

Options in the Fray

Psalm 11

Marti Ensign, a missionary to Africa, tells of a time she brought some African pastors to the United States for a meeting. During their free time, these pastors wanted to go shopping. Marti anticipated the possibility that they might lose their bearings, so she gave them her phone number. In less than an hour, the phone rang and one pastor said, "I am lost."

Marti said, "Lay the phone down, go to the street corner, find out the names of the two streets at the corner, come back and tell me, and I will come and get you."

In a moment, he returned to the phone, "I am at the corner of 'Walk' and 'Don't Walk.'"

When it comes to detecting God's leading, many of us feel that we know that corner well. David was there when he wrote Psalm 11. Apparently, some plan of God seemed to be faltering, and David had to decide if it was time to bail out. In this age, it is neat and tidy to think that walking in God's ways always means open doors and smooth sailing. Nothing could be farther from the biblical picture. When things don't sail, we may doubt that we ever really understood His will in the first place. David was torn between what he thought was God's will and what appearances and his advisers were suggesting was more prudent. He was addressing these advisors when he wrote:

"In the LORD I take refuge.

How then can you say to me: "Flee like a bird to your mountain."

David was not inherently too brave to flee like a bird. He fled a lot – sometimes *FOR* his physical safety, but also, sometimes *FROM* the will of God. So, while there might be a mild rebuke intended for those who were advising him, "Run! Bail!" it was a rebuke tempered by his own past failures. David knew by experience the folly of failing to trust God through a hardship.

In this instance, however, David's premise was that if God is our refuge, there is nothing that should so frighten us that we would choose shortcuts and compromises over simply trusting Him. As I read this brief psalm, reflecting on it with an eye on the problem of evil in our world, I could not help but be comforted that God remains our more than adequate refuge in any storm.

What are our choices in an age when it seems as if biblical morality is a relic of the past? What are our choices when the popular spirituality of the age extends validity to any religious path because they all allegedly lead to God anyway? What are our choices in a culture where more and more people are willing to believe that it makes no difference if a child is raised by a Mom and a Dad, a Mom *OR* a Dad, two Moms or two Dads? And, even within the kingdom, what choices face a church that longs to rely on the Bible and on prayer in an age that emphasizes chasing some man's vision or advancing an enterprise according to proven principles of success?

King David had options. He could flee like a bird to a place of escape. Or, he could rest in the refuge that the LORD promises to supply to his faithful ones. These options have not changed.

I. The Flight Option (1-3)

¹In the LORD I take refuge.

How then can you say to me: "Flee like a bird to your mountain.

²For look, the wicked bend their bows;

they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart.

³When the foundations are being destroyed,

what can the righteous do?"

A. David Could Have Written this Song Almost Anytime

With great confidence, various commentators suggest a specific circumstance in David's life that prompted him to write Psalm 11. Yet, in spite of their confidence, few of them agree as to what that circumstance was. One said it was written while David was on the run from Saul, perhaps, when Saul killed 85 priests that he thought were protecting David. Another said it was written when David lived in Saul's house. Bad vibes were in the air, but he had not yet bolted. Of course, why would David write a psalm about "not running" while on the run or right before he ran? Others seem sure that the psalm was written after David became king, perhaps, during the rebellion led by his son, Absalom.

We cannot even be absolutely certain that David was in physical danger. He speaks of bows bent and arrows aimed, but he uses similar images as metaphors elsewhere in other Psalms:

"They sharpen their tongues like swords
and aim their words like deadly arrows." - Psalm 64:3

David's reference to destroyed foundations may indicate that he was engaged in a battle for the Jewish faith and culture rather than for his own safety. I have been tempted at times to throw in the towel, but on all such occasions, it had to do with battling philosophies and mindsets, or my own doubts. I cannot remember any such occasion having anything to do with a fear of physical harm.

Obviously, David did not write Psalm 11 on *ALL* of these occasions, but he could have written it on *ANY* of these occasions, for David's life was filled with trials and seasons of doubt. After the LORD rejected Saul as king, He promised the throne to David, but the pilgrimage from that initial promise to David's ultimate claiming of that prize was arduous and fraught with many dangers. Surely, it was no novelty for David's friends and advisors to say, "Run for it! What you think you heard God say is not going to happen, or, if it does happen, it's just not worth the cost."

