

What Can the Righteous Do?

Psalm 11

1

Main idea: In times of crisis, we must run to our God and King, for He alone can eternally protect those who trust in Him.

For the choir director. *A Psalm of David.*

In the LORD I take refuge;
How can you say to my soul, "Flee as a bird to your mountain;
² For, behold, the wicked bend the bow,
They make ready their arrow upon the string
To shoot in darkness at the upright in heart.
³ If the foundations are destroyed,
What can the righteous do?"
⁴ The LORD is in His holy temple; the LORD'S throne is in heaven;
His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men.
⁵ The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked,
And the one who loves violence His soul hates.
⁶ Upon the wicked He will rain snares;
Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup.
⁷ For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness;
The upright will behold His face.

Introduction:

Some of you are familiar with the name "Eric Liddell." He is well-known around the world as a Scottish gold medalist in the 400-meter in 1924 Olympic games in Paris. He is probably even more famous for dropping out of his best race, the 100-meter, in those same Olympics because he refused to run on a Sunday. This part of his life has been made famous in the 1981 movie "*Chariots of Fire*." Lesser known to the world is his life after the Olympics. Eric was a man of deep Christian faith, and in the year following his gold medal win he moved to China as a missionary.

Times were difficult then in China, with considerable opposition to Christianity and especially to missionaries. But through the difficulties, Eric remained on with his family. Then, World War II erupted. Japan invaded China. Missionaries were told it was not safe, and they should leave the country. While Eric did send his family away, he felt he needed to stay, trusting in God who had called him there. In 1943, the Japanese had moved into his territory, and Eric was placed in a prison camp.

He became the bright light in that camp—daily teaching children and adults God's Word and exemplifying godliness in his words and actions though he suffered severe malnutrition and a lack of medical care. In the camp, he developed a brain tumor; and with no care available, he died five months before the camp was liberated at the age of 43. It was later revealed that, even while interned in the camp, Eric had the opportunity to be freed as part of a prisoner exchange program, but he gave his place to someone else and felt God wanted him to stay and help the others still in the camp.

Why, when he had multiple chances to run, did Eric stay? The answer lies in whom He trusted—where he ran in times of crisis. He didn't see running away as a solution; instead, he ran to God, trusting in Him to keep him and use him as He saw fit.

Although most of us will never experience something quite as global as an invading army and prison camp, all of us will face crises in our lives. Many of you already have numerous times. And chances are, you will again. It may be the threat of physical violence, disease, or other serious health problems, financial disaster, betrayal from someone you trusted, or any other number of crises. The most important question, then, is not *whether or not* you will face a time of crisis in your life; neither is it *when* you will face a crisis, but the real question is, "What will you do when the crisis comes? Where will you turn? Where will you run to?"

Psalms 11 deals with this question.

Main idea: We are taught here that in times of crisis, we must run to our God and King, for He alone can eternally protect those who trust in Him.

- A. We must know to whom to run. (vv.1-3)
- B. We must know why we should run to the Lord. (vv.4-7)

Context:

We are told in the superscription that this psalm was written by David. But once again, we are not told the specific occasion of the writing of it. It was obviously written in a time of crisis when David's friends or advisors were all counseling him to flee—to run to the hills. The two most likely occasions, then, were either when Saul was after a young David, and his friends were urging him to flee, or when Absalom was executing a coup to take over David's throne, and his advisors were counseling him to flee.

And though they seem to mean well, David rejects their counsel, deciding instead to walk by faith and trust in the Lord. And then, David writes a song about this decision—a song to the Lord, and a song for His people to encourage us to trust in Him alone.

Exposition:

A. We must know to whom to run. (vv.1-3)

1. Run to the Lord, the true refuge. (v.1a)

¹In the LORD I take refuge

David opens this psalm with an unabashed, bold statement of faith. Just two words in the Hebrew, six in English—"In the LORD I take refuge." This sets the tone for the whole psalm. Though his friends waver in their faith, and the wicked persecute the faithful, David plants his faith firmly in Yahweh, the Lord. He is saying, "You take refuge where you want, but as for me, in the Lord alone, I take refuge."

This is not the first time we have seen this word "refuge" in the psalms in reference to the Lord.

