

In *worship* we experience a spiritual tug-of-war between two kinds of wisdom, the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world. We wrestle among ourselves and within our selves. We are torn between principle – doing the right thing, and pragmatics – doing what works. True worship is not isolated from this struggle nor does worship pretend that the conflict doesn't exist. The psalmist leads us in worship by clarifying the issues between the word of God and the “good advice” coming from well-intentioned advisors.

The difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world is not always apparent even though the former is grounded in faith and the latter is driven by fear. This is especially true when faith looks like foolishness and fear looks like good advice. Real worship calls for discernment. We ask, along with the apostle James, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” (James 3:13). We agree with the apostle Paul, “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” (Phil 1:9-11).

In worship we confess that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and “knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Prov 1:7; 9:10). The household of faith affirms, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight” (Prov 3:5-6). Psalm 11 leads us into the work of worship so that we might know the will and wisdom of God even when we fear that “the foundations are being destroyed” (Ps 11:3). The poet writes, “*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.*”<sup>1</sup> Yet, even so, the saints gather in the name of Christ and they worship. They declare boldly with David, “In the Lord I take refuge!” (Ps 11:1).

*Good News*

*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?”*

Psalm 11:1-3

The psalm opens with a simple, bold declaration: “In the Lord I take refuge.” From the very first line of the psalm the end of the matter has been reached. David’s faith in Yahweh is definitive, not tentative, and he is not looking for anyone to convince him otherwise. His statement of trust

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<sup>1</sup> Webster, *A Rumor of Soul*, 43.

is resolute, but his well-meaning advisors are telling him to run for it. “Get out of Dodge.” “Run for the hills.” Live to fight another day.” “Flee like a bird.” His counselors have his best interest in mind. They cannot protect him from the enemy sniper – the stealth archer who lies in wait under the cover of darkness. The warning is urgent. The danger is imminent. The threat against the upright in heart is lethal. David’s advisors see the culture crumbling before them. They fear the break down of law and order and a rising tide of anarchy. They lament, “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?”

Many Christians can identify with this fear. They speak of losing their nation and they are filled with anger and fear. Pastor Tim Keller writes, “This may be a reason why so many people now respond to U. S. political trends in such an extreme way. . . .They become agitated and fearful for the future. They have put the kind of hope in their political leaders and policies that once was reserved for God and the work of the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> The vitriolic rhetoric and slander expressed by Christians against politicians is an indication of deep anxiety and fear. Christians feel that their culture is slipping away from them in spite of their best efforts to “bring back America” and “change the world for Christ.” Like the advisors in Psalm 11 they are ready to throw up their hands and run for the hills.

David’s not buying it. The pragmatic wisdom of the world runs counter to faith and trust in Yahweh. His advisors may be accurate in their description of the dangers and the threat of anarchy but their good advice does not take Yahweh into account. They are forgetting the divine alternative – the good news. Their strategy is built on fear, not faith. David’s bold statement of trust sets the tone and recalls the courage of Peter and John before the religious pragmatists of their day, the Sanhedrin, when they said, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).

There are many instances of “flight” recorded in the Bible. If David had not eluded king Saul and “made good his escape” he would have been killed by Israel’s king (1 Sam 19:10). Jonathan warned David to flee and David ran for his life. In Nazareth, at the outset of his public ministry, Jesus, the Son of David, infuriated all the people in the synagogue and they rose up and drove Jesus out of town, and took him to a cliff to throw him off. “But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way” (Luke 4:29). At the beginning of his apostolic ministry Paul evaded assassins in Damascus by being lowered in a basket through an opening in the city wall (Acts 9:25). But these flights from danger were driven by faith, not fear.

David’s advisors meant well, but their pragmatic advice missed the mark. Their judgment was based on external circumstances rather than internal convictions. The temptation to cut and run can be very real and it can come in various ways. It may come in the form of capitulating to the culture on matters dealing with church growth or ethical concerns. Christ’s followers are tempted to listen to the voice of “progressives” who want to reshape the church according to the spirit of the times.

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<sup>2</sup> Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 99.

Conforming to the ways of the world can be a form of escapism. I was the pastor of a church that went through considerable conflict over the gay issue. In my first year of ministry over three hundred people left the church when the elders voted not to sanction the gay lifestyle. I agreed with the decision of the elders but the anger and bitterness that ensued from this stand for biblical sexuality took us all by surprise. For more than a year we were a very troubled and divided church and many resented my leadership. I became convinced that I was there to help the church through a rough time and then move on to another church. I told myself that I was their transition pastor. My inner voice said, “Run for the mountains!” I began applying to other churches hoping for an escape to end my nightmare. And if I’m honest even the hope of another church sustained me in the daily conflicts and tensions that we endured. But no church was interested in me. Rejection letters piled up. Looking back I know now that if I had left when I wanted to, I would have flown the coop out of fear. I also know that if the Lord had told me that he was going to keep me there for fourteen years, I probably would have gone crazy. But by God’s grace we weathered the storm.

