

“Faith In A Crisis”

18 July 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: IPH 165 Be Still

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Psalm 11

Sermon:

My working title for Psalm 11 is “faith in a crisis.” The first three verses give us an indication of the writer’s situation. His friends or companions outline good reasons why he should flee. He is being targeted, there is some dark scheme being hatched against him, he is like a bird in the sight of the arrow. His friends are wondering what has the world come to; even the very foundations of his world are crumbling. It is a personal crisis and national crisis; the advice is run, walk away, get to safety! There is a struggle going on - good and evil, upright and wicked, Christian and those who are not-Christian.

The crisis and challenges faced by our brothers and sisters in the persecuted church, those who have come to us from other countries and seek asylum and refugee status, know very clearly what it means to be targeted because of their faith. In post-Christian Ireland, Bible-believing Christians are facing increasing hostility to important aspects of our faith. One response is to give up, to run away. I knew a lady who responded with great enthusiasm to a gospel presentation but when she went back and shared the news with her family, they thought she was “crazy”. Sadly, she came to me a few weeks later and said she couldn’t continue in her newfound faith.

I read an article this week, providentially, that explores four possible responses to the hostility we will face for our faith: compromise (finding ways of denying what God has said in His word), silence (knowing something is wrong but not speaking or engaging), withdrawal (staying in a Christian bubble as much as we can), and confrontation (finding ways to respond and challenge the prevailing drift or attack on Christian faith and values) with helpful responses to each.

Psalm 11 does something similar. It sets up the question, “*when the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?*” (v3); we find the answer in the second part. So, let us dip into this song, written by David, as we look at the answer he gives to what can the righteous do in a crisis of faith.

I. The Anchor of Faith (v.1a)

David starts with a strong statement of faith. “*In the LORD I take refuge*”. The LORD is his anchor. This starting position is a declaration of his faith in the Lord God. He believes in God, he believes in a personal God whom he calls Yahweh, he believes He exists, and he believes certain things revealed in scripture about God. I thought it might be good to remind ourselves of what we believe and then say, “the Lord is my refuge”.

Apostles Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty. Creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day He rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

David is letting us know, and telling himself, that his anchor in any situation in life is God, and it is in Him and with Him that he takes refuge. The anchor of faith is God, our personal refuge. It is to God we must go!

II. The Advice of a Friend (v.1b-3)

The situation is so bad that his friend, or friends, advise him to “*flee like a bird to the mountains*” because he is a target and, in fact, the foundations of the earth are being destroyed; there is nothing the righteous can do. It’s too dangerous, it’s not safe - get out! We can identify with such advice, and we may even be those who give it. Like David’s friends, we identify with the description of evil in humanity and society. We observe a crumbling of the foundations of society. These friends are for you, they have your best interest at heart, they see the world as you do, they acknowledge the wicked, they despair at the foundations crumbling and they are concerned about you.

What do you think? Are they right? How can you know? Mary and Joseph were warned to flee from Herod and escape to Egypt, and they did so (Matthew 2:13ff)! Jesus told His disciples that when they were persecuted, they should simply leave and move on (Matthew 10:23). Should the psalmist heed their advice? The advice comes from friends who have our best interest at heart - what should we do?

Dale Ralph Davis points out that we should not only note from whom the advice comes from, but also note the assumption that security and safety is our priority. It is possible to make security and comfort a god. I have been aware recently how complex and difficult decisions have been to make, no doubt they always have been. We do not always have the full facts. It sometimes comes down to a balance, or determining which is better or best. We need discernment so that we can filter out what advice leads us toward or away from faith in our Lord. Paul shows his pastoral concern for the church in Philippi when he prayed for them:

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:9-11).

III. The Answer Given by Faith (v.4-7)

Remember v.1a, “In the LORD I take refuge”, and what David did was remind himself, and those who will sing the song, who God is. He starts with God, and he notes the character of the Lord he takes refuge in. That surely is highly significant.