- **Psalm 2:12**—How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!
- **Psalm 5:11**—But let all who take refuge in You be glad, let them ever sing for joy;

- **Psalm 7:1**—O LORD my God, in You I have taken refuge; Save me from all those who pursue me, and deliver me.

And this is not the last place we will see it. In fact, the noun and verb form of this word occurs 37 times throughout the psalms.

This idea of God as a refuge was very important to David and to all God’s people. A refuge was a somewhat general term that could be used for different things.

- a. A refuge was a place of shelter from the violent storms that would unexpectedly come upon the land (and still do)—dust storms blowing up from the Sahara, torrential rains that caused flash floods, or even hail that could cause injury. Today, when these storms hit, people can jump in their cars, or into the nearest shop or restaurant. But in David’s day, shelter was not always readily available. If you were caught outdoors, for example, as a shepherd or farmer, when a storm hit, you needed to find shelter quickly, or your life might be in danger. You needed a refuge from the storm.
- b. A refuge was a place of safety from enemies. When an invading army or group of bandits were threatening, the Israelites could flee to certain places located in high rocky areas that could be defended and fortified. In that sense, a refuge was synonymous with a “fortress” or “stronghold.”

So, when David or anyone else calls God their refuge, or that they take refuge in Him, they are saying that when times of crisis come, they trust in God alone for protection and preservation.

- **Psalm 91:1-2**—He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. ² I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”

So, David opens his psalm by declaring that in this crisis, he is trusting the Lord as his one and only true refuge. Why does he say this? Because he is countering what his friends and advisors are telling him. They are telling him to run to a false refuge.

2. Don’t run to a false refuge. (*vv.1b-3*)

¹How can you say to my soul, “Flee as a bird to your mountain”

It is bad enough that we have to deal with crises in life. It’s worse when our own friends tell us to deal with it in the wrong way. David’s friends and advisors were people who loved him and cared for him and wanted what was best for him. And in this instance, the crisis was so bad that their best advice was to get out of town—run! “Go quickly, fly away like a bird to the mountains, because that is your only chance.” They don’t mention God at all; their solution is the best that man can come up with—just run away and hope that things get better.

But for David, that doesn’t make sense. Can a mountain, manmade fortress, city, or even an army provide true protection, true refuge? For David, they can’t. There is only one refuge, Yahweh, the LORD. He knew that true refuge exists only in God. He had proved this before when he faced Goliath as a youth. The reaction of most of us upon seeing that giant would have been to turn tail and run, but David took refuge in the Lord.

- **1 Samuel 17:37**—The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine. (Cf. 1 Sam.17:45-47)

Why were they telling David to “*flee as a bird to your mountain*”? Because of 1) personal attacks of the wicked and 2) the crumbling of the social and moral order.

a. Personal attacks of the wicked

² For, behold, the wicked bend the bow, they make ready their arrow upon the string to shoot in darkness at the upright in heart.

The language they use is of extreme urgency. The wicked have the arrow nocked, and the bow is already bent, ready to fire straight at the upright in heart—those whose heart is straight, aligned with God’s Word. They are ready to fire at you, David, and all those who trust in the Lord. There is no time to lose; the wicked are ready to shoot at any moment.

The theme of the wicked persecuting the righteous is obviously a theme that has been coming up in the last few psalms and will again in the next few psalms. And it is not an accident that these psalms have been grouped together. We are meant to “get it.” The world is opposed to God’s people. It has been that way since Cain and Abel and will continue to be so until Christ returns.

The world is under the sway of Satan, and one of his great goals is to go after God’s people; to go after the church any way that he can. And he does it in different ways, in different places, and at different times. He might attack God’s people with persecution from without, or through sowing division from within the church. Whatever the means or method, his goal remains the same: to hurt, disrupt, or slow down the progress of the Gospel and the growth of the church.

So, David’s friends see these personal attacks coming and urge him to run away. But another reason for their urgency is because they see a crumbling of the social and moral order.

b. The crumbling of the social and moral order (v.3)

³ If the foundations are destroyed, What can the righteous do?

The foundations of society are being destroyed. They see the tearing away of social and moral order at the hands of the unbelieving. Anarchy seems to be their goal. And if they manage to accomplish this, what can the righteous do? When, not only are believers personally threatened and attacked, but the whole moral fabric of society is eroded, what can we do?

