

PSALM 11

- It is safe to take refuge in the Lord who loves justice! -

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Introduction and setting

Psalms 11 can be described as a confession and song of trust and confidence in the Lord – the hallmark of the upright as depicted in the Book of Psalms. The righteous (upright) believer (vss. 2, 3, 5, 7) in this psalm is under threat of the wicked (named in vss. 2, 5 and 6). The wicked are those amongst the people of God who confess with the lips their love for the Lord, but who do not take the love of justice and righteousness seriously. This is not a new theme in the Book of Psalms (cf. Psalm 1). This psalm demonstrates what it means to be righteous, i.e. to resist the temptation (advice), to flee the wicked and rather take unconditional refuge in the Lord who can be trusted to uphold righteousness. If we assume that the righteous king speaking in Psalm 11 refers to David, it appears that he is in conversation with his advisors. Their solution to the threat against him as the Lord's anointed king is to flee to the mountains. He, however, considers fleeing to the Lord as the only solution and hope. Those advisors who suggest he must flee make no reference to the Lord, but the name of the Lord completely dominates the second section of the psalm where the reaction to the bad advice is described.

Form and structure

The psalm can be divided in two sections:

- i. 11:1-3 – The upright/righteous person expresses the predicament in which he is caught.
- ii. 11:4-7 – The trust and confidence that the righteous have in the Lord's love of what is right.

Exposition

Verse 1-3:

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

¹*In the LORD I take refuge.*

How then can you say to me:

"Flee like a bird to your mountain?"

²*For look, the wicked bend their bows;*

they set their arrows against the strings

to shoot from the shadows

at the upright in heart.

³*When the foundations are being destroyed,*

what can the righteous do?"

- ❖ Hear the righteous person confess his key response to life and its dangers: *"In the Lord I take refuge."* That is the language of faith. In Psalm 11 this life of faith is tested not only by the attacks of the unrighteous. A temptation is added. He is given advice that will compromise his trust in the Lord's faithfulness. Apparently the mountains function here as place of safety and security. Perhaps the advice was not intended as a temptation, but given as a well-meant concern for the future of David. It might also be David's own thoughts tempting him in his fear.
- ❖ The danger is depicted in three ways:
 - The first is the image of a vulnerable bird that can survive only by flying away from the danger.
 - The second image is that of hunters with arrows in their bows. In this case the target of the hunters is a human being! The total vulnerability of the upright is portrayed in the fact that the arrow is shot in the dark (cf. vs. 2). The attackers either want to conceal their identity or the deceptiveness of their deeds; they do not want to be seen. There is some form of deception. This desire is countered by what we later read in verse 4; the Lord God sees everyone! How do you protect yourself against such an attack? The hunters have all the advantages on their side. In Psalm 10 we also find the wicked preying on the righteous like a hunter (10:2, 8-10). Living a righteous life means that you offer yourself as target for the attacks of those who do not want to subject themselves to the Lord and his anointed king (Psalm 2).

- A third image is that of the foundations of a building been shaken. When the true worshipper of the Lord is attacked by those either pretending to be fellow believers or being in open revolt against the Lord and his anointed king, it is as if the very foundations of reality, society, life and fellowship between people are shaken.
- ❖ This first section ends with a question: “What can the righteous do?” Do they need to do something? What should the righteous do with the advice to flee?

Verses 4-7:

⁴ *The LORD is in his holy temple;*

the LORD is on his heavenly throne.

He observes everyone on earth;

his eyes examine them.

⁵ *The LORD examines the righteous,*

but the wicked, those who love violence,

he hates with a passion.

⁶ *On the wicked he will rain*

fiery coals and burning sulfur;

a scorching wind will be their lot.

⁷ *For the LORD is righteous,*

he loves justice;

the upright will see his face.

- ❖ This section is an answer to the question(s) being put in verse 3. Should the believer do anything? Flee? Retaliate? Make plans? The answer lies in who the Lord is and what the Lord loves and does.
- ❖ When the foundations are being destroyed, the righteous should not flee to the mountains but to the Lord in his holy temple with its indestructible foundations. For Israel, the Lord in his holy temple was the pinnacle of stability and security. When all justice and safety were falling apart in the life of Israel, the prophets reminded the people of God in his temple (e.g. Habakkuk 2:20). The psalmist’s intention with this reference to the Lord who is in his holy temple (11:4) is therefore not (primarily) to indicate the location of the Lord’s presence. The Lord upon his throne in his holy temple indicates that the Lord in his role as *supreme and indestructible judge* is exercising his judgement over all unrighteousness. Each and

every inhabitant of the earth stands before the Lord in his royal court of justice.¹ The emphasis here is not on the fact of the Lord's presence in the temple in Jerusalem, but the Lord's transcendence above what happens here on earth. When the Lord is therefore depicted as one who "observes everyone on earth", much more is implied than mere observation for the purpose of taking note. This is a description of the Lord in the process of examining everyone in his role as the One who will judge them according to the results of his examination! We should therefore note that even though the Lord's heavenly temple is usually associated with the temple in Jerusalem where fellowship with the Lord could be enjoyed, the emphasis is here on the fact that the Lord cannot be contained in buildings built by human hands (2 Chronicles 6:18). Even though David might be limited in his access to the Jerusalem temple, that does not mean he has no access to the Lord in his heavenly temple!

