

## **“What to Do When You Are Tempted to Drop Out”**

Psalm 11 (NRSV)

Even **your best friends can be wrong**. Of course, they mean well. They have tried to assess your problems with care. They struggle to share your agony and suggest a sound solution. But they can be wrong. It takes a lot of **wisdom to assess their advice and decide whether or not to follow it**. And it takes a lot of courage to go against their counsel, when they have offered it to you with all good will.

This was the situation in which the psalmist found himself. His friends were urging a course of action that they were sure was best for him. They had only his good in mind. They had tried to read the circumstances accurately. But they were wrong and the psalmist had to tell them so.

That’s where **the psalm begins**: “In the Lord I take refuge; how can you say to me, ‘Flee like a bird to the mountains ...’” (11:1). The friends had used their best judgment. They had measured the pressures that were pushing in on the psalmist, and – knowing him as they did -- they had measured his ability to take those pressures. When they had completed their calculations, they had had a simple word of advice for the man in trouble. “Head for the hills.” “What dove continues to sip water when some small boys are throwing pebbles into the pond?” “What raven keeps on pecking at the grain in the field once the farmer aims the gun filled with buckshot his way? Birds may not be smart, but they know enough to get out of the way when the stones begin to fly.” “You should do the same.” So went the entirely reasonable, practical counsel of the friends.

And they had **good evidence on which to base their counsel**: “... for look,” they observed, “the wicked bend the bow, they have fitted the arrow to the string, to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart” (11:2). The enemies were threatening and formidable. Like archers, hiding under cover to ambush their prey, they waited for the psalmist with murder in their eye. Their wickedness had made them ruthless; their superior weapons gave them confidence; their secure hiding place strengthened their nerve. The odds were overwhelmingly against the psalmist. He must run.

**The psalmist’s cause was hopeless**. Besides the enemies’ direct and immediate threat, it was clear a moral decay had seeped into the land.

So the friends summarized the psalmist's situation: "If the foundations are destroyed what can the righteous do?" (11:3). The political, social and spiritual life of the land was crumbling. The foundations of truth, justice and piety were being undermined by a flood of wickedness. No one righteous finger in the dike could stem those tides.

**How does the psalmist reply?** As usual, he was frugal with his words. He gives us little clue as to who these enemies were or what they were doing. In all probability they were men and women who had rejected Israel's faith traditions. No doubt, they despised the covenant and its standards of righteousness. They rejected the worship of the one true God. And they busied themselves making life difficult for anyone who was serious about the faith. Apparently they did this with considerable success. To the psalmist's friends they seemed to be winning. Why else would they advise him to cut and run?

It seems likely that **the psalmist was a leader**. He may have been a king, like **David**, harrassed by his own son's, Absalom's, youthful rebellion. He may have been a prophet, like **Jeremiah**, persecuted by kings and princes, and the majority of the religious establishment. Whoever he was, you can be sure that the pressures were great enough to tempt him to drop out. No doubt, there were moments when the words of his friends seemed to make sense. At times he may have been on the verge of packing his bags and heading for the mountains where the rugged terrain and the hidden caves offered some shelter from the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" that had been sown by his taunting, threatening enemies.

Many of you know how he felt. You live in **homes** where your faith is treated trivially or occasionally made an object of sport or derision. You have husbands or wives who don't much care about the ways of Christ or his church. You are tempted to drop out. And your friends may encourage you to do just that. This psalm is for you. Let the psalmist who knows how you feel become your counselor.

Some of you **work** in places where your Christian witness puts people on the spot. Your sense of fairness makes them uncomfortable. Your attitudes and values clash with their practices. They demand compromises you are unwilling to make. We live in a world where God increasingly seems to be irrelevant if not a nuisance. You are tempted to drop out. This psalm is for you. Let the psalmist who has sat where you now sit become your teacher.

**The psalmist's answer to the friends** who urged him to “flee like a bird to the mountains” comes in four parts. It was based on his view of God. He didn't dispute his friends' evaluation of the evildoers. The situation was every bit as bad as they said. But he saw more than they. From his wider – and higher – perspective he had the good sense to reject their counsel and offer some of his own – counsel that pointed to a new relationship with God. He suggested beleaguered people might renew their **belief in the presence of God**; they might trust more in **the righteousness of God**; they might count more on **the power and justice of God**; and they might rejoice more in their **fellowship with God**. Let's see how these fourfold suggestions shed light on the psalmist's predicament – and on ours.

