

October 3, 2021

HOPING WHEN THINGS ARE FALLING APART

Psalm 11

*(3 of 11 in a series of selected Psalms)*

One of the most enlightening texts in the Bible comes in Revelation 6. As John is given a heavenly tour by his angelic guide, the scene that unfolds in the sixth chapter is fascinating. The Lamb who had been recognized as worthy to take the scroll and open its seals begins to do so. And as he does, the Lord's work of judgment and salvation is carried out. Each of the seals is opened, and as they are different John witnesses different scenes or hears certain declarations. But it is the fifth seal specifically that I find so captivating in that chapter. As that particular seal is opened, John looks and sees under the altar the souls "of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne" (Rev 6:9). These were believers who had endured, who has persevered in their faith to the point of death, and who now were before the throne of God. So with that heavenly vantage point, what were they saying? What were they crying out for? What did they want to see the Lord do next? Perhaps surprisingly, John tells us that they cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (6:10). "Then," John adds, "they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been" (6:11).

What I find so fascinating about that scene is that when these believers get a heavenly viewpoint of things, they're not asking the Lord to show more mercy or exercise more patience or grace. They're crying out for the Lord to hurry up and bring vengeance on the earth. In other words, with our limited perspective on the happenings of the world, we're not being shielded from a viewpoint that would show us things really aren't that bad. Our limited perspective keeps us from seeing the multitude of rebellion, violence, and debauchery that covers this planet. It is no wonder the Scripture calls the devil the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4) and describes these days leading up to Christ's return as "evil" (Eph 5:16). And for believers throughout the history of the church, this isn't shocking. The book of Acts tells of persecution against the church, a persecution that has continued on in at least one pocket of the world or another since. In the early chapters of the book of Revelation, believers are told not to fear what they are about to suffer, as the Lord declares, "Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested. . . . Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev 2:10-11). And perhaps in many of our lives, seemingly wrecked by sin and feeling as if there is no light in the darkness all around us, we know well the heartache of living in this sinful world. How do we persevere in obedient faith when those with a heavenly viewpoint see the need for speedy vengeance? How do we have hope in the midst of a world where it feels like the foundations of everything good seem to be crumbling around us? This is what Psalm 11 is about.

We don't know the specific setting of Psalm 11. We know from the superscript that it was written by David. And it was obviously written during a time when things around David seemed

like they were falling apart. But, of course, that could refer to many moments in David's life. Before David actually took the throne, he was on the run from King Saul, who wanted to take his life. And even after he was king, his son rebelled against him and tried to seize the throne. So, this psalm could have been written during any moment of those seasons in David's life. Regardless of the specific situation, as I've noted, we know that it was written at a time when things seemed to be crumbling all around David.

He begins the psalm with a triumphant declaration, saying, "In the LORD I take refuge" (v. 1). But he brings this up because he is getting encouragement to run away. He says, "In the LORD I take refuge; how can you say to my soul, 'Flee like a bird to your mountain, 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; if the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?'" (vv. 1-3).

Now, there are a few details we need to note as we parse out what is being said here. First, I think those telling David to flee to the mountains are likely his friends. The reason we can say that is because they refer to those attacking David as "the wicked" while referring to David as "the upright" or "righteous." Typically those opposing you aren't going to refer to you as the righteous one and themselves as those who are wicked. So, these are most likely David's friends. Second, though translations differ on where the words of David's friends end, I think the ESV has it right to note the quotation goes all the way through v. 3. In other words, David isn't asking, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" Rather, as part of his friends' argument, they are telling David to flee because he has enemies ready to pounce, and then they are making the point that he seems to have no other options because the foundations are destroyed, probably meaning that everything he seemed to have been able to rest in for his safety and security has now crumbled, and it seems there is no hope but to flee.

And this brings us to our final detail. David is being attacked. We don't know whether he is being physically attacked so that his friends are pointing out that people are literally fitting their arrows because they're ready to shoot them at him and attempt to kill him or they are using that image metaphorically about verbal attacks he is enduring. But either way, he is being attacked. Things are crumbling around him. And his friends tell him that it seems his only way out is to flee. Flee like a bird to the mountain, they tell him, because there is nothing more he can do.

And yet David is defiant. He's not tempted to heed his friends' warnings. He wonders how they can say this to his soul, declaring that his refuge is in the Lord. So what is it that David knows that they don't? What is the basis for David's confidence in this moment that leads him to realize he doesn't have to run? And the reason it's important to ask and answer this question is not only because we want to understand the psalm but because you may very well find yourself in a similar place. Maybe your friends are telling you to abandon your marriage because it's proving difficult or just pursue that relationship with an unbeliever because you're tired of being lonely or that it's okay to pursue abusing alcohol because there's so much pain you've got to deal with or a thousand other things, and you feel like life is crumbling around *you*. And you need to know what David understood that helped him stand firm in obedient faith not because

you have some intellectual curiosity but because your knees are buckling and you're having a hard time standing and pressing on in obedience to the Lord.

