



Psalm 11 - Song of Trust in God

To the leader. Of David.

Introduction

This psalm expresses the confidence that the faithful may have, even in a time of severe crisis – and crisis seems to be its proper setting (vv.1-3). This may or may not be tied to a particular event in David's life, but that really does not matter, as the psalm is adaptable to a variety of desperate situations, showing how to face them in faith.

Psalm 11:1-3 - The Crisis Described.

The psalm first recounts the crisis. The wicked threaten to kill the upright (v.2), and their obvious response is to flee like a bird (v.1).

- 1 In the Lord I take refuge; how can you say to me,
'Flee like a bird to the mountains;
- 2 for look, the wicked bend the bow,
they have fitted their arrow to the string,
to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart.

Psalm 11:1-2

How can you say? The words do not require that someone has actually made the suggestion; the idea is that this would be the natural reaction.

In the years before he took the throne of Israel, David lived the life of a fugitive. He was constantly hunted by King Saul, and lived in constant danger. In such a time, his friends advised him flee like a bird to the mountains. His friends meant well, but David knew it was the wrong thing to do for God had called him to lead

Israel: <<*For some time now, even while Saul was king, it was you who commanded the army of Israel. The Lord your God said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over my people Israel*>> (1 Chronicles 11:2). Therefore, David simply could not just run away!

In the Lord I take refuge. No matter how well intentioned his friends are, they are giving him the advice of fear. The advice of fear could not stand with the position of trust David had in the Lord.

For look, the wicked bend the bow, they have fitted their arrow to the string. In today's language, David's friends would say, 'Look! There is a loaded gun to your head, and you have to run!' The advice given to David is well meant, but ungodly. It is like when Peter advised Jesus to not go the way of the Cross: <<*And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'* But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'>> (Matthew 16:22-23). Peter meant well, but he was really being used by the devil!

To shoot in the dark at the upright in heart. Here, David's friends are trying to make him afraid of a secret attack. When the things that cannot be seen are feared, then a person is really walking in fear! David's friends may have been using an element of manipulation here. They may have reasoned like this: 'Look, for his own good we have to get David to get out of here. It is justified for us to exaggerate things a little bit to get him to do what is right.' However, it was not justified. Manipulation is never right, even if it is for a good cause.

³ If the foundations are destroyed,
what can the righteous do?'

Psalm 11:3

The foundations. These would be either the people who ensure that Israel is managed justly or the principles of justice upon which Israel was founded. When these are destroyed, giving the unfaithful in Israel free rein, what can the righteous do – what security do they have? When David hears these words from his friends, his head probably told him there was something to them. But his heart told him that to heed this advice and to flee would be to compromise.

Psalm 11:4-7 - The Righteous Lord Gives Us Confidence.

The second part of the song reveals the answer to the psalmist's question. Thus the song looks beyond the immediate danger to the God who so rules all things as to vindicate his righteousness and his love for the righteous; that is, for those who keep his covenant.

- 4 The Lord is in his holy temple;
the Lord's throne is in heaven.
His eyes behold, his gaze examines humankind.

Psalm 11:4

His holy temple. This is more likely God's heavenly palace, i.e. the Lord's throne is in heaven, than the earthly temple in Jerusalem, although one must not press the distinction too far: in the OT, the earthly sanctuary is the doorway into the heavenly, as in: <<*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple*>> (Isaiah 6:1), <<*As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple*>> (Jonah 2:7), <<*Hear, you peoples, all of you; listen, O earth, and all that is in it; and let the Lord God be a witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple*>> (Micah 1:2), <<*But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!*>> (Habakkuk 2:20); and thus, in worship, God's people join the heavenly choir.

His eyes behold, his gaze examines humankind. David does not need to take the advice of fear, because God sees his situation. David can have a greater cause than self-preservation, because he knows that God is looking at him and taking care of him.

- 5 The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked,
and his soul hates the lover of violence.

Psalm 11:5

Just as God carefully assesses the inner condition of all mankind (v.4), and confirmed in: <<*O let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish the righteous, you who test the minds and hearts, O righteous God*>> (Psalm 7:9), and: <<*If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress*>> (Psalm 17:3), he especially assesses or tests the righteous; thus the faithful should see their danger as an opportunity to prove that their faith is genuine. In contrast, the Lord hates the lover of violence – i.e. those among God's people who would exploit and harm others, and thereby foil the very purpose of the covenant, arouse God's anger, and render themselves liable to severe judgement (v.6).

- 6 On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and sulphur;
a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.

Psalm 11:6

On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and sulphur, as it did upon Sodom and Gomorrah: <<*Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from the Lord out of heaven*>> (Genesis 19:24). This gives the image of ultimate, eternal judgement. What does David have to fear from men destined for hell? In the words of Jesus: <<*I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more*>> (Luke 12:4).

The portion of their cup. That is, what God has assigned for them, whether in this life or the next: <<*This is your lot, the portion I have measured out to you, says the Lord, because you have forgotten me and trusted in lies*>> (Jeremiah 13:25); and conversely for the pious: <<*The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot*>> (Psalm 16:5). The judgement may be visible in history, or it may be ultimate: that is God's business.

7 For the Lord is righteous;
he loves righteous deeds;
the upright shall behold his face.

Psalm 11:7

For the Lord is righteous. This was a comfort and encouragement to David. When someone rebels against the Lord, his righteousness is no comfort to them: <<*O Lord, God of Israel, you are just, but we have escaped as a remnant, as is now the case. Here we are before you in our guilt, though no one can face you because of this*>> (Ezra 9:15). However, David knew he was the innocent victim of persecution, and he knew the righteous Lord would take up his cause.

He loves righteous deeds. David knew that as he walked righteously, he would keep himself in the love of God: <<*keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life*>> (Jude 21). It is not that one must earn God's love by one's personal righteousness; instead, one's pursuit and practice of righteousness keeps one flowing in the benefits of God's love. God's love extends everywhere. Nothing can separate a believer from God's love: <<*But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us*>> (Romans 5:8). However, a believer can still deny themselves the benefits of God's love.

People who do not keep themselves in the love of God end up living as if they are on the dark side of the moon. The sun is always out there, always shining, but they are never in a position to receive the light or warmth of the sun. They are like the Prodigal Son of Luke Chapter 15, who was always loved by the father, but for a time not he did not benefit from that love.

The upright shall behold his face. Scholars and translators debate if this means ‘God’s upright people see him’ or ‘the Lord sees his upright people.’ Most modern translations think it speaks of God’s people seeing him: <<*The pright will see his face*>> (NIV), <<*The upright will behold his face*>> (NASB), or <<*The virtuous will see his face*>> (NLT). However, it really does not matter, because both are true.

- God shines his face on his people. This speaks of ‘an eye of approbation, and true and tender affection, and watchful and gracious providence; which is oft signified by God’s beholding or looking upon men’ (Poole). In fact, the last line of the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:26 is <<*the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace*>>.
- God’s people will see him: <<*I shall behold your face in righteousness*>> (Psalm 17:15), and: <<*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*>> (Matthew 5:8). In fact, the desire to behold God is one of the greatest motivations to an upright life and heart.

All in all, when David considers the greatness of God, the care of God, and the vision of God, it all outweighs the danger. For David, trusting God was the safest move of all. His friends may or may not have meant well, but David would not receive their advice of fear. Instead, he would answer it with faith.