, you and I can be in Yahweh just like our king is.

B. Yahweh's Omniscience, v. 4b

Not only is Yahweh in the heavenly temple; He is the guardian of the heavenly temple. In particular, we can say that Jesus Christ is the great high priest who is personally responsible for protecting the sanctity of the temple precincts. He does so through His omniscient knowledge of what the wicked are up to. He watches and tests all the sons of men, the same ones from Ps 4 who would turn the king's honor to shame and the ones from Ps 8 who exercise dominion over animals and angels alike.

You cannot take refuge in any earthly mountains that have an omniscient guardian. It's not possible. There are no such mountains. But the holy hill where Yahweh dwells is forever safe.

C. Yahweh Tests the Righteous, v. 5a

Now comes the revelation of where the cunningly misleading words of the interlocutor came from. They are ultimately a test from Yahweh — not that He tempts anyone, but He does test His people and allow temptations to sin to come their way. The king is no exception to this rule. He gets tested too. Notice that Yahweh tests the righteous but hates the wicked. That is, He tests the ones He loves. He tested Abraham by calling him to sacrifice his only son. He tested Jesus with the Devil's words in the wilderness. Here in this very psalm, He tests the king with a plausible set of reasons to take refuge in some earthly way rather than taking refuge in the LORD. And He is going to test you with various opportunities to sin, to believe lies, to act in bad faith, to steal or to cheat on your spouse. These tests come the way of all the righteous, from Adam on down. They are a sign of love.

D. Yahweh Hates the Wicked, vv. 5b-6

But the LORD hates the wicked lovers of violence. The ones who walk around with arrow on string, ready to shoot the upright in heart? God hates them. What does that mean, you ask? It means that fire and brimstone will be the portion of their cup. In a single word, Hell is their final destination. I once asked a guy next to me in the Newark airport “What’s your final destination?” “Hell is my final destination,” he responded.

Well, brothers and sisters, so far are the wicked from destroying the foundation that the foundation is going to destroy them by raining fire and brimstone, a burning wind and the snare of poetic justice described in the previous two psalms, right down on their heads. That’s what “hates the wicked” means. It’s not just that God dislikes the wicked. He is going to do something about the wicked, something very aggressive and final.

E. Yahweh Is Righteous, v. 7a

Why? Because He is righteous. The interlocutor suggested that the king should try to find geographical refuge in some distant earthly place because God’s righteousness was limited, because wickedness controlled a good portion of earth. But the king affirms the righteousness of Yahweh. At the heart of the universe is not malice, not blind pitiless indifference, but the righteous love of our good Father. That’s why we take refuge in Him, not in foreign parts. I joke almost every week about moving to Malaysia because it has no extradition treaty with the United States. But Malaysia is a pretty pitiful refuge. Yahweh is the only perfect refuge because He is the world’s only bastion of perfect righteousness.

F. Yahweh Loves Righteousness, v. 7b

He loves righteousness! The righteous are not going to be shot down by the wicked, not going to be rendered helpless by the wicked’s foundation-destroying acts. We saw that one action of love is to test. That’s true. But another action of love is to reward the righteous with the opposite of fire and brimstone.

G. Yahweh’s Face Is the Ultimate Reward, v. 7c

What is that? It is the face of Yahweh. The upright are rewarded with the beatific vision. This, my friends, is the ultimate positive reason why you and I should take refuge only in Him. We get to see the face of God. That’s why we take refuge in Him, why we don’t believe in the omnipotence of evil.

To see the face of God with the mind's eye — this is the beatific vision properly so called. This is how you will enjoy God in heaven — an intellectual beholding, by which you understand an amazing amount of who He is. We will see the glory of God, and love it. That sight will transform us, for we shall see Him as He is. We will never grow tired of feasting our mind's eye on the overflowing, ever-renewing glory of God.

Let me preach about a sunset for just a second here. Only God is rich enough to create the mind-blowing beauty of a sunset each and every day, and then pull it all to pieces and start over the next day. The sunset is never the same. It's always different. You never say, "Well, I saw a sunset last week, and I'm not even going to look this week because it's going to be the same old thing." God doesn't do reruns.

Well, if a "throwaway" work of God is that glorious, that fresh and new every time, then how satisfying will be the sight of God Himself?

Walk uprightly in union with your king. Our king is seeing the Father's face right now. If you stick with Him, if you take refuge in him even in the face of earthly danger, then you too will see Yahweh in the face of Jesus Christ. Amen.