

Flee Like a Bird!

Psalm 11

<p>1 לְדָוִד</p> <p>בַּיהוָה חֲסִיִּתִי</p> <p>אֵיךְ תֹּאמְרוּ לְנַפְשִׁי</p> <p>נֹדֵי תִרְכָּם צְפוּרָה :</p> <p>2 כִּי תִהְיֶה הָרָשָׁעִים יִדְרֹכֹן קִשְׁת</p> <p>כּוֹנְנֵי חֲצָם עַל-יֵתֵר</p> <p>לִירֹת בְּמוֹ-אֶפֶל לְיִשְׂרָאֵל-לֵב :</p> <p>3 כִּי הִשְׁתּוֹת יִהְרָסוּן</p> <p>צְדִיק מִה־פָּעַל :</p>	<p>1 By David</p> <p>In I AM I take refuge. (Ps 2.12)</p> <p>How then can you say to my soul:</p> <p>“Flee to the mountains [little] birdie!”</p> <p>2 For look, the wicked bend their bows;</p> <p>they set their arrows against the strings</p> <p>to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart.</p> <p>3 When the foundations are destroyed,</p> <p>what can the righteous do?”</p>
<p>4 יְהוָה בְּהֵיכַל קִדְשׁוