

Psalm 11 “When the Foundations Are Being Destroyed”^{** 1}

Series: “Learning from the Psalms: How to Put God at the Center of Life”

Main Idea: Psalm 11 teaches us that when the foundations are being destroyed, we need to see life from two perspectives that make all the difference in the world.

- I. When the foundations are being destroyed, we must see the obvious (1-3).
 - A. David encountered a problem (1).
 - B. David wrestled with some advice (1b-3).
 1. When God is our refuge, we don't try to escape reality.
 2. Neither do we take matters into our own hands.
 3. Instead, we face problems in light of the presence of God.
- II. When the foundations are being destroyed, we must see the not so obvious (4-7).
 - A. David saw what others missed (4-6).
 1. We know where He is (4a).
 2. We know what He is doing (4b-5)
 3. We know what He will do (6).
 - B. David affirmed what others forgot (7).
 1. The Lord is righteous.
 2. The Lord loves righteousness.
 3. The Lord allows the righteous to see Him.

Response: Three important questions...

1. What is my refuge in life?
2. Am I seeing what others have missed?
3. Am I affirming what others have forgotten?

The Psalms show us how to make God central to our experience. We've seen that in previous weeks, how to make Him central when in pain (Ps 13), when we have sinned (Ps 51), when we're afraid (Ps 56), and last week, when we're in the desert (Ps 63). But how do we make God the gravitational center of our lives when the foundations are being destroyed? We find the answer in Psalm 11.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 11

Back in 1992, Chuck Colson made the following observation in *Christianity Today*: "There was a time when most Americans respected the Bible, and you could quote it with authority. In 1963, according to Gallup, 65% believed the Bible literally; today the number is only 32%. There was a time when most Americans were familiar with biblical doctrine. You could say, "Believe in Jesus," and at least they knew what you meant. But today most would be mystified. Newsweek tells of a child who saw a crucifix and asked, "Mommy, what's that man doing?" There was a time when most Americans accepted absolute standards. They might disagree on what those absolutes were, but they knew that some things are really right or wrong. Today 70% reject moral absolutes."²

Again, Colson wrote that nearly thirty years ago. Something's definitely happening to the foundations. The foundations are being destroyed.

Not just on a national level either. The erosion affects us where we live and work and go to school. If there's a word that best depicts our world today it may well be the word *broken*, at least in our country. We see brokenness in the family. We see it in the government. There's talk about the environment being broken. Seniors wonder if Social Security will be broken. Job security is broken.

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For previous looks at this passage at WBC, see 6/6/99 and 9/5/04 PM.

²Chuck Colson, *Christianity Today*, November 9, 1992, p. 112.

With this in mind, Psalm 11:3 asks a very legitimate question, “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?”

I'm not a pessimist, but the evidence speaks loudly. Something's happening to the foundations. And when that happens, what *can* the righteous do?

More specifically, how do you pray when the foundations are being destroyed? It's hard to know what to pray. Thankfully, God has given us a Prayer Book, called the Book of Psalms, and a very specific psalm that addresses our question.

What do you say to God when the foundations are being destroyed? Psalm 11 shows us. By the way, this isn't a new problem. Since the serpent tempted Eve, the Evil One has been seeking to destroy the foundations.

Rowena Becker faced it back in 1921, that's 99 years ago, when she obeyed God's call to take the gospel of Jesus to French Equatorial Africa (known today as Central African Republic). She was one of the original six missionaries with Baptist Mid-Missions. Here's the story of what happened: “Deeply burdened for the Nzakara tribe, Rowena settled in Ouango...”³

[see article]

Psalm 11 teaches us that when the foundations are being destroyed, we need to see life from two perspectives that make all the difference in the world.

I. When the foundations are being destroyed, we must see the obvious (1-3).

There's a heading that introduces Psalm 11 (in fact, of the 150 psalms, only 34 don't have a superscription). We're given two pieces of background information.

First, this psalm was penned “*For the director of music.*” And second, this is a psalm “*Of David.*” Notice that though the psalm was written by David, it wasn't just for David. It was given to the music director so the entire congregation of God's people could benefit from its message. And it was designed to be sung as a prayer in corporate worship.

So David wrote Psalm 11. But when? Was this penned by David the shepherd boy, or David the fugitive, or David the popular king, or David the man in mid-life crisis, or David the restored king? Which David? What event in David's life prompted this psalm? He doesn't tell us. We don't need to know the details about the crumbling foundations in his day. What we do need to know is this, point one, that he saw the obvious.

