

Psalm 11

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[0 : 0 0] I'd like us for a few moments now to turn to the first passage of Scripture which we read in the book of Psalms, chapter 11. And we think particularly of the last phrase of the Psalm, upright men, or it includes women of course, the upright will see his face.

The upright will see God's face. Now reading of this Psalm, it would suggest that it originated in a social context similar to that being experienced today by God's people in Iraq or in the Congo in a situation of civil unrest, if not civil war.

There's a reference here to the wicked bending their bow, setting their arrows against the string, shooting from the shadows, at the upright in heart. And in such a situation, there were some people who said to the psalmist, the foundations are being destroyed, what can we do?

What can the righteous do in such a situation? And this was what was said and perhaps what is being said today in churches in the Congo, in churches in Iraq, in churches in Darfur and perhaps churches elsewhere.

But I would suggest that this is being said not, this is being said in Aberdeen and in Edinburgh and in Glasgow and in Scotland as well, as in these places of the social unrest and of civil war.

[1 : 4 5] Because there are many people who feel that their lives have become disrupted and their lives have been turned upside down and they feel that the foundation on which they've been building their life have been destroyed.

And there may be someone here this morning who has experienced such a crisis. I'm sure all of us can think of times in our own lives when we've had to face such a situation.

And it's so easy for us to heed the advice which the psalmist was given, we're not told by whom to give up. What can the righteous do?

Now the psalmist doesn't take that advice. The psalmist tells us that he does not flee to his mountain. He does not give in.

He turns to the Lord and discovers that the Lord is his refuge precisely in this moment of crisis. And he says in the beginning, In the Lord I take refuge.

[2 : 5 5] How then can you say to me, flee like a bird to the mountain? If the Lord is our refuge, how can we even consider the foundations being destroyed?

If God is on the throne, as the psalmist assures us in verse 4, the Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord is on his heavenly throne. If he is on the throne, how can we contemplate that the end has come, that life does not make sense, that the foundations are destroyed?

How can we contemplate throwing in the towel and saying there's nothing that we can do? Now the key, the key to the psalmist being able to resist and overcome this temptation to despair was that he came to the house of the Lord, that he came with the people of God and he put this psalm together.

And he wrote this psalm. And countless generations facing a similar situation, a similar crisis, have sung this psalm.

And through singing this psalm, through singing other psalms, have discovered that the Lord is indeed their refuge. And what the psalmist has done for us here is he's given us a means through which we, when we find ourselves in similar circumstances, can find refuge in the Lord.

[4 : 29] And the whole point of our coming together today to worship the Lord is that we might find refuge in him. We come, of course, to worship him. We come to exalt him. We come to magnify his name.

But we also come to find refuge in him. Refuge is one of the key images in the book of Psalms. The Lord is our refuge and our strength, we read in Psalm 46.

And today, as we gather here, we, all of us, come as refugees, looking for strength, looking for comfort, looking for orientation, looking for a foundation in life.

We come to him because he is on the throne, because he is the all-sovereign Lord. And it is to him that we come to worship this morning.

We may have come to a building. We may have come to a particular seat in the church. We may have come to be sitting downstairs or sitting upstairs. But all of these things, in a sense, are secondary.

[5 : 39] The crucial point of our gathering here this morning is that we come to the Lord and that we find refuge in him. And so, God has given us through David this psalm and all the psalm as a means of helping us to find refuge in God.

To find our bearings in life. To find a compass. To find orientation. To find a foundation.

Christ himself used the psalms in his own life. He prayed, Psalm 22, at least, part of it, as he hung upon the cross and as he faced there.

And our Lord lived his life out of the word of God and not least out of the psalms. Augustine said that when we pray the psalms in Christ, Christ prays them with us today.

He's interceding for us. And Augustine believed that he's interceding with us. And that it is as we pray the prayers that he prayed that we can be sure that he is praying with us.