### 1. **Believe more in the presence of God.**

“The Lord,” the psalmist declared, “is in his holy temple; the Lord's throne is in heaven” (11:4). No matter what others may think and say, God is present; he is in charge; and he is not silent. These words are the key to the psalmist's faith. True, he is no naïve optimist. He mouths no glib platitudes about silver linings behind the clouds. The problems are real, but so is the presence of the living, loving God. In the Temple – in the community of the church – his story can be told, his words can be heard, his glory can be seen. The saving God is present. Believe in him. The God who overturned the might of pharaoh is among us. The God who toppled Jericho's walls is in our midst. The God of Gideon and of David has dealt with threatening situations before.

“**Flee to the mountains,**” the friends had whispered. “Your enemies are beyond your handling.” “**Go to the Temple,**” the psalmist sang, “and know that God is far greater than anyone's enemies.”

No God of a mere local shrine is he, no provincial God. He is the high God, the Lord God, over all. Earth cannot contain his throne; it stretches through the vast reaches of the heavens. He is the God of the universe. Everything – history, time and space -- and everyone on earth – friend and foe alike – must reckon with his presence.

### 2. **Trust more in the righteousness of God.**

Disconsolately, the friends had asked the psalmist, “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (11:3). It was a desperate question.

The psalmist answered, “Trust more in the righteousness of God.” “God will have his way.” “God is not finished with the world, with others, or with you and I.” This is how he put it: **“The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, and his soul hates the lover of violence”** (11:4-5).

The psalmist would not want us to misunderstand what he means by the **“righteousness”** of God.” Especially he wouldn’t want us to think of righteousness as a rather impersonal, cold, hard list of things that are right and wrong. He would see God’s righteousness as **God’s commitment to do what is right** in all situations. More than anything else, doing what is right means to **do what a “right relationship” requires**. God’s relationship with the wicked requires judgment and restorative justice; his relationship with the righteous requires consolation and blessing.

Just here our poet would want us to understand something else -- what he means by **“the wicked”** and **“the righteous.”** Often we get these categories wrong, and become rather easily judgmental of others or self-righteous about ourselves. “The wicked” are those who care nothing about their relationship with God and with others. “The righteous” are those for whom their covenant with God is the center of their lives and living. “Wickedness” and “righteousness” are as much **a matter of commitment** as of conduct, as much **a matter of attitude** as of action, as much **a matter of devotion** as of deeds.

As God scrutinizes men and women and young people with his piercing, all-seeing eyes (Deut. 11:12; 2 Chron. 16:9; Ezra 5:5), as he pointedly peers into the quality of our lives -- with eyes lowered as though to help his focus, he is testing **our loyalty** more than our acts. Are we for him or against him? That is the essential question. Wicked people may do some good things, and righteous people may do some bad things – for sure – but it isn’t particular sinfulness or sinlessness that is at stake. It is basic allegiance, ultimate loyalty.

That’s why all this talk recently by some about the fact -- as they see it -- that **“There is no God, stop worrying about it”** (as some atheists have promulgated in ads on buses) is so insidious. They are well answered in a new book by an author and believer, David Adams Richards, a Canadian Maritimer, called God Is: My Search for God in a Secular World (“David Adams Richards takes on ‘intellectually lazy’ atheists” Douglas Todd, The Vancouver Sun, Sat. Aug. 22/09, C4).

The psalmist knew to whom he belonged; he wasn't ambivalent about his loyalty. That's why he trusted in God's righteousness. He knew that God would do what his righteousness required – he would save the psalmist at the time and in the way he deemed best. **“For the Lord is righteous,”** he sang, **“he loves righteous deeds”** (11:7a). Of course, God loves righteous deeds. But more important, he loves to do righteous deeds for us. Not our righteous deeds but the righteous deeds of God are the theme of this song. “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he has saved us” (Titus 3:5). God loves to deliver, to rescue, to save, to redeem those who look to him. That's an unbeatable assurance when we are tempted to drop out.

