

When foundations crumble

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[0 : 00] Okay, boys and girls, this is that moment to grab those note sheets and pick up a pen. Hopefully your parents have managed to print one, but if not, well, don't worry.

You can just take your notes on a blank sheet of paper and maybe draw us a picture too. And after the service, you can all ask your parents to take a photo and pop that in the comments on the video, and we can all see how much we've been learning and admire your pictures as well.

Maybe we'll get some of the grown-ups to upload their notes as well, and we can see whether they were paying attention as well. So, folks, we've been working our way through the first 12 psalms at Covenant Church under the heading, The Way of the Righteous in the Muck of Life.

And you can check out the previous sermons on our website, covenantchurch.scot, if you want. And today we come to Psalm 11. Now, Psalm 11 is particularly well-suited to our present circumstances because the key question of this psalm is found in verse 3.

When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do? What do faithful people do when everything is falling apart?

[1 : 10] Well, in this psalm, David first examines a possibility which he then finds to be inadequate. Verses 1 and 2, we see false refuge. But he then quickly moves on to find true refuge in the verses that follow and to reflect on heavenly justice in the closing verses.

So if you are taking notes, well, those are our headings this morning. First, false refuge and then true refuge. So first up, verses 1 to 3. And here we find some well-intended advice.

David's friends are saying to him, The situation is desperate. The foundations are crumbling. Your enemies are laid in ambush. You're not even going to see them coming. Just get out of here while you still can.

Run for cover. Mountains are a well-established place of refuge, aren't they? Plenty of end-of-the-world films feature people trying to reach that Cheyenne mountain complex in Colorado. And while they might head there with its 1.5 million gallon water reservoir and its own fire station and dedicated power plants and etc., etc., that desire to find refuge in the mountains is well-established.

[2 : 21] And it's not new. You run to the hills to escape the bandits and the marauding armies. And in fact, at times, David himself fled for refuge to the hills. So this isn't necessarily bad advice.

Yes, David's friends, or maybe this is even him kind of reporting his own temptation, his own inner thoughts, whether it's his friends or his own ideas. The intentions are good, aren't they?

It is legitimate to desire safety. There's a kind of deep-rooted instinct in the human psyche to preserve our lives. Sometimes we'll go to extraordinary lengths to that end.

There was a brief time this week. There was a website called skyisolation.com that was offering isolated living with meals being brought to you each day and so on for just a few hundred pounds a day.

Now, whether that is evidence of an entrepreneurial spirit alive on the Isle of Sky or of a somewhat grubby willingness to profit from a crisis, well, I'll leave you to decide.

[3 : 21] But sometimes it's hard to tell whether the advice that you're being offered is prudent or is evidence of unbelief. I've been watching churches this week, particularly perhaps in America, watching them grappling with this question over these past weeks.

When the call goes out from the government to refrain from gathering in person, is it prudent for the church to obey or is it evidence of unbelief when we do that? Well, you can tell from where I'm standing right now what I think the answer to that question is.

But it's a legitimate question to ask, isn't it? To say if we obey this call to social distancing, which, by the way, is a really poorly chosen term, we should be seeking physical distance but trying our best

to preserve social closeness.

But anyway, it's reasonable to ask if we obey that call to be separate from one another. When we obey that call, are we following advice like that of David's friends and seeking safety in the mountains?

Or are we being wise and prudent? It's sometimes hard to know whether we're getting good advice from our friends or not. A guy called H.L. Ellison, he says, that the love of your friends will often create your most subtle temptations.

[4 : 39] Well, that was certainly true for Jesus. He said in Matthew 16 that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and to suffer many things and to be killed and rise again. And what did Peter do in response?

Verse 22, Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Never, Lord, he said, this shall never happen to you. And the sharpness of Jesus' response to Peter, it perhaps takes us aback.

Get behind me, Satan! Why so harsh? Well, I think because Peter's suggestion was so very tempting to him. Maybe even more so than the temptations in the wilderness that we're more familiar with.

That here, one of Jesus' friends, and with the best of intentions, was tempting him to deviate from the path God had set out for him. For David, here in Psalm 11, for him surely to flee to the mountains was a tempting possibility.

