

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message Fear or Faith?

Scripture Psalm 11

The collection of Psalms have been used by the Hebrew people as their songbook for 3000 years. The Psalms were sung and recited at religious festivals, for daily devotions, during times of distress and joy, by individuals and in large group gatherings. The followers of Jesus Christ frequently turn to the Psalms for encouragement and comfort. Believers testify that the Psalms speak to their emotional needs more deeply than most other portions of Scripture and hence have proven to be very powerful sources of spiritual help. Today we will think about Psalm 11.

Read Psalm 11

This Psalm was written during a time in which David was being threatened by circumstances beyond his control. Let's think about his situation for a minute. He had been designated as the future king of Israel. He had proven himself as a warrior who had successfully defended Israel against outside enemies. He was an outstanding leader among his band of loyal followers. He was, in many ways, more popular in Israel than the reigning King Saul.

Yet as long as Saul held the throne, David was forced to live as a fugitive. He sometimes had to hide in caves in the hills of Judah. He even lived for short periods of time outside the borders of Judah. There were times when he was actively hunted by an army of his countrymen led by King Saul, who was very jealous of him. At other times David was pursued by the enemies of Israel, such as the Philistines and Amalekites. We don't know the exact situation which led to the writing of this Psalm, but it is obvious that David was once again in danger.

The individuals who were concerned about David's safety and well-being advised him to flee from the danger in which he found himself. The dangers facing David were real and imminent. As his counselors pointed out, wicked people were bending their bows and making ready their arrows to use against him. Furthermore, these enemies were underhanded in their methods; they were planning to shoot from the shadows, to ambush David from their concealed positions.

The dangers mentioned in verse 2 could be both literal and metaphorical. Arrows and spears were the artillery weapons of his era, and David frequently had to physically defend himself against his enemies. The words in verse 2 could also be a poetic description of circumstances which were spiritual and psychological in nature. David was sometimes the target of slanderous accusations, insults, ridicule. His motives were sometimes questioned. Verse 2 helps us to understand the main theme of this Psalm. This Psalm contrasts the thinking and the orientation of righteous people against wicked people. Notice that the enemies of verse 2 are called "wicked" and their intent is to eliminate the one who is "upright in heart."

The message of this Psalm must not be limited to the historical circumstances of David's time. What was happening to David has happened to God's people throughout history. All people of faith in the Old Testament as well as the followers of Jesus Christ in the New Testament have been subjected to the attacks of people who have no interest in God and God's ways. Through the generations, there have been literal physical attacks on God's people through the infliction of torture, imprisonment, deprivation of the necessities of life, martyrdom. The attacks have also been spiritual and emotional in nature through slander, insults, verbal abuse, ostracism, temptations, and other deliberate behaviors. The objective of wicked people is to compromise and suppress the testimony and influence of God's people, and to make them fall.

In verses 2 and 3 the counselors implied that the conditions were so bad that David had no choice but to flee. Not only were the wicked enemies with their weapons in position to harm David, but the “foundations” around him “were being destroyed.” Commentators are in agreement that the word “foundations” here refers to the civil laws of government and society. At this time in David’s life, Saul, the king, was making poor leadership choices. He was acting in irrational ways and losing his ability to influence the people of Israel in positive ways. There was very little concern for interpersonal justice and fair play, and there was very limited obedience to the Law of Moses. Law and order were breaking down and being replaced by human autonomy and subsequent anarchy. The conditions in which David was living were not safe. The foundations of civil society were crumbling.

“What can the righteous do” in times of distress, when they are under duress? What can the believer do when the foundations are crumbling? Run and hide? Human logic and reasoning would prescribe escape, to be like a bird and get away as quickly and directly as possible; but for the person of faith, the response is in verses 4 through 6.