Things can look especially hopeless when the values that hold a society together appear to crumble. David's advisors cried, "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" David had many occasions to contemplate such a dilemma. When Saul turned out to be a petty tyrant rather than Israel's shepherd, when he turned a blind eye to the rise of idolatry, when he slaughtered those priests or when he sought the counsel of a witch – none of these things were becoming of any Israelite, much less, Israel's king. Loyalty to God was essential if the nation was to make it, but too often, the people of early Israel only looked out for themselves. No one looked out for God's Law. No one guarded the foundations.

Is it any wonder that David might have received counsel from time to time that said, "Run!" "Flee like a bird to your mountain." This was a temptation to escape. "The enemy is too strong! Evil is advancing over the face of the land" Do you suppose that there were times of such weariness for David that this counsel sounded pretty attractive? Those of us who have not had a chance to scope out caves in the mountain are no less prone to the temptation of escapism.

B. Many Times, Escapism Still Seem Attractive

Every culture has had norms and standards that are counted on to hold things together. America was never a "Christian nation" in the sense that a church is Christian, but there was a consistent heritage that included belief in one Creator God and a value system rooted in the Judaeo-Christian ethic. So, at least there were common boundaries against which things like truth, virtue and morality could be discussed, because the foundation of the culture did not shift.

Today, the media and public education present evolution as scientific law. Anyone who questions it is placed on a par with those who still think the earth is flat. It is a noble cause to protect a chicken from Colonel Sanders or a cow from Ronald McDonald, but to take any kind of a stand for the human unborn is a cause for kooks on the fringe.

Our foundations seem to have crumbled so thoroughly that even a good, solid grasp of the Bible is not the weapon of persuasion that it once was because so many have rejected the notion that truth can be absolute and with that rejection, the Bible has lost its standing as an authoritative source in the culture at large. Living as God's light in the world is clearly an uphill battle, for not only are the foundations crumbling, those who most urgently feel the burden to call the culture back to God seem to walk around with the biggest targets on their backs as modern bows and arrows of slander are drawn and aimed. So, the question remains: "What can the righteous do?"

Is God winning? Will He win when it is all said and done? We know what the Bible says. It's what we want to believe. Given our own crises of faith, is it so hard to imagine that even a man after God's heart like David might, at times, be shaken in his confidence that God will prevail?

More than a few believers through the ages have withdrawn from the conflict to "flee like a bird to some mountain." Some lose their passion for God and for the work of His kingdom. They reinvest themselves in some frivolous pursuit of this world. Some drift away from intimate communion with God because spiritual growth came too slowly. Spiritual mountain peaks became too few or spiritual struggles became too fierce. Some run to perceived greener pastures. Some even became re-enslaved to old sins because the strength to fight did not come easily.

Still, God often defies the visible odds. An archaeologist in Israel came upon a tomb containing a mummy. He called the curator of a prestigious natural-history museum and claimed, "I've just discovered the 3,000-year-old mummy of a man who died of heart failure!"

The curator replied, "Bring him in. We'll check it out."

A week later, the amazed curator called the archaeologist. "You were right about the mummy's age and cause of death. How in the world did you know at a glance?" he asked.

The archaeologist replied, "Easy. There was a piece of paper in his hand that read, '10,000 shekels on Goliath.'"

This world as it appears now gives one numerous incentives to "flee like a bird." Still, the counsel of the psalmist is clear. Even though the wicked are intent on destroying all that is good and all who are upright, we must never give in. We must look beyond the immediate fix for our current frustrations. Faith in God and confidence in His ways will win the day.

II. The Faith Option (4-7)

The cultural landscape is not encouraging. Virtues that we once held dear are ridiculed as backwards while things once considered shameful are celebrated. Black is white. White is black. Yesterday's sins are today's expressions of freedom. We are not so far removed from David that we cannot understand his fears, frustrations and the temptation to say, "Aw! Forget it!" But, David clung to a number of unchanging truths about God that empowered him to endure. And, because every word of God is by its very nature unchanging, they are strong to sustain us today.

A. God Lives verse 4a

⁴The LORD is in his holy temple ...