After all, the very foundations were being destroyed. When the foundations crumble, what else can you do? But David sees that in this instance, that to run from the situation would be evidence of unbelief.

[5 : 49] As the psalm begins, he takes refuge in the Lord. Now, we'll come back to that in a moment. But to help us understand why he reaches this conclusion, we need to think about the assumptions underlying his friend's advice.

And it seems to me that their assumption here is that safety is all important. That physical well-being should be David's first concern.

And the assumption would be that it should be our first concern. Now, self-preservation is important. I said earlier that that instinct seems to be innate to the human psyche.

That is how God made us. However, if self-preservation is all important, then something has gone awry. Then we're failing to heed God's commands if our own lives are our first priority.

If like me, if you're into reading classic science fiction, maybe you're familiar with Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics. These govern the behavior of artificial intelligences such that as a first priority, they preserve human life.

[6 : 56] Then they obey human beings, provided there's no conflict with that first law. And only then when both those other criteria are satisfied, only then do they seek to preserve their own existence.

Now, we are often inclined to put preserving our own life as priority one. But God's word is clear. There are at least two other priorities that should take precedence over that.

Our first priority should be to glorify God. That's the first commandment, isn't it? And if we're taking Philippians 2 seriously, when it calls us to humbly value others above ourselves, then that means we're also looking out for one another before we worry about our own safety.

Love your neighbor as yourself. So, how does that play out in our present circumstances? Ennis McSween up at Smithton Free Church, he put it very succinctly earlier this week.

I don't mind getting coronavirus. I very much mind giving it. We can. And for those of us who are young and otherwise healthy, I would even say we should.

[8 : 07] We can hold our own lives lightly. But what we cannot in good conscience do is hold the lives of others lightly. This is a clear implication of the sixth commandment.

Obedience to the command, thou shalt not kill, requires not only that we do not raise our hands in violence, but also that we are willing to actively take action to preserve life.

And in this case, we follow the advice of governments and of epidemiologists. We keep our distance from one another. It is legitimate that we risk ourselves to help others, however.

That's what our doctors and our nurses are doing, even as we speak. And we all of us, we do it to a lesser extent when we brave Tesco in order to bring food to a family worse off than ourselves, to provide their necessities without them being placed at risk.

In other words, to return to Psalm 11, for us to isolate ourselves in these present circumstances, this is not the same as David being called to flee to the mountains.

[9 : 14] Because when we isolate today, it is for the sake of others, for the safety of others, not because we hold our own lives as the most precious commodity. Well, so much for the false refuge being offered in those first three verses.

But we're still left with that question of verse three hanging over us, aren't we? When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do? If we're not going to put ourselves first, if we're not going to flee to the dubious safety of the mountains, well, then what do we do? Verse four offers us a vision of hope. The Lord is in his holy temple. The Lord is on his heavenly throne. He observes everyone on earth.

His eyes examine them. So hope in troubled days comes from turning your eyes away from the difficult circumstances and looking to God.

David was called to focus less on the enemies in the shadows and more on the Lord who sees even those deeds done in darkness. When we're reminded in this verse that the Lord is on his heavenly throne, the focus is not on heaven as kind of some distant, far off place.

[10 : 33] Though the wicked men of verse two, they might want to think of God as distant, but that isn't what David's saying here. Now, the picture isn't implying that God is removed. Rather, it is implying that he rules on his throne.

This isn't a place of inactivity, but a place of supremacy. It doesn't suggest distance. It suggests dominion, control. When the foundations crumble, whether that's the foundations of your own life, your health, your job security, the friends and family you counted on, or whether that's the foundations of society as a whole, even if law and order and justice break down, even in days when people are struggling to find the simple necessities of life, when the foundations crumble, the invitation of verse four is to look up, to consider God in his holy temple.

Corrie ten Boom, who survived the Nazi Holocaust, she said, if you look at the world, you'll be distressed. If you look within, you'll be depressed.

But if you look to Christ, you'll be at rest. The panic that causes David in those first few verses to consider fleeing to the mountains like a fluttering bird, that panic comes to an end when it's countered by the calm description in verse four.