### *True Wisdom*

*The Lord is in his holy temple;  
the Lord is on his heavenly throne.  
He observes everyone on earth;  
his eyes examine them.  
The Lord examines the righteous,  
but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion.  
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; the upright will see his face.*

Psalm 11:4-7

David has two good reasons for trusting in Yahweh, the sovereignty of God and the justice of God. When “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,” the fact remains that the Lord is in his holy temple, symbolizing the Lord’s nearness. When “the foundations are destroyed,” the Lord is on his holy throne, symbolizing his transcendence.<sup>3</sup> He is the architect and builder of the city with eternal foundations (Heb 11:10). When “the nations rage and the people plot in vain” (Ps 2:1), the psalmist knows that the Lord God is sovereign. “This King is in residence, not in flight.”<sup>4</sup> The prophet Habakkuk echoes these words to people tempted to live in denial of this immense truth: “The Lord is in holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (Hab 2:20). The central truth of the psalm is that the “faithful fix their confidence on the heavenly sovereign and his plans, and not on earthly, human institutions. . .”<sup>5</sup>

The image of the Lord in his temple years before Solomon built the temple serves to underscore the meaning of the metaphor. The real presence of God was never housed in a building. To think

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<sup>3</sup> Craigie, Psalms, 133.

<sup>4</sup> Kidner, Psalms, 73.

<sup>5</sup> Ross, Psalms, 341.

otherwise would be to be to limit God humanistically. A similar dynamic occurs in the New Testament description of the church. We don't find a single word about church facilities, but the apostles deployed concrete images for the community of God's people. Their strength and solidarity was not reflected in church buildings but in their union with Christ Jesus and in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Early Christians had a sense of place, a feeling of being at home, not in a facility but in a family of shared faithfulness to the Word of God. There was no outward temple or tall steeple to symbolize their place, but as they met together there was a powerful presence of the risen Lord Jesus. The early Christians knew that "the Most High does not live in houses made by men" (Acts 7:48). The relational and spiritual character of this "house," built by God *of people*, is no less material, temporal, spatial, and concrete, than if it had been built with stone and steel. "The accent of Ephesians 2 lies not upon intangibility but upon the fact that the church of God is made of people, rather than of bricks."<sup>6</sup> The good news is proclaimed and lived through the local church, through the community, rather than through the individual. In a world of hostility the church is an alternative society, a visible sign of the kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

The justice of God is achieved through his perfect examination and holy judgment of the righteous and the wicked. The psalmist uses anthropomorphisms freely without fear of misunderstanding. The Lord observes everything: "his eyes taking everything in, his eyelids unblinking, examining Adam's unruly brood inside and out, not missing a thing."<sup>8</sup> One of the character defining features of the Son of Man in The Book of Revelation is his blazing eyes.<sup>9</sup> The penetrating gaze of fire-blazing eyes purifies. Christ sees us better than we see ourselves. Every idol is the object of a thousand human stares, but without a trace of any recognition. We look and look at the object of our admiration but it cannot even see what we see. The idol sees nothing, knows nothing. "Their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand" (Isaiah 44:18). In our age of celebrity, idolized images demand our attention. We are captivated by the daily viewing of media images of famous personalities that cannot recognize us in return. But Christ's penetrating, purifying eyes see us completely. "Search me, God, know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See, if there is an offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps 139:23-24).

God scrutinizes the righteous and the wicked in a process that is likened to testing metals.<sup>10</sup> In a fiery kiln of hardship the righteous are purified. The dross is burned away leaving only the precious metal. But the "fire and brimstone" of God's judgment burns up the wicked. The righteous are subject to a purifying fire, but the wicked, "those who love violence," provoke the wrath of God. The psalmist uses the strongest language to express God's hatred for violence. Literally, the Lord's *soul* hates violence.<sup>11</sup>

This Old Testament perspective of the wrath of God against the wicked is in harmony with the

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<sup>6</sup> M. Barth, 320.

<sup>7</sup> Webster, Ephesians, 57.

<sup>8</sup> Peterson, Psalm 11:4-5, The Message.

<sup>9</sup> Webster, Follow the Lamb, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Craigie, Psalms, 134.

<sup>11</sup> Ross, Psalms, 342.

New Testament perspective. Eternal torment and the lake of fire are not popular subjects in our day.<sup>12</sup> Yet Jesus repeatedly promised that on the day of judgment those who rejected the gospel would suffer a worse fate than Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15; 11:21-24; Luke 10:12-15). The people of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba will rise up at the judgment and condemn a generation that had every advantage to receive the gospel but stubbornly refused (Luke 11:29-32). Jesus stated it plainly, “There is a judge for those who reject me and do not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day” (John 12:48). Repent or perish was a refrain that ran through his ministry (Luke 13:2-5). Jesus warned that even if a person were to gain the whole world, what good would it be if he lost his soul? (Matthew 16:26). “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,” Jesus said. “Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both the soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

Jesus uses graphic language to describe judgment. Hell is outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). Jesus warned, “Anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matthew 5:22). And again, “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands and two feet and be thrown into eternal fire” (Matthew 18:8-9). Jesus offered these words of condemnation at the final judgment: “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). On the theme of judgment the language of Jesus and the Psalms draw on the same truth. “The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear” (Matthew 13:41-43).

Psalm 11 begins with a statement of trust and ends on a promise of love. The counsel to flee has been effectively countered by a “shelter in place” faith. The Lord is in his temple, let the faithful say “Amen.” “Things fall apart” but the Lord is on his throne. The upright in heart are under sniper fire but the Lord has them covered. His devastating counter attack is a firestorm of fiery coals, burning sulfur and a scorching wind. The Lord hates those who love violence and he defends the cause of the righteous. Security, stability, and unshakeable confidence are important, but for the upright in heart there is even more at stake. “God as ‘refuge’ may be sought from motives that are all too self-regarding; but to ‘behold his face’ is a goal in which only love has any interest.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Webster, Follow the Lamb, 274-275.

<sup>13</sup> Kidner, Psalms, 74.