A. David encountered a problem (1). The first words David uttered were, “In the LORD I take refuge.” You don't need a refuge unless there's a storm. And in David's case, the storm was intense.

Ryrie suggests the setting may have been 1 Samuel 18 & 19, the times King Saul tried to pin David to the wall with his javelin. David was in a jam. Things had been going so well for him. He'd killed Goliath (1 Sam. 17). And Samuel had told him he was going to be Israel's next king (1 Sam. 16). But there was a slight obstacle, namely Saul.

Saul was king, and he wasn't about to hand the kingdom to David on a silver platter. In fact, out of envy Saul tried to kill David. And no doubt, David felt like running for his life. But he didn't run, not at first. At this point he stayed.

It's possible that's when David wrote this psalm. If not then, this much we know for sure. As we'll see this psalm came at a time of crisis, when David's life was in jeopardy, when the foundations were crumbling, and it seemed like the expedient thing to do was *run away*.

³ Baptist Mid-Mission Advance, *Summer 2020*, p. 9.

Ever felt that way? As if the problem itself wasn't enough, what compounded the turmoil was some advice David's friends gave him in verses 1-3.

B. David wrestled with some advice (1b-3). "In the LORD I take refuge. How then can you say to me: 'Flee like a bird to your mountain. For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart. When the foundations are being destroyed what can the righteous do?'"

In the midst of crisis, David had confidence, "In the LORD put I my trust," as the KJV puts it. But someone near to David wasn't quite so sure. He was the pragmatic sort, and gave David some very pragmatic counsel, "David, if I were in your shoes, I'd run. I'd skip town and lie low until the heat is off. That's what you should do, David, flee like a bird to the mountain. That's the smart thing to do, David. I know you believe in the Lord, but the Lord gave you a brain, didn't he? You can talk about trusting in Him some other time, but now it's time to take matters in your own hands. There's heat in the kitchen, David, and you'd better get out. It's the rational thing to do, David. Flee!"

There are times when it's wise to avoid tough situations. David himself fled to En Gedi to get away from Saul. But not this time. David knew if he fled, God would be dishonored. Which means this was a time to trust God and face the onslaught.

David's decision wasn't applauded by everyone. Notice the flow of the pronouns in the psalm. First it's "I" (1)—that's David. Then it's "you" (1b)—that's David's "friend." Then it's "they" (2-3)—a reference to the wicked who were the source of David's turmoil. And finally it's "He" (4-7)—as the psalm climaxes, David puts the focus on the Lord.

So the advice David's friend gave him prompted this question in verse 1, "How then can you say to me?" It's as if David can't believe what he's hearing. The initial problem is bad enough—he's under attack. But now it's compounded by the deflating advice his peers were giving him: "David, flee like a bird to your mountain!"

How does a bird flee? One time, Sherry, our daughters, and I were sitting on our front porch, and we let our dog (Blackie) loose to run. She spotted a bird in the grass and ran full steam towards the little creature. Do you know what the bird did? It turned towards our dog, squared its shoulders and prepared to fight. Do you believe that?

Of course not! That bird did what little birds always do when they see danger coming. It flew away as quickly as it could! That's what birds do, dart away. A tiny bird is a picture of timidity. When we describe a person as "flighty," it's not a compliment, is it? Birds don't face problems. They avoid them. They get away.

So rather than fleeing, David said he took refuge in the Lord. In practical terms what happens when we take refuge in God? David's example provides us with three lessons.

1. *When God is our refuge, we don't try to escape reality.* If you make the Lord your refuge, it doesn't mean you're in for smooth sailing. Your *trust* will be put to the *test*.

David wasn't naive. He didn't stick his head in the sand and pretend the problem wasn't there. He didn't write off his friend by saying, "Oh, you're blowing the problem out of proportion. It's not that big of a deal."

Actually, it was a big problem. And David knew it.

There's an interpretation question involving the quotation marks. What actually did David's friend say to him? The NIV and ESV begin the quotation with the word "Flee" in verse 1 and finish it with the question in verse 3, "What can the righteous do?"

In the NKJV, only the statement "Flee as a bird to your mountain" is in quotation marks. Then verses 2-3 provide David's reflection on what his friend said. The NEB closes the quotation after verse 2. In the KJV there are no quotation marks.