[7 : 19] Now, the Lord has given us the psalms not simply as songs. He's given them to us also as prayers. And it's important for us, I think, to recognize that.

We have a tendency to look down upon formal prayers. But the psalms are in fact formal prayers. And it's a very useful exercise spiritually to pray the psalms.

Not simply to sing them, but to pray them. And in fact, all over the world this is one of the common denominators of many branches of the church which are very disparate in many other ways that the psalms are prayed.

And God has given us this psalm, has given us all the psalms as prayers to enable us to find refuge in him. Eugene Peterson speaks of the psalms as a toolbox.

And those of us, especially those of us who are keen in DIY, have a toolbox in our homes. In our homes, we have two toolboxes, whether that helps or not, I'm not sure.

[8 : 32] But all of us know what a toolbox is. And a tool is something that we use to help us to do something. God has given us the psalm, says Peterson, as a toolbox to help us to find refuge in God, to help us to glorify him, to help us to live our lives focused upon him.

Now, when we come to God, as we are urged to do through this psalm, there are three things that we do. The first is that we see, we seek and we see God's face.

The upright will see his face, says the psalmist here at the conclusion of the psalm. The upright shall behold the Lord's face.

Now, to see the king's face was an idiom in the Old Testament denoting access to the king. Joseph saw the face of Pharaoh.

And we find various references in the Old Testament to seeing the face of the king. It meant an audience with the king. You had an interview with the king. This last week, our new first minister had an audience with the queen in Holyrood Palace.

[10 : 01] And in that sense, he saw her face. And when we come to worship God, we are given this assurance that we can see God's face.

We can meet with God. God will meet with us. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians in describing their worship, he said that someone from the outside comes in, that person ought to be aware that God is among you, that God is present, that God reveals himself to you.

And so when we come to church, we simply don't come to a building, we simply don't come even to a service of worship. We come to meet with God himself. He is our refuge and our strength.

In him we find a present aid. And so the psalmist had this longing to meet with God.

We see this especially in a psalm like Psalm 42 where he says, My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?

[11 : 07] That has been translated, when shall I enter so that I may see the face of God? The psalmist is there thinking of going to the temple in Jerusalem, perhaps to one of the great festivals under the old covenant, and he's anticipating eagerly meeting with God.

He's thirsting. He says, My soul thirsts for God, the living God. He's got this hunger, this thirst to meet with God. And God graciously and wondrously has agreed to meet with us.

And to reveal himself to us. And so when we speak about seeking God's face and seeing God's face, we're speaking metaphorically of worshipping the Lord and of meeting the Lord.

The psalmist urges us in Psalm 105 to look to the Lord and his strength and to seek his face always. And in Psalm 27, the psalmist himself tells us, my heart says of you, seek my face, your face Lord, I will seek.

And he's there speaking of his determination, spiritual determination to seek the face of the Lord. So God has given us this psalm and all the psalms as a means of helping us to seek and to see the face of God, to meet with God as our great king, to meet with God as our sovereign Lord, and to receive his blessing, to honour him, to acknowledge him, to worship him, and to praise him, but to be blessed by him and to find our refuge in him.

[13 : 00] So often when we come to the psalms, we come more as archaeologists than as seekers. It's so easy for us to try to analyse, well, what was David doing when he wrote the psalm, or what could he have meant?

And we think of what the psalm meant to David, and that's important. Of course it's important, but what is of crucial importance is that we don't stop there, and we ask, what does the psalm mean to us?

Are we using it as a means, of enabling us to come to God in worship and in prayer? God has given us the psalms to use, to use in an experiential way.

He's given them to lead us, to lead us into the presence of God. And so that's the first focus I think that we see in this psalm, that as we worship, as we use this in other psalms, as we come to God through his word, we seek and see his face.

And God has graciously agreed to, or decided, to reveal himself to us.

[14 : 20] The psalmist says, let your face shine in your servant, save me in your unfailing love. God's face shining in many ways is a figure of God rejoicing, God smiling, if you like.