For David’s friends, the righteous can’t do anything but run away and hide. But for David, they can, and they must, take refuge in the Lord.

Application

When you are in a time of crisis, what do you do? Which way do you run? Our culture tells us the answer is to run, to escape, to get lost in something—to take refuge in anything but God. Take refuge in your work—get lost in your business or trade, and ignore the problems you face. Take refuge in

entertainment—binge watch 15 hours of some show on the internet, so you don't have to face reality. Take refuge in fleshly desires—obey the advertisers and get lost in alcohol or sexual immorality; give in to the temptations of drugs or more and more painkillers. And, of course, this kind of thinking can spiral and spiral down until people consider the ultimate escape of suicide. When times of crisis come, we feel the burden is too heavy to bear, and so we run to so many false refuges.

But Jesus comes along and says, *"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt.11:28-30).*

You can take refuge in the Lord. You can come to Jesus Christ in repentance of sin and faith in Him as Savior and Lord. You can trust Him who came to save us from the peril and destruction that comes from taking refuge in anything and anyone else. *"There is salvation [refuge] in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).*

When you take refuge in Him, what can man or life do to you? The worst is death—and for those who take refuge in Jesus, He promised that, *"He who believes in Me will live even if he dies" (John 11:25).* His refuge is permanent.

We must know to whom to run. Don't run to a false refuge—they are all temporary and lead to death. Run to the true refuge for eternal shelter, protection, and rest. We must run to the Lord.

B. We must know why we should run to the Lord. (vv.4-7)

1. The LORD reigns sovereignly. (v.4a)

⁴The LORD is in His holy temple; the LORD's throne is in heaven.

Though wickedness seems to have a foothold and threatens to undo things, God is in control. Our God reigns from heaven. We have seen this already several times in different psalms. They continually come back to this truth: the Lord is King; His throne is in heaven. This truth should comfort every believer, because no matter how things are going down here on earth and in our governments and in our lives, God remains on His throne, ruling sovereignly, always watching over us.

- **Matthew Henry**—The Lord is in His holy temple above, where, though he is out of our sight, we are not out of His.¹

But here, another truth is also mentioned: *"the LORD is in His holy temple" (v.4a).* His throne is in not in a heavenly palace, but a heavenly holy temple—for worship happens around God. Our King is holy, pure, and undefiled—and He is worthy of worship and sacrifice.

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/mhcw/psalms/11.htm>

That God reigns from His holy and heavenly temple is something that God's people need to hear, especially in times of crisis.

- Isaiah (*Is.6*)—Isaiah needed that reminder as the long-reigning Uzziah had just died. What would happen to the kingdom now? Would enemies invade? Would the economy collapse? In that crisis, God gave Isaiah a vision of Himself, seated on His throne in His holy temple.
- John (*Rev.4*)—John needed that reminder as Christians were being persecuted across much of the Roman Empire. God was still on His throne, sovereignly ruling and carrying out His plan and purposes in the world and in His church.
- **Matthew Henry**—Let us by faith see God on this throne, on His throne of glory, infinitely transcending the splendour and majesty of earthly princes—on His throne of government, giving motion, and giving aim, to all the creatures—on His throne of judgment, rendering to every man according to his works—and on His throne of grace, to which His people may come boldly for mercy and grace; we shall then see no reason to be discouraged by the pride and power of oppressors, or any of the afflictions that attend the righteous.²

2. The LORD examines comprehensively. (*vv.4b-5a*)

⁴His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men. The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked

The words David uses here are what is called an anthropomorphism—describing God in human terms so that we can better understand what He does. Here, David describes how God, from far up in heaven, is always looking down on mankind. The verbs used, “beholds” and “tests,” together teach us about the intensity of His look. He not only sees us, He examines us. The mention of His eyelids is probably getting at the idea of God squinting intently to peer into the hearts of every person. He peers intently at every one of us to closely examine and scrutinize our words, actions, and even thoughts and intentions. Like He did so long ago when men were building the tower of Babel—when God on high looked down on what people were doing. He examined their actions and the intentions of their hearts, and what He found was pride and wickedness.

And so, here we are told that God does this to every one of us every day. He knows you inside and out. He knows your thoughts and intentions; He hears every word you speak, and He sees everything you do—in secret and in the open.