So what actually did David's friend say? We know he said, "Flee like a bird to your mountain." But did he say verses 2 and 3 as well, or do those verses contain David's assessment of the problem? Since in the Hebrew text there is no punctuation, we can't say for sure. I think it could go either way, and in the end it doesn't really matter.

What we know is that David was in a jam, and his friend told him he should run. But he didn't. You see, when God is our refuge, we don't try to escape reality.

2. *Neither do we take matters into our own hands.* Whether verses 2 & 3 originated from David's friend or from David, we know this. David knew the severity of his problem. He sees his wicked foe (Saul, or whoever he was) as a hunter hiding in the shadows. He sees him in the darkness. There he is with his bow in hand. The crafty enemy reaches for his quiver to take a deadly arrow and pierce the heart of an upright man.

What's your instinct when you see a man in the shadows pointing a weapon at you? Get away from the danger? Run? That's natural. What else? Ponder a question. *What can the righteous do?*

That's the question David pondered, whether it originated with his friend or in his own soul. Notice verse 3 again, "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

When the foundations are destroyed. If you don't have a foundation, you don't have stability. And if you don't stability, you're going down when the wicked attack.

What foundations is verse 3 talking about? In Psalm 82:5 Asaph said this of the wicked, "They know nothing, they understand nothing. They walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken."

A foundation is something you depend on, something you can put your weight on and know it's going to hold you up. Someone does right, and they're treated rightly. That's a foundation. Someone does evil, and they receive a just sentence. The foundations of good and evil.

But what if these foundations aren't there? What if you do what's right, and you're treated wrongly? Or others do wrongly, and they're rewarded for it? Then what? When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?

Fly away like a bird? No, that's not the answer. Then fight back? Is that the answer?

We understand this feeling all too well. When a police officer puts his knee on the neck of a defenseless George Floyd and snuffs his life out of him, this is the question of the hour. When the foundations are destroyed (of justice and human decency), what can the righteous do?

Many of our African-American brothers and sisters are asking this question, and rightfully so. And they're not alone.

If 2,700 Americans had the ability to talk, they would ask the same question, for that's the average number of unborn children who are murdered in the womb *every day* in America (one million per year). When the foundations of life and death, good and evil, justice and injustice are destroyed, what can the righteous do?

Some are saying: "We need to mobilize our Christian forces and save this country! Let's fight for justice, and to change abortion laws, and curb internet pornography, and get

prayer back in schools. If we can just get enough people to speak out, we can do something about the erosion of our foundations."

That's a legitimate approach, and while there's a place for it, seeking to restore broken foundations by political and social action doesn't go far enough. Or better said, *deep enough*. The foundation problem is a *heart problem*.

Long ago the hymnwriter asked, "Is this vile world a friend to grace to help me on to God?" The answer is always *no*. This world is not a friend to grace. So we ought not be surprised when we encounter evil, nor when the world's attempts to solve the problem fail. What's needed is to take heed to David.

His first lesson—when God is our refuge we mustn't try to escape reality. Second lesson—neither must we take matters into our own hands.

3. *Instead, we face problems in light of the presence of God.* Listen again to David's affirmation (1), "In the LORD I take refuge. How then can you say to me: Flee like a bird?" David knew there was a problem. But he faced it in light of God's presence. Rather than fleeing or fighting, he announced his resolve to *take refuge in the Lord*.

Beloved, as followers of Christ we must never forget that we are citizens of another kingdom. And quite honestly, we have a higher calling than merely preserving the American experiment. A kingdom calling (Matt. 6:33). A gospel calling. We are a people who have taken refuge in the Lord.

We didn't save ourselves. We freely admit that. He saved us, and He did it by dying in our place on a cross, then conquering our greatest foe by rising from the dead. We now say unashamedly, "In the Lord I take refuge." And we invite others to join us. That's why we exist. That's our mission. That's how hearts change. That's how a country is transformed.

I found a couple of very helpful quotes in William Plumer's commentary on the Psalms. Plumer, who was a preacher and seminary professor in South Carolina, said this in 1876: "Good men should not be surprised at any amount of wickedness they shall witness. Bad men have always been very bad."⁴

And then he had this to say about government: "What an inestimable blessing is a good government... If those, who complain of ordinary burdens in a good government, were placed even for a short time under the terrors of misrule or anarchy, they would find a state of things, which would probably make them thankful for a return to any form of regular and free government... But if we are placed by God in states of social and civil life, wholly unsettled, let us remember that others before us have seen all order subverted, all justice denied, v. 3. Through God they have outlived such a state and come to better days; and so may we."⁵

Plumer wrote those words eleven years after the Civil War.