So that God is meeting us graciously. God is not meeting us as judge, he's meeting us as savior, he's meeting us as redeemer. His face is smiling, his face is shining.

And he invites us to discover his favor, to discover his mercy, to discover his grace. And that's why the psalmist was so concerned lest God should hide his face from him.

Do not hide your face from me. Again and again, the psalmist brings this plea to the Lord. And so God has decreed to meet with us, to meet with us, and he's given us this psalm as a means of helping us to meet with him.

As a means of grace, as a means of worship. So when we come to God as we seek to do this morning, we seek and we believe that we see God's face by faith.

[15 : 42] But there's also a sense in which we are answering, we are responding to God's word to us. We are answering God's voice, not simply seeing his face, but answering his voice.

This psalm and the other psalms were at the heart of the worship of ancient Israel, as they are and ought to be at the heart of the worship of the church of God and in the new covenant.

They were originally used as a means of encountering God in the temple and the means of responding to God's word to us. And so the psalms come to us as a living word, as a word which God is speaking to us today, so that although the psalms were inspired, written by David, but they were inspired by the Holy Spirit centuries ago, the Spirit has not abandoned the word of God.

The Spirit is still with the word of God. The Spirit is still animating, illuminating the word of God, bringing it to life, so that we hear the voice of God. And it is through the work of the Spirit of God that we can hear God speak, not simply read the word of God, not simply understand the words, but actually have the sense of encounter with God.

God draws near by His Holy Spirit and He speaks through His Word. And so God has given us the Psalms not simply as a means of helping us to communicate with Him, but they are also God's word to us.

[17 : 24] They become the channel of His voice, the articulation of His voice, which enables us to hear what He is saying to us.

Now we can formally read, we can even formally listen to the Psalms without hearing the voice of God. In this church this morning, there are many radio signals passing through the atmosphere, and if we had radios or TV sets or other forms of IT communication, we would pick up all sorts of signals.

But we don't have these means of receiving these signals, so we are unaware of them. We are totally unaware of all the signals that are passing through the atmosphere in the church this morning.

Sometimes we can come to church, the Psalms are sung, the scriptures are read, the gospel is preached, and we don't hear anything, because simply we're not switched on.

We don't have that faith that is reaching out to hear the voice of God, God speaking through his word, God bringing his word to life in our experience.

[18 : 48] And that's what the psalmist also urges us to know, to hear God's voice. The psalmist say, ask the Lord to open his ear, to help him to hear what God is saying to us.

We need to ask God to open our ears, to help us to hear what he is saying to us, because these words, these psalms, are means not simply of us praising God, but of God speaking to us.

And so God has given us this word, as a word through which he speaks, and he speaks today. God's word is a living word, God's word is a contemporary word, God's word comes to us today, living and active.

When we worship God, we not only seek and see God's face, we not only answer God's voice, but ultimately, and perhaps supremely, we affirm God's rule.

We acknowledge that God is king. We acknowledge that he is the sovereign one. We exalt him, we magnify his name, we recognize that we are dust, we recognize that we are sinners, we recognize that we deserve to be cast out of his presence rather than to be invited into it.

[20 : 19] And God gives us this sense of a wonder, of amazement, that we who are dust, that we who are sinners, should have this inestimable privilege of entering together into the presence of God through the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we do that in order that we might exalt him, in order that we might affirm his rule, affirm his kingship over our lives.

The psalmist tells us that the Lord is in his holy temple in verse 4. The Lord is on his heavenly throne. Even in the midst of a situation which socially and politically seem to be falling to pieces, the psalmist is able to affirm God's kingship.

That's what the kingdom of God means the kingship of God. It's the rule of God. It's the sovereignty of God. And when we worship God we come not simply to be blessed, although that's a very important factor of our worship, we come supremely to exalt him and to worship him and to say to him, to remind ourselves that he is king and to exalt him as king and to glorify his name, to affirm that he is in his holy temple and that he is on his heavenly throne.