- ❖ The contrast between the Lord's attitude towards the wicked and the righteous should be noted. Strong language is used to describe the Lord's relationship to the wicked – He hates them with a passion (vs. 5)! In contrast to this intense hatred we find that the Lord "*examines the righteous*". This is not a negative "inquisition"; it should be understood as the Lord who in his love for the righteous really cares to know the object of his love. That is the character of God's love that we often find expressed in the Psalms (cf. Psalm 139; the Lord wants to "know" the righteous). Divine love cares enough to want to examine and know (cf. Psalm 1:6). In this context "know" (Hebr: jadaa) means "to be intensely involved with".
- ❖ Verse 6 portrays the Lord as executing his own judgement of the wicked. This is the biblical view of the power of God – his power to be able to act on his judgement of people. Verse 6 explains what it means that the Lord is "in his holy temple" and on his heavenly throne (vs. 4).
- ❖ Again: we should note that the distinction between the righteous and the wicked is not in the first place some moral code that is either honoured or dishonoured. Verse 7 points to the basis for the distinction – *the Lord who loves righteousness*. The righteous are those who also love righteousness and seek it with their whole heart, even though they may also stumble and even fall in sin. The wicked, on the other hand, have neither regard nor love for righteousness and those who love righteousness.

¹ Compare Psalm 9 and 10, where the power of God over all the nations is demonstrated not in brute force, but in his function as royal judge whose judgement cannot be called in question neither opposed, cf. Living Word on Psalms 9 and 10.

- ❖ The reward for those who love what is right is nothing less than the enjoyment of the Lord's presence ("*see his face*"), vindication and deliverance (vs. 7). This is the reward for not fleeing to the mountains, but rather seeking the Lord in his temple; the Lord will be encountered in his temple and his blessing will be enjoyed!

Application

- ❖ This psalm continues the strong emphasis on the just **rule of the Lord** that we also find in Psalms 9 and 10. We can repeat here what we wrote in the Living Word on Psalms 9 and 10: "*The rule of the Lord takes a very particular form in these psalms. The Lord rules through judgement. His might and power is not demonstrated in brute power and might. It is much rather seen in his just judgement that sets the falsely accused and trampled-upon free. The judgement that truly matters is the judgement of the King on his heavenly throne. Divine rule and power are manifested and most evident in the Lord's righteous attention for and care of those who call to him in pain, shame, hurt and humiliation. In these psalms it therefore becomes evident that judgement is a royal activity. God rules through his righteous judgement.*"
- ❖ Psalm 11 expresses a very pronounced **confidence** in the Lord. This confidence is founded on the Lord himself who loves righteousness. The pure of heart is therefore encouraged not to flee or panic in the face of enmity, danger or when it feels as if their lives are being destroyed by wickedness and evil. When we do flee, it is always a flight to see the face of the Lord; to enjoy the assurance of his presence and blessing for those who love righteousness like the Lord does. Even when it seems as if all foundations of life, the church and society are being destroyed, the foundations of the Lord's rule cannot be shaken. He is above all and everything. Our comfort since the ascension of Christ is even increased, because He that sits on the throne at present is "one of us". One who is not ashamed to call us "brothers" (Hebrews 2:9-18).
- ❖ We must take note of the very important theme of the Lord as **lover of justice** (vs. 7). This love is much more than the Lord "admiring" justice wherever He sees and observes it. In this psalm the Lord is portrayed as having an active love of justice. The Lord's love of justice and righteousness is the love of one that acts justly himself; the Lord **is a just and righteous** God! This is the reason why we should also love justice and righteousness (cf. Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:1-8; Isaiah 61:8).

- ❖ Beholding God's face is something that people often think belongs to the afterlife; the life of the Lord's children after death. In Scripture it can refer to that hope and expectation as well. In Psalm 11, however, it refers to the reality of the hope to be and live in the presence of the Lord and to enjoy his blessings every day. It is not so much a future expectation as it is a present blessing of the life in union with the Lord (cf. Psalms 17:15; 42:3; 27:4, 13) and worship of the Lord (Psalms 22:28; 24:6; 68:4; 86:9; 141:2). Seeing the Lord's face represents the culmination of the enjoyment of fellowship with God in worship and life.
- ❖ The central theme of Psalms 9 and 10 is continued in Psalm 11. I quote from the Living Word on those two psalms: "*It is AS JUDGE that the Lord acts as warrior, fighting the cause of the afflicted.*"

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