God is close: He is in the temple; He has come to be with His people. Imagine that David is in Jerusalem. He has gone to the temple to meet with God, to find out from God. Surrounded

by the trappings of tabernacle life, he experiences the personal presence of God. We call that the immanence of God, and in Jesus we call it incarnation and salvation. We meet with God personally, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to ask His advice.

God reigns: God is sovereign, in control. Nothing happens without His knowing and His purposes are always carried out. He sits on a throne in heaven. Knowing this is reassuring.

God observes: Nothing escapes His notice. In fact, the word is “examines”, scrutinises, everything, including the hearts of all, both the righteous and the wicked. The previous psalms have highlighted this aspect of God. God is the ultimate CCTV experience, He is the MRI of CCTV everything. The smallest detail, the hidden thought, is observed, examined and scrutinised.

All are examined, and yet the outcome is different for those who are righteous and those who are wicked. This is not a simple binary of some do good things and some do wicked things. It is a description of those who believe in God and are declared righteous because of their faith and acceptance of God's offer of salvation, and those who do not believe and are in rebellion against God. They deny Him His rightful place as Lord. They are, therefore, not declared righteous, and so all their works are sinful, even those that we think of as good.

The LORD examines the righteous (v.5): here the word is used as a test. The best-known example of that is God's test of Abraham when he was asked to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Genesis 22:1 says, *“sometime later God tested Abraham....”* and James writes *“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God promised to those who love Him”* (1:12). It is important to know and believe this is not temptation from God, as James tells us, nor it a judgement for our sin; it is a wise, sovereign and loving God testing our faith for His good purposes. What the test is designed to do is to reveal our hearts and, usually, we will find all manner of sin under the test - anger, frustration, unforgiveness, hatred, dis-belief, love of self, etc. In reality, we fail the test, BUT we pass the test when we prove that our hope is not in ourselves but in Christ, His righteous life and His death for us, and we place ourselves in Him by faith. The test proves our need of the gospel, its sufficiency, our dependence upon the grace of God, and in that we pass.

However, it is a different story for the wicked. Those who are implacably opposed to God, who constantly disobey Him, and who love the things He hates will experience His judgement. The truth of v.5 is very sobering; it challenges any theology we have that God is only a cuddly soft toy of a God. God hates the wicked and He will punish them by fire and by scorching wind, biblical pictures that need little explanation of judgement. God will deal with the wicked, definitively and decisively. The Lord is righteous and He loves justice. So what are we looking at in the crisis: God or the situation? Our faith needs a renewed and true vision of God.

IV. The Assurance of Faith (v.7c)

I have been really taken with the first and last lines of the psalm, as others have been. The first - *“In the Lord I take refuge”* - so in God we have security, coupled with the last line - *“upright men will see His face”* - meaning, “the upright” or “humanity”, will see His face. The desire is not primarily safety and comfort, but intimacy, personal relationship, friendship, respect, fellowship with God is our desire and goal.

Dale Ralph Davis writes, *“there are many who are interested in safety, but only saints care about fellowship. The genuine disciple doesn’t want only protection from God but fellowship with God. And such full and final communion is David’s assurance here.”*

Yet this is our difficulty, especially when suffering, in crisis, or in the general mess of life. Seeing God requires faith, we live by faith not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Yet we are assured that in our struggle, we will see God and one day meet Him face to face. This is the hope of our faith. It means our struggles are not purposeless, for they are training us in hope.

In his commentary, Davis tells the story of a man who was blinded in the early years of his life by an accident. Despite the limitations of his inabilities, he diligently studied. He met a young woman who was not put off by his blindness; rather, she grew to love him and agreed to marry him. A skillful surgeon heard of the man’s case, and after consideration, the man placed himself in the surgeon’s hands. The bandages were removed on the morning of his wedding, and the surgery had been successful! And so, as he turned to watch his bride walk down the aisle, he saw her for the first time. It was a beautiful moment of joy for them both. He saw her face, but he loved her before he even saw her.

“In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:6-9).

Praise: IPH 529 Will Your Anchor Hold?

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: IPH 551 O Jesus, I Have Promised

Benediction