In these verses David looks beyond both his advisors and his enemies to the LORD, in whom he has placed his trust. David looked to the One on whom he depended for protection and guidance. Advice based on fear of earthly circumstances just did not line up with his confidence in God. As one commentator (Spurgeon) wrote, “David preferred to dare the danger than exhibit a distrust in the LORD his God.”

David knew that the LORD was in His holy temple, on His heavenly throne, from which location He could fix His eyes on, observe, and examine all people. The words of verse 4 imply that God was aware of what was happening and that He was in control of human activities. The word “throne” symbolizes His authority to rule and to judge.

The word translated “examine” has the meaning of “testing” or “prying into.” The Scriptures inform us that the LORD does more than give a casual glance in the direction of the people on earth. Rather, He has the ability to probe into the thinking and the motives of people. Scripture explains that the LORD can know the innermost thoughts and intentions of their minds and hearts. Scripture has several ways of describing God’s ability to understand people: He can differentiate between wheat and chaff, gold and dross, shadow and substance, sincerity and hypocrisy, spirituality and carnality.

And what the LORD sees in people becomes the basis of His treatment of them. According to verse 7, those who place themselves in the care of and under the protection of the LORD “will see the LORD’s face.” In the Hebrew language, the expression “to see the king’s face” meant that a person had access to the king, that the person was permitted to enter the king’s presence. David applied this expression to the people who took refuge in the LORD. They are people who are declared to be “righteous” by the LORD, who are qualified to stand in the presence of the LORD. That kind of person would have met the standards of a righteous God who loves justice. That kind of person would be considered to be “upright.”

The consequences of being identified by God as “wicked” are much different. First of all, we are informed that God hates the behavior of wicked people in the depths of His being. God is holy, and He is unable to love those who love violence. He sets Himself against people who love what He hates. This does not imply that God has no mercy for sinners. In the Old Testament God demonstrated His love for fallen humanity by providing coverings for mankind’s shame, by instituting sacrifices to cover mankind’s guilt, and by promising a Redeemer who would come to take away the burden of sin.

This Psalm describes individuals who were deliberately and determinedly opposed to God, and to God’s righteous followers. They were the ones who were tearing down the foundations of God’s laws, and who loved violence. These wicked people were not interested in God’s offer of salvation. As a result they were subject to God’s wrath.

The LORD will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur on them. The rain of brimstone will consume them, just as it destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Another image of judgment is the “scorching wind,” the hot desert wind which blows over the Middle East at certain times of the year. Its effects are devastating; it can turn healthy vegetation into parched withered plants within a day or two. The wicked will be like the flowers of the field, which appear healthy and thriving one day but become desiccated and dead the next.

It may seem to us that God at times does not adequately protect and sustain His people. There are places in the world today in which believers are being persecuted and killed. Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sudan, Syria, Myanmar, Laos, India, come to mind. We ask ourselves, “Why doesn’t God do something?” and “Why do bad things happen to good people?” The truth is that we don’t understand very much about the purposes of God. However, in this Psalm, and throughout Scripture, the LORD is described as righteous, which means that He can be counted on to do the right thing in regard to people. He is also powerful, more than powerful enough to overcome all the forces which oppose Him.

While it is true that God may not immediately judge the wicked, we are assured that God is in control and the time will come when the wicked will face judgment. David knew he was the innocent target of his enemies, and he knew the righteous LORD would take up his cause. In the same way, we can take comfort and have confidence in the fact that God maintains and safeguards the order of life by looking after those who put their trust in Him. Likewise, we can be encouraged that the forces of evil will not ultimately prevail. God will judge and destroy the wicked.

When David considered the greatness of God and the protection of God, his confidence in God outweighed his fear of the human dangers. For David, trusting God was the safest course of action he could take. His counselors may have meant well, but David would not receive their advice because it was based on human fear. Instead, David made it clear that he would live with faith in the LORD.

Take away points:

In times of trouble, the best course of action is to put trust in God.

In the world, the followers of Jesus Christ will be persecuted. However, we need to keep in mind that Jesus said that He has overcome the world.