Well, David remembered three things that helped him stand when those around him were telling him to run, and these are three things we can remember in these moments as well. The first is that the Lord rules and reigns.

### **The Lord rules and reigns**

After the urging of his friends to flee like a bird, David begins his response in verse 4, saying, "The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD's throne is in heaven." Now, perhaps we could hear that and think that David is acknowledging that the Lord is distant, unaware of David's struggles here on earth. But that's not what David is saying. When David notes that the Lord is in his holy temple and that his throne is in heaven, he's noting that God is currently ruling and reigning.

We know this because this is consistent imagery for God's rule and reign throughout the Psalter. When the psalmist asks in Psalm 2 why the nations are raging and the rulers plotting against the Lord, he answers, "He who sits in the heavens laughs." God's heavenly platform is higher than theirs, do you see? That's his point. Again, in Psalm 115 the psalmist declares, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." Again we can see how the psalmist makes clear that God's dwelling in the heavens which means that he is exalted above all others, and thus his plans aren't thwarted? Rather, he does all that he pleases.

Similarly, the reference to throne is the same. For example, in Psalm 47:8 the psalmist writes, "God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne," paralleling his sitting on the throne with his reigning over the nations. And (though we could name more), finally, in Psalm 103:19 David writes, "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all," again paralleling God's rule with him sitting on his throne in the heavens. Therefore, we can say that David's declaration as to why he does not feel the need to flee like a bird but rather to take refuge in the Lord (resting in the Lord as he walks in obedience to him) begins with his recognition that God is ruling and reigning over the earth.

No matter what transpires in our lives, no event should be interpreted by us to suggest that somehow someone or something has gotten the upper hand on the Lord. This doesn't mean that we always understand in his mysterious providence why he allows certain difficulties to come into our lives or even lets us bear the weight of great tragedies. But our answer must never be to think that the Lord isn't ruling and reigning over the earth. Of course he is. Before the greatest sin in history happened—the crucifixion of the Lord of glory by evil men—Pilate said to Jesus that he had the authority to release him or have him crucified, and Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). David knew that truth as well, and he rested in it. No matter how great his enemies seemed, he knew that God was still on his throne in heaven. The Lord was ruling and reigning.

But we might hear that and wonder if God is a mighty king who simply isn't paying attention, but David addresses that too as he remembers that the Lord sees and takes note of all.

### **The Lord sees and takes note of all**

The psalm continues with David writing, "His eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man" (v. 4b). Here the psalmist uses anthropomorphic language to describe God, meaning that he uses terms that are suitable to man, but he applies them to God. In this case, he acts as if the Lord has a body with eyes and eye lids to make a point, but it's the point he's making that is important for us to grasp. He says the Lord sees what is going on in this world. And in the second statement he's intensifying his claim. His eyes seeing is replaced with his eyelids testing or examining (the word can be translated either way). By referencing eyelids, he's most likely emphasizing that the Lord is peering or paying close attention, such as when we squint to see something clearly and our eyelids are more visible to the onlooker than our eyes themselves. The Lord is not simply observing but observing closely. He's not simply seeing but examining what's going on or testing mankind, seeing what is going on and what is in our hearts. In other words, the Lord is paying careful attention.

I know we can go through situations where it feels like the Lord has abandoned us, or doesn't notice what we're going through, and doesn't care, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Jesus picks the seemingly least important creature, noting that two sparrows are sold for a penny, and then he reminds us that not one of them falls to the ground apart from the Lord's meticulous oversight and care. His point is that if the Lord pays that close attention to the details of the sparrow, how can we think he doesn't care for us? And just to emphasize the point—lest we miss it—he explicitly tells us that the hairs on our head are all numbered (Matt 10:29-30). Now, this is typically followed by a joke that it's an easier task for the Lord with some of us than others, but think seriously about what Jesus is saying here and let his point weigh on you. God pays such attention and gives such care to your life that even something as inconsequential as the number of hairs you have on your head are numbered by him. Do you really think he's not aware of every single detail of your life? He knows what you've been through. He knows what's been done to you. He knows the insecurities and fears you feel. He knows the doubts you harbor. He knows everything in your heart. He knows how hard this situation is for you. He knows the heartbreak the infertility has caused or how hard it is to be alone or how your heart wants to protect itself from love so that you're not hurt again—or a thousand other things. He knows. He sees. He's paying close attention. He could tell the details of your life story—even the pain it's caused you to live that life story—with much more precision than you could.

