

Right Or Flight

Psalm 11 January 8, 2025

Have you ever had a fight or flight moment? Something goes bump in the night and your brain tries furiously to decide what you just heard but simultaneously what in the world you're going to do next. Depending on the situation your life might depend on the choice you make.

Researchers say there are three stages to the fight or flight: Alarm, resistance, and exhaustion.¹ In that alarm phase, the body goes through all kinds of physiological changes to prepare you for what you need to do. Hormones flood your system, your breathing speeds up to top you off with oxygen, pupils dilate, muscles tense and tremble as blood is routed away from your skin into your brain and limbs. Your blood clotting ability also increases - just in case you get a puncture or two.

It may be helpful in the moment, but repeated exposure to these intense changes can lead to break downs in the body. We need *rest* and *peace* - that's what we're made for.

We can experience something similar in the spiritual life. Facing troubles and trials, we can spiral into fear, unrest, and a compulsion to solve our problem, save ourselves, or do what it seems like God is unwilling to do for us.

That's what Psalm 11 is about. In a time of trial or trouble, when the alarm sounds will we try fight or flight? *Or* will we take the third option, not fight or flight but *right* - the way of God's righteousness?

Psalm 11:Superscript - For the choir director. Of David.

David was often in serious trouble - even from a young age. Lions try to kill him. Bears try to kill him. Giants try to kill him. Kings try to kill him. His own son tries to kill him. We don't know which specific situation he was in, but it was a serious one.

He writes this song, which is ultimately a song of great hope and security, but he doesn't keep it for himself. He gives it to the chief musician. He delivers it to the whole choir. All of us will face troubles of one kind or another, sometimes life-threatening troubles, but the truth of God's love, power, and grace is just as relevant for us as it was for the son of Jesse.

Psalm 11:1-2 - ¹I have taken refuge in the Lord. How can you say to me, "Escape to the mountains like a bird! ²For look, the wicked string bows; they put their arrows on bowstrings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart.

At first, the tone seems worrisome, even desperate. But that's only if we pass over the opening phrase. "I have taken refuge in the Lord." The situation is very bad, but David's heart isn't pounding

¹ <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-fight-or-flight-response-2795194>

in fear - he's at peace because he *has* taken refuge in the Lord. He writes this song from a place of shelter and security and supply. He assesses his situation from under the shade of the Lord's wings.

In his trouble, David knew the only *real* refuge was in the presence of the Lord - trusting the Lord. But the *conventional* wisdom he got was, "Don't go to the Lord, get to the *mountains*."

Who was giving him this guidance? It could've been his friends, trying to help but ultimately not giving good advice. It could've been David's enemies, trying to trap him. We see a situation like that play out with both Nehemiah² and Jesus.³ Or, it could've been David's own heart saying "escape to the mountains like a bird!" We've all seen that in a movie - some tense situation where the good guys just need to stay hidden where they are, but that *one* character just can't keep it together, and out of terror they jump up and try to run away, only to be immediately killed.

That's what would've happened to David if he took this bad advice. "Fly like a bird to the mountains." But what was waiting in the shadows? Hunters with bows and arrows - the exact tools you need to kill a bird in flight. You don't hunt birds with swords, do you?

David *knows* this is bad advice. "How can you say that to me?" But if you know David's story, you know that *sometimes* he gave into fear. Sometimes he went the way of man's wisdom, rather than taking refuge in the Lord. And the results were always disastrous.

David's example reminds us that many times, especially in times of trouble, we *know* what we should do. It's not a question of what to do, it's whether we're willing to do it. Are we *willing* to wait on the Lord? Are we willing to allow the Lord to be our Provider and our Shield and our Strength and our Refuge, or do we jump up and say, "I've got to save myself from this problem?"

The mountains *seem* like a place of great strength. It *seems* like the best place to go. But you and I can't see all the enemies in the shadows. Oh, maybe we see the one that's closest, but beyond him is another and another, waiting for us to expose ourselves in our own strength, which is insufficient for the day of trouble. We may think we have a great plan to escape our problem, but we really don't. In fact, the Hebrew here gives the sense of wandering.⁴ "Go wander to the mountains."