David's confident declaration of God's kingly rule, that continues in verses five and six, where the picture evolves to show God as a righteous judge who examines all, both the righteous and the wicked, who examines all and administers justice.

[12 : 14] There is in these verses a clear sense of threat, isn't there? Verse five proclaims that God hates the wicked. He hates those who love violence. And verse six recalls God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah when fire and brimstone rained from heaven.

And in Luke 17, Jesus says, that's what it will be like when he returns. Now passages like this exist in God's word to warn us, to call us to sit up and to take notice.

It's never comfortable to be warned of impending disaster. It isn't pleasant to think about the prospect of judgment. But the Bible teaches us that when bad things happen around us, when the foundations crumble, that it should prompt us to examine ourselves.

Jesus asked in Luke 13, what about those 18 people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?

His answer, I tell you no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish. Tragedies should prompt us to examine ourselves.

[13 : 31] Now let me be clear. I am emphatically not saying that the coronavirus is a judgment from God. But what I am saying is this. When disaster strikes, the wise course is to look at yourself and to ask, where do I stand before God?

When God examines me, what does he see? When God looks at my life, what does he think? Now if you're listening to this and your honest answer is that he won't be happy when he looks at your life or that you're not sure, well don't be content with that.

Don't be content with wishful thinking. Don't be content with uncertainty. I'd love to talk to you about that more. We might not be able to meet in person at the moment, but you can get in touch with me by phone and email and Skype.

The contact details in the about box somewhere over there on the Facebook page where you're watching this or on our website at covenantchurch.scot. So whatever stage you're at, I would love to talk to you about these things.

Because? Because there is hope to be found. There is hope when the foundations crumble. There is hope in the face of judgment. There is hope for the righteous.

[14:50] Verse 1, David declares that he takes refuge in the Lord and at the end of the psalm we find the promise that the upright will see God's face. David has this confidence and he's not the only one.

In the midst of his immense suffering and difficulty, in the midst of it all, Job proclaims in chapter 19 of the book with his name, he proclaims, I know that my Redeemer lives and that in the end he will stand on the earth and after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.

I myself will see him with my own eyes. I am not another. How my heart yearns within me. This is what we hope for.

This is what we long for. This is what we yearn for. This is the Christian's great desire and great confidence that our Redeemer lives and we will see him face to face.

many might be tempted to seek safety in God in troubling days. Many will opt for any port in a storm. Selfish motives perhaps might prompt you to take refuge in God as verse 1 but the hope of verse 7, the desire to see God's face, well that desire surely is a desire for those who love God himself, not only the safety that he offers.

[16:14] as one commentator puts it, only saints care about fellowship. The genuine disciple doesn't only want protection from God, he wants communion with God.

This is the promise for the righteous because God is righteous, verse 7, he loves those who are righteous and upright themselves. That's who he loves, the righteous and upright and that could be cause for grave concern when we undertake that sober self-examination.

It could be worrying that it is the righteous whom God loves but it doesn't need to be because friends, our hope is in a righteousness that is not our own. Our hope isn't in living holy lives ourselves, it is in the holy life lived by Jesus our Saviour and in the sacrifice that he made on the cross on our behalf.

So this psalm offers hope when it seems like the foundations are crumbling because it shows our need for a foundation that will never crumble, a foundation that will never be destroyed.

This psalm shows us that we need Jesus. We sing sometimes that my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

[17:30] The foundation of Jesus' blood, that is a foundation that will never crumble, that can never be destroyed. So when the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?

We can look up and see the Lord in his holy temple and we can see a lamb looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne.

And with that vision in our heads, filled with that picture, well with that we can keep on walking the way of the righteous even in the muck of life.

Let's pray. Lord God, when the foundations crumble, what can the righteous do?

We look, we look up, we see you there, we see that vision of hope, we see the lamb, the lamb who was slain, the lamb whose righteousness is granted to us in order that we might have hope as we live through difficult days and as we look to eternity, we may have hope in a God of justice and a God of love.

[18:56] Be with us in these days ahead, we ask. Fill us with that confident hope in Jesus' name we ask. Amen.