Now, this doesn't mean that because he rules and reigns and sees all he'll keep you from suffering. In his infinite wisdom, he allows suffering, but it doesn't mean he doesn't care. He'll allow the very thing that will cause you to shed tears, but David will later write in Psalm 56:8 that he bottles those very tears, keeps count of our anxious thoughts leading to restless nights, and writes them down in his book. His eyes see. The God who rules and reigns sees. He knows you

and is keeping a close eyes on every detail of your life. And, finally, David remembers that the Lord will exercise justice.

### **The Lord will exercise justice**

David ends the psalm noting that the Lord will exercise justice on the earth. He repeats the Lord's testing or examination of all mankind in relation to the righteous in verse 5. He writes, "The LORD tests [or examines] the righteous," but then he makes clear that he doesn't examine the wicked in the same kind of overseeing, caring way that he does the righteous. Rather, David notes, "But [the LORD's] soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence" (v. 5). The wicked are the objects of God's furious wrath. And consequently they will bear his wrath, as David reminds us, writing, "Let him rain coals on the wicked; fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup" (v. 6).

Christopher Ortiz reminded us a few weeks ago as we looked at Psalm 23 that the cup of God is often used to represent God's wrath. So, here, they will drink a cup that will contain fire and sulfur and scorching wind, representing the idea that they will bear the vengeance and judgment of God. No one will refuse to acknowledge the Son as Lord in this life and avoid the furious wrath of the Lord in judgment. Nor will this judgment simply be some kind of mechanistic consequence such like if you play with fire you get burned. Listen how personal this is. David says that the Lord "hates the wicked," reminding us that it is the Lord against whom mankind rebels, and it is the Lord who will inflict his personal judgment on the day of judgment.

In some ways, this is the Lord's reminder to his children as we are the objects of the world's persecution that he sees what's going on. In other words, these three observations build on one another. God rules and reigns, but he doesn't do it as an aloof King. He sees and observes and takes note. But he doesn't see and take note while being unable to do anything. He will bring justice. His answer to the martyrs in Revelation 6 isn't, "I refuse to avenge you." It's simply, "Wait." But it *will* happen. He doesn't ignore the persecution of his church, and he doesn't ignore the denial of his Son. As the author of Hebrews reminds us, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb 10:31).

But the Lord's exercise of justice isn't simply manifested in pouring out his wrath on unbelievers; it's also seem in blessing his people. As David ends, "For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face" (v. 7). Beholding the face of God is the richest of blessings. In the Bible for the Lord to allow his face to shine on his people is to bless them. Moses asked to see the Lord's face, and the Lord told him that no one could see his face and live. But this is the very thing promised to the righteous—which we know as those who faith rests in Christ. We shall behold his face.

But these two realities—the judgment of the wicked and salvation of the righteous—aren't two separate realities. Throughout Scripture salvation is pictured as salvation *through* judgment. The deliverance of Israel from Egypt is seen in the crushing of the Egyptians in the sea. Our deliverance at the cross is pictured in Genesis 3:15 as the crushing of the serpent's head. God's

final act of saving us will be his exercise of justice—pouring out his wrath on his enemies and saving those who have trusted in his Son. Our God will execute justice.

And what's interesting about the contrast of the righteous and the wicked in verses 6-7 is that we who have been credited with the righteousness of Christ through faith in our crucified and risen Lord know that what we await is of grace. We deserve—because of our sin—the judgment that the wicked will bear. Ray Ortlund, Jr. has said it well: “Hell is filled with people who think they should be in heaven; heaven is filled with people who know they should be in hell.” And so we should let the reality of verse 7 overwhelm us as we consider how gracious the Lord is with us.

How do we have hope when it feels like everything is crumbling around us? How do we hold fast to obedience when even our friends tell us that walking away from Christ's commands is okay? We remember that the Lord rules and reigns. Whatever is going on in our lives, he is still ruling and reigning. Nothing can come to you apart from the Lord's ruling hand. And he loves you so deeply—which leads us to that second truth. The Lord sees and takes note and bottles your tears and writes down the moments of your struggles. He is not distant. He is with you—peering to see every detail in the life of his precious child. And, he will bring justice. The books will one day be balance, and—by the Lord's grace—this includes the Lord Jesus Christ welcoming you into his kingdom so that you might dwell forever with him.

David's friends simply spoke of the troubles. “The wicked bend the bow; they have fitted their arrow to the string,” they said. David simply spoke of the Lord. He reigns, he sees, he is righteous, and he will bring justice. Let us then do the same and walk by faith as we walk in faithful obedience. And let us publicly proclaim that now as we come to the table. Amen.