Psalm 11:3 - ³When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

Foundations here refers to the pillars of society.⁵ The basic principles of civilization and community. When *those things* are destroyed, what can the righteous do? That's a significant question.

We live in a time when a *lot* is going wrong in the world around us. Not just in America but in many places we see serious distrust of institutions. We see leaders resigning. We see everyone accusing everyone else of destroying the justice system to use it as a weapon against others. I saw an article

² Nehemiah 6:10-13

³ Luke 13:31-33

⁴ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

⁵ Arno Gaebelein *The Psalms: An Exposition*

this week about how New York city doesn't have enough applicants for the number of police they need.⁶ Current cops are telling people not to bother applying. Ironically, considering our text, one Brooklyn cop said he tells young people to "run for the hills" rather than join the NYPD.

Families are pulling their kids out of California schools at a record rate - more than 300,000 kids since 2020.⁷ People feel like the system is crumbling and failing.

It's not only a secular issue. I'm guessing many of you have heard someone you know use a new buzzword recently: *Deconstruction*. People say they're "deconstructing" their faith - that they're getting rid of all the spiritual baggage they think has ruined their lives and now they can be truly enlightened. In my experience, deconstruction is usually just apostasy. But even in the Church we sense a shaking and a breaking up of basic pillars. Denominations leaving behind orthodoxy. Confidence eroding away.

When the foundations are crumbling, what can the righteous do? It's a rhetorical question that David has already answered for himself. The answer is *not* "freak out." It's not "get angry." It's not "do whatever the popular thing is." David said, "In the Lord I sheltered."⁸

The answer is to hold fast to the Rock that *cannot* crumble. The foundation that can't be destroyed. We can remember that God Most High is our Rock and Redeemer. *He* is the Deliverer. And though my heart and flesh may fail, though there may be shaking and crumbling around me, I need not fear because God is the strength of my life. And I can build my life on His promises, on His truth, with His grace and power, whether the schools are good or bad, whether the justice department is good or bad, whether my town is more safe or less safe. Our God remains the same.

In a crumbly world, in a time of alarm, we have an answer. One commentator puts it this way: We seek "not escape but asylum with God."⁹ The answer is to trust Him and respond like He does.

Psalm 11:4 - ⁴The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord—his throne is in heaven. His eyes watch; his gaze examines everyone.

When David wrote this song, Solomon's temple had not been built yet. There was the Tabernacle of course, but David wants us to look to heaven. Look where the Lord is. Look at Him in His temple.

A temple is not a traditional fortress is it? Not in our minds. Where are the towers and the moats and the defenses? The Lord shows that all the strength we need is found in *Him*.

David was sometimes driven from *his* throne. Driven from his home. Though he was the greatest warrior the nation of Israel ever saw, sometimes even he had to run for his life. But not so the Lord.

⁶ <https://nypost.com/2025/01/04/us-news/number-of-nypd-applicants-plummeted-as-nyc-force-tries-to-hire-1600-officers/>

⁷ <https://www.ppic.org/publication/factors-and-future-projections-for-k-12-declining-enrollment/>

⁸ Alter

⁹ Frank Gaebelein, Willem VanGemern, Allen Ross, J. Stafford Wright, and Dennis Kinlaw. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

The Lord is *always* on His throne in *power*. And in His vast power, we see here that He concentrates and concerns Himself with *you*. "His gaze examines everyone."

God sees you. He sees your struggle. He sees the foes hiding in the shadows along the way - even the ones you don't even know about. The powers and principalities that we are no match for - the Lord sees and watches and examines. We learned last week in Psalm 33 that the Lord *stares* at us.

In the midst of disaster, David says, "Look at the Lord in His heavenly home." What an important perspective that is. So often, in our human hearts, in our human fight-or-flight mentality, it's easy for us to feel like God isn't with us. But, as New Testament Christians, we've been told that not only is God with us, but in fact *we* are with *Him*. We heard about this a little this past Sunday in our study of Ezekiel 16. But here is what's spiritually true about you *right now* if you're a Christian:

Ephesians 2:5b-6 - You are saved by grace! ⁶He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus.