I wonder how this makes you feel. Frightened? Comforted? Both?

For those without Christ, this should be a terrifying thought, because He not only is a King who reigns sovereignly, and a King who examines comprehensively, but He is also a King who judges righteously—which is the third reason David gives for why we should run to the Lord for refuge.

3. The LORD judges righteously. (*vv.5b-7a*)

⁵ And the one who loves violence His soul hates. ⁶ Upon the wicked He will rain snares; Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup. ⁷ For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness

² Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, p.278

To the wicked, to the unbeliever, to the one who has rejected Him, and His Word, and His offer of salvation, He is a righteous judge.

David says that when God examines us, and when He finds wickedness and violence, He hates that one. Ascribing that word "hate" to God is very hard for many to hear as it goes against our sensibilities of who we think we want Him to be—it seems to conflict with a God of love. But it's what the Bible says in several places. Already, we saw in Psalm 5:5-6 that the Lord "*hates all who do iniquity*" and that "*the LORD abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit.*"

Sin and sinner cannot be separated in God's eyes. Sin exists because of the sinner. Sinners who die without Christ are punished eternally because sin cannot be separated from the sinner. Only those who have had their sins removed from them through faith in Christ have God's smiling face upon them.

But for those whose sin remains, the wrath of God abides on them. And compared to God, the wicked seem tame in their wrath. They shoot little arrows; God rains snares, fire and brimstone, and scorching wind. This should remind us of His judgment of the "wicked" people of Sodom and Gomorrah. He destroyed whole cities because He looked intently at their thoughts, words, and actions, and He found unbelief, rejection of God, disregard of His moral standard.

In other words, He found total "unrighteousness." There was a total lack of righteousness. And because God is totally and wholly righteous in His being, He will not and cannot tolerate unrighteousness forever. For a time, He may allow us to go our own way in unrighteousness, but He has fixed a day when He will judge the world through His own Son Jesus Christ for all the wickedness and unrighteousness that we practice.

And His judgments may be fierce now, but they are nothing compared to what is coming in Christ.

- **Revelation 6:12-17**—I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. ¹⁴ The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; ¹⁶ and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

Who is able to stand in the judgment to come? Answer: only the righteous will stand. Only those whom the Lord loves will stand. And the Lord loves righteousness. But the problem is, we are not righteous in and of ourselves, and we cannot do righteousness because of our sinful hearts. That is why we need a righteousness that is not our own—an alien righteousness that is outside of us. We need the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

In fact, the Father sent His Son, Jesus, for that very reason: To live a perfectly righteous life in our place, and to die for our unrighteousness, so that all who believe in Jesus can exchange their unrighteousness—their filthy sin-stained rags—for the righteousness, the clean and holy garments of Jesus, by repenting of sin and believing in Him. By running to Him alone for refuge—eternal refuge. And those who do this will find that God declares you now forgiven of your unrighteousness, and He now empowers you to live more and more righteously in your life.

And this is David's last reason for us to take refuge in the LORD alone.

4. The LORD loves eternally. (v.7b)

⁷ the upright will behold His face

The LORD loves the righteous eternally. Those whom He has cleansed by the blood of Christ—who are declared righteous in His eyes, and prove it by living in a righteous way—these are the “upright who will behold His face.” This is the ultimate goal of the believer, isn't it? To behold the face of God in Jesus Christ. To see Him in His beauty; in His glory.

*He is beautiful beyond description, too marvelous for words,
too wonderful for comprehension, like nothing ever seen or heard.
Who can grasp His infinite wisdom? Who can fathom the depths of His love?
He is beautiful beyond description, majesty enthroned above.³*

The hope of seeing our Lord Jesus should motivate us in life to persevere, to press on, to serve Christ, to expend energy for Christ, to live for Him no matter the cost—all that I might see Him one day face-to-face. And when that happens, it will affect us eternally.

- **1 John 3:2**—Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. ³ And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

Conclusion:

Where are you running? To whom are you running for refuge when crisis comes? Are you running to anything or anyone other than Jesus? It won't work. There is no lasting solace, no true comfort, no eternal protection in those things or those people. In Jesus alone there is true refuge, rest, peace, and love. Run to Him and be safe.

Amen.

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible: 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation.

³ Hillsong, “I Stand in Awe of You”