

“Courage”
Psalm 11
June 10, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

The psalmist is experiencing a serious threat. An assassin is lurking, hiding under cover of darkness and hoping for an opportunity to kill King David, the author of our psalm. What should be done? A voice speaks up with advice: “Flee like a bird to your mountain.” But the psalmist has a place of refuge other than some private mountain. “In the Lord I take refuge” (v. 1). A second voice, this one calmer than the panicked earlier voice, speaks of trusting the Lord instead of fleeing. This psalm is about courage, about facing the challenge before us instead of running away from it.

When we think of courage, most of us think of some momentous challenge that tempts us to walk away from a commitment. Perhaps you think of someone threatening you with execution if you don’t deny the Lord Jesus. Or maybe you think of some criminal threatening your family, and you wonder if you would have the courage to put yourself at risk to defend them. Others might think of the soldier under fire on the battlefield. Most of us will never have to face challenges such as those. So is there no need of courage in our lives? The truth is that we face multiple opportunities each day to show courage, to face a challenge instead of running away. Many times the challenge is just staying in the messiness of life, of relationships, of daily challenges. We all face the challenge of facing the truth when we would often rather escape into unreality. Maybe it is the unreality of blaming your problems on someone else instead of taking the responsibility God has placed before you. It takes courage for a spouse in a troubled marriage to stop blaming the other person and ask the simple question, “What does God want me to do?” It takes courage to face the truth about yourself no matter where that truth might take you. These are the opportunities we all have on a daily basis to decide between courage and escape. The resources for choosing courage are found in the Lord. This psalm outlines what it means to seek refuge in the Lord when troubles threaten.

I. Ignore the Voice of Panic

The psalmist begins by declaring his trust in the Lord: **“In the Lord I take refuge.”** But his commitment is immediately challenged. In the face of a most serious threat of a determined assassin, a voice speaks up urging him to **“Flee like a bird to your mountain.”** In other words, take matters into your own hands and flee. Escape this threat and go to your safe place where you can be protected. Whose voice is this? It’s not entirely clear. Perhaps it is a well-

meaning advisor or friend, concerned for David's safety. Some commentators think it is David's own voice, as if David is talking to himself as he decides what to do in the face of this grave threat. Whichever is the case, it is a persuasive voice. Notice the wording of verse 1. **"How can you say to my soul."** The voice penetrates to his very core. It is persuasive too because it seems that there is nothing else to do but to flee. **"If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"** (v. 3). In other words, things have become so chaotic and out of control that it seems nothing can be done to address the threat short of running away.

The truth is that we live in a messy, dangerous, even chaotic world. Threats are never far away. Think with me about some of these. I'm old enough to remember the time when the threat of worldwide nuclear destruction was fresh in the world, leading many to build bomb shelters in their backyards. We live today under the threat of terrorism. School shootings, and now even church shootings, have become more and more common. Sea levels are rising. Cyber terrorism has brought to us the threat of a long-term outage of our electrical grid. Superbugs have developed resistance to all known antibiotics. I could go on and on. You can read almost daily of some new threat we are facing.

These large threats are such that the question of verse 3 seems all too pertinent. **"What can the righteous do?"** It would seem that nothing is left to do but to flee like a bird to your mountain. Some have done so. I once knew a Christian married couple who decided that the world was just too bad a place to bring children into, so they decided not to have any. Others have joined a growing number of people called "preppers," a name that comes from their massive and expensive efforts to prepare for a world catastrophe of some sort, including building up a significant arsenal of weaponry to protect themselves from those desperate enough to attempt to steal from them.

There are other threats that lie closer to home, threats that tempt us to take the easy way out, to escape in some way. Maybe it's a messy relationship, and you are tempted just to run away from it. Or perhaps it's a difficult job, a financial mess, or something as simple as a messy and disorganized life. The easy thing to do is to escape to your mountain. Perhaps your mountain is watching television, or food, or alcohol, or pornography, or shopping. It is an escape from the reality you have, but more significantly, an escape from the opportunity to trust the Lord, to take refuge in him.

There is an important question that needs to be answered before we talk about trusting the Lord instead of escaping. Where is the line between taking prudent precautions and cowardly escape? There are times when it is prudent to see danger and take appropriate steps to protect oneself. The Bible itself says, **"The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it"** (Prov. 22:3). I serve as a board member of Serge, a mission agency of several of our church's missionaries. Just this week, the team in

Nicaragua had to be evacuated because of some significant civil unrest. At a recent retreat for leaders of the mission, someone asked if they were willing to be martyred for the sake of Christ. The director of missions replied, “We *should* be willing to lose our lives for the sake of Christ, but try not to.” Something that helps me answer this question of where this line is between prudence and unbelieving escape is the metaphor of verse 1. **“Flee like a bird to your mountain.”** That describes unbelieving escape, and it is a panicked and fear-driven response. The bird sees a person approaching and unthinkingly responds out of fear to fly away. Have you experienced that kind of impulsive, unthinking fear? Something threatens and you simply react rather than thinking through the situation with a heart of faith. What difference does it make when we think through threats with such a heart? Our next verses speak to that.