David reminds us that God is in His holy dwelling place. He conspicuously identifies *JEHOVAH*, the one true God of creation, the covenant name of the God Who revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Who spoke the foundations of the nation of Israel into existence when He inscribed His Law in stone tablets and delivered them to His chosen nation through Moses. Decadence may very well reign over the entire face of the earth, but one holy God dwells above the earth. He has made promises that cannot be broken, and He will not forever tolerate the things that stand opposed to the children He has called to share in His holiness.

B. God Rules verse 4b

... the LORD is on his heavenly throne.

The idea that God has a throne in heaven is a way of saying that He has authority to rule and to judge everything on this earth below. Chaos may appear to be the norm in the world around us, but this world has not flown apart. The Author of creation is also the King of creation. He is also the Sustainer of creation Who holds everything together. His rule cannot be broken by the wickedness of men. His authority cannot be usurped by the arrogance of sinners and fools.

C. God Sees verse 4c, 5

He observes the sons of men;
his eyes examine them.

⁵The LORD examines the righteous,
but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates.

"Examine" means to test as in the processing of metal. God's silence does not mean that He does not care about how we're doing. On the contrary, He allows trials and challenges to temper and strengthen us in much the same way as heat serves to temper, strengthen and purify metal.

Older versions render "eyes" in verse 4 as "eyelids". The idea is that one's eyes tend to narrow as one focuses carefully upon a thing. David does not want us to picture God as overseeing creation in such a general sense that he has no riveted focus upon us or upon those who scheme against Him. God is carefully scrutinizing your life so that you will only endure the trials that can cause you to grow. He has numbered the hairs on your head. He is also acutely aware of what the wicked are doing.

D. God Judges verse 6

⁶On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur;
a scorching wind will be their lot.

The wicked may or may not taste judgment in this life. What causes believers to hang tough with God in hard times is the promise that His holiness will one day be vindicated. When that day comes, you really want to be on the side of His holiness. "Fiery coals and burning sulphur" remind us of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities that became such a stench in God's nostrils that He could endure them no longer. "A scorching wind" prompted David's readers to think of the hot desert winds that blew over Palestine during the changes in season from spring to summer and from summer to fall. Only parched and withered vegetation remained.

God will judge wickedness with horrible swiftness. That may be one of the least popular truths of the Bible these days, and one from which we easily shy away. Talk of judgment angers the enemies of God. They scoff at us to the point we may question if it is really a truth to anticipate. It would be so much easier for us if God would just make His holiness known by sending forth a little judgment right now, but there is a reason that God is more patient than we are:

... ⁹The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. – 2 Peter 3:9, 10

E. God Rewards *verse 7*

⁷For the LORD is righteous,
he loves justice; upright men will see his face.

A journalist assigned to Jerusalem took an apartment overlooking the Wailing Wall. Every day when she looked out, she saw an old Jewish man praying vigorously. So, she went down and introduced herself to the old man. She asked, “You come every day to the wall. How long have you done that, and what are you praying for?”

The old man replied, “I have come here to pray every day for 25 years. In the morning I pray for world peace and then for the brotherhood of man. I go home, have a cup of tea, and I come back and pray for the eradication of illness and disease from the earth.”

The journalist was amazed. “How does it make you feel to come here every day for 25 years and pray for these things?” she asked.

The old man looked at her sadly and said, “Like I’m talking to a wall.”

Have you ever felt like you were praying to a wall? Have you ever embraced a cause that looked like such an uphill battle that it seemed futile to carry on? Have you ever surveyed the landscape of the culture in which we live and questioned, even for just a passing moment, “Is God really winning?” There were such times in David’s life. There will be such times in yours.

Even though there are times when to us God may seem silent and unreasonably longsuffering in regard to those who defy Him, it will be worth the waiting. “Upright men will see his face.” This picture implies a specific time of deliverance when our Rescuer will make Himself known. Even more precious in this notion of the face of God is the assurance of eternal communion with Him.

Faithful endurance will pay-off eventually. David was not the first man to ever be shaken in his faith, wondering if there would really be a reward for persevering over temptation, standing up to God’s enemies and remaining faithful to the end in the face of a decaying culture. You won’t be the last. But the remedy is the same. God lives! God rules! God sees! God judges! God rewards!

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