When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do? First, says David, we must see the obvious. But that's not all we must see. In the second half of the psalm David moves our attention to a second vital perspective.

II. When the foundations are being destroyed, we must see the not so obvious (4-7).

⁴ William Plumer, p. 171. Plumer wrote his commentary, *Psalms*, in 1867. He was a preacher and professor at Columbia Theological Seminary in South Carolina.

⁵ William Plumer, pp. 171-2.

What's the not-so-obvious? It's actually not *what*, but *Who*. In verse 3 David ponders the question, "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" Beginning in verse 4, David doesn't answer the question so much as change the focus:

"The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD is on his heavenly throne. He observes the sons of men; his eyes examine them. The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates. On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot. For the LORD is righteous; he loves justice; upright men will see his face."

In his 1983 acceptance speech for the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn recalled the words he heard as a child, when his elders sought to explain the ruinous upheavals in Russia: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened." He added, "If I were called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the entire twentieth century, here too I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat once again: 'men have forgotten God.'"⁶

Beloved, if we're going to stand strong in a day when the foundations are being destroyed, we must see what the majority does not see. We need a fresh, accurate perspective of God Himself.

That's why David didn't run. According to verses 4-6...

A. David saw what others missed (4-6). Three times in these verses David mentions the Lord by name, using His covenant name *Yahweh*. He saw what others missed, and he wants us to see it too, three certainties regarding the Lord.

1. *We know where He is (4a).* Where? "The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD is on his heavenly throne." Please notice that the attack on the foundations is no problem for God. Why not? Because the attack can't reach Him. He's on His throne *in heaven*.

It was about four hundred years later that another man felt the ferocious attack on the foundations. Habakkuk was his name. Habakkuk clung to this same truth when he wrote in 2:20, "But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."

Friends, we know where the Lord is. See Him in His temple, high and lifted up.

2. *We know what He is doing (4b-5).* Just because the Lord is silent doesn't mean He isn't doing anything. He is. What's He doing? According to verse 4, *He's watching*. He's taking inventory of everything that's happening on earth. Everything. Every knee to the neck. Every brick through a window. Every backroom deal. Everything.

The text says, "He observes the sons of men; his eyes examine them." The ESV and KJV use the word "test." The Hebrew verb denotes the activity of a blacksmith who is in the process of purifying gold or silver.

Let that sink in. Right now, whether we realize it or not, God is testing both the righteous and the wicked. And the day of recompense for this testing is coming. That's something we all need to remember.

In the late 1800s Charles Spurgeon penned these words in his discussion of Psalm 11 taken from *The Treasury of David* (130), "This is a very strong reason why we should not adopt the vile suggestions of distrust. There is one who pleads his precious blood in our behalf in the temple above, and there is one upon the throne who is never deaf to the

⁶Observation by John Wilson, reviewing "Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World," in *Christianity Today*, Feb 7, 1994, p. 57.

intercession of His Son. Why, then, should we fear? What plots can men devise which Jesus will not discover?"

We know where He is, and what He's doing. There's a third certainty.

3. *We know what He will do (6)*. Verse 6 is sobering, "On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot."

What's fire used for? Many things. For heat, for light, but it's also a purifying agent, isn't it? With the righteous, God uses fiery trials to burn up the dross and make them more like His Son, Jesus Christ.

Yet verse 6 is talking about a different purpose. In the Bible, fire is also associated with judgment. God judged Sodom and Gomorrah, how? By raining down fire on them. And according to verse 6, that will be the future fate of those destroying the foundations.

My friend, the next time you see it happening and ask, "Why doesn't God do something about it?", remember this. He will.

This again is why we need to proclaim the gospel with great fervor. Do we care about justice? Yes. And racial reconciliation? Yes. It should grieve our hearts to see cities on fire.

But listen. There is a place of forever fire coming. Let that sink in. A flame that will never go out, said Jesus. Is it important to put out fires and what causes them in this life? Yes. But how much more to "snatch others from the eternal fire and save them" (Jude 23). That's why we need to tell people about Jesus, and plead with them to repent and trust in Him, and pray fervently for His Spirit to open their eyes. The lake of fire is real. And it's forever.

So this is no time to flee in fear. Nor to respond like the rest of the world. This is a time to trust God and see what others are missing, namely what the One who is on His heavenly throne is doing and will do. Like David did. And something else he did.