II. Listen to the Voice of the Lord

Another voice begins speaking in verse 4, and it is the voice of faith, countering the impulsive fear of the previous voice. Remember that the voice of fear and panic penetrated deeply into David’s soul. So this voice must penetrate even deeper. It begins with the Lord rather than the threatened danger. **“The Lord is in his holy temple.”** The temple was the place of sacrifice, the place where satisfaction for sin was made through blood sacrifice. God is in his temple, delighting in the sacrifice of his Son on our behalf. That means that in the midst of every threat, we can and must remember that God is mightily for us.

This God who is for us is seated on a throne. **“The Lord’s throne is in heaven.”** He has not lost control of his world. He is ruling all things, and he entered into an ancient covenant with Noah that still is relevant to us. **“While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease”** (Gen. 8:22). While there are no shortages of crises that have the potential to end life as we know it, God has promised that he will not allow these things to succeed. Life will go on until he decides that it is time for the kingdom of heaven to come to the earth with the return of Jesus.

Though God has promised to preserve the world until the coming of Jesus and the establishment of his kingdom, it is still the case that we must go through times of suffering. It is often during these times that we are tempted to run away into some escape. So the psalmist reminds us next that God is not only able to save the world from end of the world catastrophes, but he is also able to use the crises in our lives to be a blessing to us. We see that in the repetition of the word “test.” **“His eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man. The Lord tests the righteous.”** The word for “test” has the idea of testing by fire so as to purify. This is what happens with precious metals like

gold and silver, which are put through the fire in order to burn away all the impurities. God is working through the difficulties in our lives to burn away our impurities. So to flee like a bird to the mountain, to escape your God-appointed trials, is actually to leave the place of blessing.

This doesn't mean that God calls you to stay in abusive situations. It is neither virtuous nor helpful to stay in a situation in which you allow someone to abuse you. What it does mean is that we must let God be God, not our own comfort or safety. We need to be willing to enter places and situations that may not feel completely safe when God calls us to do so. And we need to be willing to stay in hard places when God calls us to stay there, knowing that he is working his good purposes of blessing in our lives in those very hard places.

Many difficulties in life stem from the efforts of God's enemies to bring harm upon God's people. So the psalmist reminds us of God's attitude toward these enemies. **"His soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. Let him rain coals on the wicked; fire and sulfur and scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup"** (v. 5-6). Though the wicked may flourish for a time, their evil purposes will not be allowed to stand. The one who sits on the throne of heaven opposes them and will certainly bring them to judgment in his time. We need not fear these enemies because God reigns over them. They may have more power than you and I, but not more than God.

These verses on God's judgment by fire and sulfur deliberately call to mind the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. After the Lord delivered Lot and his family from that evil city, we read that he **"rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven"** (Gen. 19:24). Peter comments on this judgment with this conclusion: **"Then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment"** (2 Peter 2:9).

The book of Esther is a good illustration of this. This young Jewish woman became the Queen of Persia when an enemy of God's people arose. Haman was one of the king's chief advisers and he slowly gained power in the kingdom. He went to the king one day with a proposal, offering to pay 10,000 talents of silver into the king's treasury if the king would allow a day for the extermination of the Jewish people in Persia. I can imagine the strong temptation it must have been for Esther to "flee like a bird to her mountain," which would have meant distancing herself from the Jewish people. Instead, she courageously moved forward in prayer and dependence on God. She concocted a plan that involved considerable risk for her and one that counted on God's help. As a result, this great enemy Haman was defanged. Not only did the king turn against him, but God judged him and he was hung on the giant gallows he had erected for Esther's uncle, Mordecai.

III. Seek the Face of the Lord

The closing verse of the psalm wraps things up beautifully. **“For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.”** To behold the face of the Lord is to experience the presence of the Lord. The greatest reason I can think of to avoid the escapism of fleeing like a bird to your mountain is that by doing so you miss the presence of the Lord. There is something far more precious than safety, and that’s beholding the face of the Lord. The presence of the Lord is both the promised blessing for trusting the Lord as well as the chief enabler of real courage.

CONCLUSION:

A psalm such as this one is best grasped by applying it. Let me suggest three ways to do that. First, identify and repent of “your mountain.” Notice again the language of verse 1: **“Flee like a bird to *your* mountain.”** What is your mountain, your preferred escape? Food? Comfort? Shopping? Staying busy? Alcohol? Some hobby? For many people, it’s simply ignoring something in hopes that it will go away. The greatest tragedy of your mountain is that God is not there. You will miss the face of God there.

Second, embrace the daily challenges God puts before you rather than attempting to escape them. Most of us are not facing the kind of challenges David faced here, with an assassin lurking. But we all face numerous daily challenges that require faith and courage. What are those challenges for you? Perhaps it’s something as simple as your finances are out of control and you’ve been procrastinating in doing something about it. Or maybe there’s a difficult conversation you need to have with someone. One of the great ways to start every day is to ask for God’s Spirit to come and empower you to embrace whatever challenges he brings to you this day.

Finally, celebrate your security. There is no catastrophe possible for you that will remove the blessing of God from your life. We don’t need to live in fear, but can go forth in life with confidence and courage, resting in the love of God for us through Jesus.