

Psalm 11, A Psalm of Confidence

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Confidence is a valuable virtue, but it must be mixed with wisdom or it can degenerate into something inferior and be counterproductive. For example, if we trust too much in ourselves, our confidence can become an impulsive arrogance. A rash confidence can “be false, unwarranted, and...lead to unnecessary danger” (Leslie Allen, *Psalms*, WBC, p. 134).

When is confidence appropriate? It is apropos when it is trust in God for a good outcome. It is fitting when someone does what is right—even if it results in suffering—in the knowledge that God “works for good with those who love him” (Rom. 8:28). Jesus always had this kind of confidence. Other biblical examples would include Jeremiah, Daniel, Stephen, and Paul. Psalm 11 speaks of this kind of confidence. The occasion for the writing of this psalm might have been the danger that David faced from Saul. Alternatively, this psalm might have come from the time of Absalom’s rebellion.

Advice to Flee

“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?’” (Ps. 11:1-3).

The advice to flee may have come from well meaning friends. It also might have come from David’s own natural fears. He talks about fleeing like a bird. Birds are usually defenseless against a predator, so they fly away from danger, rather than staying and fighting. Sometimes this is good advice. Sometimes it is best to run, not simply because we are afraid, but out of prudence. Live to fight on another day with a better chance of success. We may be able to do more good at a later date. David fled both the wrath of Saul and the danger of Absalom’s rebellion, only to return victorious in each case. Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria in the fourth century, did this on

more than one occasion, ultimately winning a victory for truth against the Arian heresy (Farrar, *Lives of the Fathers*, 1, 445-571).

The chief danger in this strategy is that we may stress what is safe instead of what is right. Sometimes it is necessary to take a stand, to refuse to give in to fear, and to be confident in God no matter what the outcome. Standing firm against seemingly overwhelming odds can sometimes turn the tide of victory in favor of truth and justice. Even if you lose your own life or suffer some other loss, you will have done what is right (Isa. 32:17; Jer. 17:7). The stand-bravely-approach is what Jesus and Paul both did when they went to Jerusalem, even though danger was imminent (Mt. 16:22; Acts 21:10-12).

Verse 2 refers to archers drawing their bows and shooting arrows in the direction of the upright. The bowshot might simply be an allusion to threatening words or slander (Ps. 64:3-4; Jer. 9:3). However, it could refer to physical danger such as a plot to kill David. Maybe David had in mind Saul’s attempt to track him down and murder him. After all, David once said, “The king of Israel has come out...as one hunts a partridge in the mountains” (1 Sam. 26:20). The shot “from the shadows” could refer to the treacherous, underhanded tactics of David’s foes.

In verse 3 society is compared to a building and its foundation. The foundations of society are morals, law and order, justice, and the principles of right and wrong. The statement may suggest that when truth is no longer respected, when fair play is not honored, the righteous are in a difficult position. The playing field does not seem level, since God’s people must not use lies or dishonest means to achieve a good end. As Barnes explains, “Whatever others may do; whatever reliance they may place on such things, [the righteous person] can have no confidence in fraud, dishonesty, and error—in secret machinations and plans of treachery and deceit. His reliance is, and must be, in the

prevalence of just principles; in the observance of law; in the diffusion of truth” (*Psalms*, p. 100).

The basis for David’s confidence

“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” (Ps. 11:4-7).

In spite of a seeming disadvantage because David plays fair, he remains confident. His confidence is not from a favorable evaluation of his own human ability to deal with the crisis. Rather, it is from trusting in God’s majesty and sovereignty. God is in residence in his holy temple; God is not in flight. From on high God is scrutinizing the lives of mankind. God sees both the evil plans of the wicked and the precarious plight of the righteous. The wicked he will punish with fire and brimstone, as he did at Sodom and Gomorrah. The upright, though, will see God’s face and experience his favor.

Conclusion

Sometimes the wise thing to do is to run and fight another day. At other times, though, we must not run. We must believe in what is right, stand firm, and have confidence in God for a good outcome (Ps. 71:5). Whatever David’s choice was, his confidence was in God rather than in himself. As Christians we seek refuge in Jesus, in whom we gain confidence and by whom we can be victorious over fear (1 Jn. 4:18; Eph. 3:4; 2 Cor. 3:4). The story is often told of a sailor in a shipwreck. He clung desperately to a huge rock until the tide went down and the seas became calmer, so that he could reach safety. He was asked, “Weren’t you afraid and shaking all the time?” “Yes,” he replied, “but the rock wasn’t shaking.”