In our time of trouble, we can look to heaven and remember what is true: That *since* we are hidden in Christ, He is with us here *and* we are with Him there.

Psalm 11:5 - ⁵The Lord examines the righteous, but he hates the wicked and those who love violence.

Why does the Lord examine us? For one reason, He watches us to see which way we're going to go. When we face trouble, we find out if we *really* believe. Will we follow Him or will we search for some other refuge? When we come to that fork in the road, will we go the way of the hunters or will we go the way of the humble and shelter ourselves in Christ?

God, in His patience, will also allow difficulty in our lives at times so that we can be refined like gold in a fire. That doesn't mean *every* suffering is for that purpose or that God causes all of it, but that is a factor in some cases. In the moment we usually think, "Hey I'll stay at 10k gold - no need to go all the way up to 24k." But that's not really what we want, is it?

Romans 8:18 - ¹⁸For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.

We learn something else very important here: There are things God *hates*. Do you know what God hates? Some of you parents here have kids with serious allergies - peanut or bee sting. You *know* what their allergies are, right? You need to know because some very serious life stuff depends not only on knowing it, but *avoiding* exposure to certain things.

The Bible reveals that there are things God *hates*. God has expectations. He has standards. Are we meeting those standards? As we think about that, let's remind ourselves that they are *heart* standards. We even see it here: "those who *love* violence." David's experienced a lot of violence,

but he's talking about a heart issue. And so, as the Lord examines us and as we cooperate with Him, we must *always* start with the heart and then move out to the hands.

Psalm 11:6 - ⁶Let him rain burning coals and sulfur on the wicked; let a scorching wind be the portion in their cup.

Commentators agree this is a callback to God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah.¹⁰ Sometimes we chafe at these imprecatory prayers where God's people pray that unbelievers would be brutally judged. But remember the story of Sodom? Remember how God gave them more than a fair chance at mercy? How He would've spared them but they were unwilling to repent and believe?

When a person or a town or a nation *refuses* to go God's way, He will ultimately allow them to go their own way, and that way *always* ends in destruction. Their *portion* is a burning wind. It's interesting - the word for *wind* is the same word the Old Testament uses for the Holy Spirit. So, again, we have this choice. We can go man's way and our portion will be a burning wind. Or we can go God's way, and He becomes our portion - the blessed *Wind*, the Holy Spirit, Who indwells us and comforts us and teaches us and helps us.

Psalm 11:7 - ⁷For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds. The upright will see his face.

We started the song with David taking refuge *in* the Lord. We saw enemies lurking in shadows - a world crumbling - judgment on the way. As usual in the Psalms, there's a clear contrast between the righteous - who are believers who trust the Lord - and the wicked. And now, in the closing verse David points out the *Lord* is righteous.

And so the answer to trouble is not only to trust in God and hide ourselves in Him, but to be *like* Him. *He* is righteous and He has *given* us His righteousness, and so, in every circumstance, our aim is to be more like Him. In a fight or flight situation, my goal is not *escape*, but *exchange*. Exchanging my worry for His peace, my wickedness for His holiness, my weakness for His strength. My plans for His plans. And it's not only about the way I think, but also the things I *do*. It starts in the heart, but moves out to the hands. The Lord loves righteous *deeds* - actually living out our Godliness the way God lives it out.

And so, as the song closes, we no longer find ourselves in alarm but in the glorious, affectionate presence of God Who delivers us and shields us and makes us like Himself. And the result is rest.

In the day of trouble, instead of alarm we can approach our Lord. Instead of resistance we find refuge. Instead of exhaustion, He gives us exchange. Providing us with righteousness, hope, security, and rescue. And from the shelter of His shade, we are sanctified and sent out to live His righteousness in whatever situation we find ourselves in, knowing that this is the way that leads to life and rest and peace and supply and joy in this life and the next.

¹⁰ See Kidner, Smith, Perowne, Alter