### 3. **Count more on the power and justice of God.**

If the righteous have this kind of assurance, the wicked have quite a different kind: “On the wicked,” sings the psalmist, “he will rain coals of fire and sulfur; a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup” (11:6). Part of what the psalmist learned in the Temple was that there is a Judgment Day coming. There are a number of stories in the Bible about those who experienced this judgment while they were still alive. Take, for instance, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:1-29). It is not a happy story. But it happened. Jesus, too, the all-compassionate One, told stories of coming judgment (e.g. Matt. 25:31-46). Judgment for some is sadly, inevitable, and it is awful; it is real. Avoid it if you can.

“Flee like a bird to the mountains”? Not the psalmist – he counted on the ultimate power and justice of God. Not he, but his enemies, should do the fleeing.

### 4. **The upright shall behold God's face.**

The final word is in some ways the psalmist's best: **“the upright shall behold God's face”** (11:7b). “Now I see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). What really keeps us from dropping out as the pressures mount? The joy of fellowship with God – knowing God, being with God, enjoying God.

What kept legendary coach **Punch MacLean** alive during his five-day ordeal lost in the BC wilderness? We are told he said, "I never lost faith" (The Van. Sun. Sat. Aug. 22/09, A4). What often keeps others lost at sea, bobbing day after day in a rubber dinghy? The thought of seeing their loved ones. What helps prisoners of war survive torture and stave off suicide? The hope of gazing again on the faces of their families.

Letters can be a great help. They bring words of comfort and cheer. Phone calls are even better. The sound of a voice helps to sharpen the memory of a face. But when we are face to face, that's where the real fellowship begins.

The **face**, more than any other part of the anatomy, expresses the person. To behold the face of God must be wonderful. Jacob tells us he once got a glimpse of God's face (Gen. 15:32). Moses, we are told spoke with God "face to face" on Mount Sinai (Exod. 33:11). To behold the face of God is to be in direct touch with his magnificent love; it is to be personally acquainted with his majestic holiness; and, it is to know firsthand his unqualified acceptance, mercy and grace. One day, the psalmist sings, we will behold God's face. What a great day that will be!

"Flee to the mountains"? Not at all. Cling to God's promise of fellowship. Rejoice in the delights of his companionship now and forever. Look lovingly into his face, revealed in Jesus Christ. In that look you will find strength and hope and healing.

**Tempted to drop out? Of course!** We are all tempted to give up at times. And sometimes we **do** take refuge in the mountains, temporarily, to gain strength and perspective to return to the pressures and challenges of the valley. But at other times **we cannot flee**. Even when our friends urge us to do it, we cannot, and we will not. Instead we will endure the opposition, the tough threats, even the ridicule of those who are threatened and annoyed by our faith.

**We can endure if we see more than our enemies do -- more even than our friends.** We can endure if we see God present with us, ready to rescue us in his righteousness, ready to judge with his justice and power those who oppose him, and ready to call us to constant, deeper fellowship. One look at him, and especially seeing his look at us, are more than enough to keep us from dropping out.

I don't know if you are aware of it but, apparently, Reader's Digest is losing its appeal. It has gone from a peak circulation of some 18 million copies in the 1970s to 5.5 million copies and from 12 issues a year to 10 today. A respected journalist, **John Ibbitson**, of The Globe and Mail newspaper recently laments this loss. Especially he valued the message that many of the stories taught generations of postwar middle class North American and European people: "Things will get better if you apply yourself. You can lose that weight. You can get that job. You can save your marriage. You can overcome this [or that] tragedy. But first you need to assume responsibility for your body, your character, your future. People who embrace this [will] message lead good lives" (Aug. 18/09). And, whatever else you make of this magazine, this message still remains largely true.

I visited with Ann Woensdregt and some of her family this past week, wanting to console them in their recent bereavement, and I was touched to see one of her grandsons wearing a green T-shirt with the words boldly emblazoned on the front: "**Never give up.**" I don't know if he knew what he was doing, but I thought and told him, "Right on." That's what God's people do. They don't give up because they have faith and trust in the everlasting, almighty and living God of the Bible.

Amen

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