B. David affirmed what others forgot (7). It has to do with righteousness. "Righteous" is a key word in Psalm 11. There's a variant of it in verse 2 ("upright"). It appears in verses 3 and 5, and three variations of it in verse 7, as the ESV and KJV translators demonstrate, "For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face."

As we've watched the news this week, we've heard a lot of talk about justice, and rightly so. But what is justice? Justice has to do with what is *right* and what is *not right*. But who determines what is right and not right? This is the problem in a society where everyone does what is "right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

Here's where David can help us. He affirmed what others forgot, three affirmations involving righteousness in verse 7.

1. *The Lord is righteous*. This is His nature. He is righteous. Righteousness is not subjective, but rests on the foundation of who the Creator God is.

2. *The Lord loves righteousness*. The NIV uses the related term "justice." Because God is righteous, He loves righteousness. That could imply either He loves to do righteous deeds, or He loves the righteous deeds that His people do for His glory. In this context, the latter is more likely.

Jesus later said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt 6:33)."

Right here is our motivation for doing the right thing even when it's tough. The Lord loves it! What more do we need to know than that?

When your boss takes advantage of you, yet you still do what's right towards him, the Lord loves it! When you keep reaching out to that family member who won't give you

the time of day, the Lord loves it! When you choose to honor Christ even when your friends mock you, the Lord is pleased with you. He loves righteousness.

When your kids ask you about the video they saw of George Floyd, and you take time to teach them about the right way to treat people, the Lord loves it. As well as when you take time to talk to them about the unrighteous responses of some protestors. He loves that too. He is righteous, and He loves righteousness.

A third affirmation...

3. *The Lord allows the righteous to see Him.* The psalm ends right where it began, with the spotlight on the Lord. The first words were these, "In the LORD I take refuge." Here are the last words, "Upright men will see His face (ESV "The upright shall behold his face")."

Here is our ultimate motivation. It's what keeps us going when the foundations are being undermined. The righteous will see Him. Psalm 1:6 puts it this way, "For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

Which raises a question that requires a razor sharp answer. If God is righteous—and He is, and if God loves righteousness—and He does, and if the Lord allows only the righteous to see Him—and He will, *how do you become righteous?*

The Bible makes it clear that, when we enter the world, we're not righteous, are we? We are sinners, every one of us. Oh, we may grow up and do "good things" in life, as we define goodness, but He says we are sinners who, having inherited a sin nature from Adam, have fallen short of His perfect standard.

So how can a sinner become righteous? That's the very question the Bible answers, and nowhere more directly than the book of Romans. Indeed, the theme of Romans is *righteousness* and how to obtain it.

According to Romans 3:10, "There is no one righteous, not even one." That's a quotation of Psalm 14 and Psalm 53. No one is righteous. That includes the guy who's shooting at the foundation *and* the guy who's getting shot at. None of us are righteous.

That creates a problem, doesn't it? What's the problem? Psalm 11:7 said that the Lord allows the righteous to see Him. How can we become righteous? By doing good things. Many think so, but it won't work according to Romans 3:20, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law."

We can't merit righteousness. God says we must receive it. That's what the gospel is all about. God in His grace offers us a gift. It's called righteousness, the very righteousness of His Son, Jesus Christ. Romans 3:21-22 explains, "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."

That's it! Because of the atonement of Jesus Christ, because of His death as a substitute and victorious resurrection, God *gives* righteousness to anyone who will abandon attempts at self-righteousness and believe in His Son.

If you will do that, God will declare you righteous. He will *justify* you. He'll do it today. You can leave this place righteous in God's eyes, wearing the robe of His Son's righteousness. And then one day, as David affirmed, He will allow you to behold His face, indeed, to enjoy His presence forever and ever.

Response: Three important questions...

1. *What is my refuge in life?* Who or what are you trusting in? Is it the Lord? Can you say with confidence, as David did, "In the Lord I take refuge."?

2. *Am I seeing what others have missed?* When the foundations are being destroyed, look up. Remember where God is, what God is doing, and what God will do.

3. *Am I affirming what others have forgotten?* The Lord is righteous. The Lord loves righteousness. And one day He will allow the righteous, those who've been clothed in the righteousness of His Son, to see Him.

I hope you're taking time to watch the news, for we need to know what's going on in the world these days. Having said that, I hope you're setting aside even more time to behold God in His Word. I need to take what I'm seeing to Him, to make sure He is my refuge day by day, moment by moment.