Now God's rule is not a remote, it's not something remote. It's not like someone who, say, an Arab prince who buys an estate in the highlands and visits us once every ten years.

[22 : 04] God's rule is not like that. God's rule is immediate. God's rule is near. God's rule is close.

God's rule is something, he's actively interested in the details of our lives and not simply in the big picture.

Now the psalmist believed that God was near. They believed that God was in heaven, yes. It's interesting how in verse four, the psalmist is able to bring these two things together. The Lord is in his temple but he's also on the throne in heaven.

Now the Lord is enthroned, we read elsewhere in the Psalms, he's enthroned on the praises of Israel, Psalm 22, verse 3.

And that's how the Lord was enthroned. Yes, the people praised him. They were enthroning him. And he was enthroned upon the praises of his people. He was also enthroned in heaven.

[23 : 09] That his enthronement in heaven was reflected and illustrated in a sense by his enthronement on the worship of his people and the praises of his people.

And today when we affirm that God is the kingdom of God, when we affirm the kingship of God, we're affirming not simply that God is on the throne of the universe, that we are also seeking to exalt him here and that he is ruling here in this fellowship of his people as he is ruling in all fellowships of his people.

And we seek to affirm him. He is enthroned on the praises of Israel. He is enthroned on the praises of his people. And so David has given us this psalm and the other psalms in order that we might enthrone the Lord, in order that we might acknowledge him as king, in order that we might affirm his kingship and his rule, and declare to the world that he is sovereign.

The psalmists were exceedingly bold in their prayers, much bolder than we are. We are much more deferential than they were. In fact, I'm not sure if the psalmists would be allowed to pray in some of our prayer meetings, they were very, very, very bold.

And they were bold because they believed that God had called them in a sense to share in his rule. They could access to the throne room of history, to the throne room of the universe.

[24 : 49] And that's what made them bold. And that's how they could challenge God. As in Psalm 74, when the temple was destroyed, the people of God came in worship and they said, Lord, it looks like you've got your hands in your pockets.

Why is your hand in your bosom? You're doing nothing, Lord. Things are not as they should be. Why? You are the sovereign Lord. And so if we affirm the kingship of God and the sovereignty of God, this enables us to affirm the greatness of God.

God and to worship him as though God goes high, it also gives us an intimacy and enables us to say to the Lord, why is the situation as it is if you're king, if you're Lord?

And so we are invited as we worship the Lord to affirm God's rule today. His throne is not only in heaven, his throne is in the worship of his people.

Martin Luther wrote these words concerning the Psalter. He said, the Psalter is the book of all saints. That is the book of all saints that everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better.

[26 : 37] So God has given us this psalm. He's given it to us as a means of helping us to seek and to see his face, as a means of hearing and responding to what he is saying to us, as a means of exalting him and glorifying him.

I trust and pray that this purpose for which this psalm has been given may be fulfilled in our experience as a congregation today and in our own individual experience and the experience of our families as well.

that the purpose for which God has given us his word may indeed be fulfilled and that we may seek to see it fulfilled, that we may seek to honour it in all that we do.

May God grant it for his name's sake. Let's pray. Our heavenly fathers, we come before you, we come to give you thanks for the assurance that the upright will see your face.

We thank you that it is through the Lord Jesus Christ that we may indeed come to you as upright because we are in ourselves not upright.

[27 : 53] We are sinners. We have broken your law. We have departed from it. We have transgressed it. But we thank you that the Lord Jesus Christ lived in a totally, utterly, wholly, upright life.

And that through him we may draw near to you covered by his life, covered by his uprightness, covered by his righteousness. And we thank you for the assurance that those who come to you through him will see your face.

Those who come to you through him will hear your voice. And those who come to you through him will acknowledge truly that you are king. Help us so to do today.

For we ask it in the name of Jesus and for his sake. Amen. God God Which haste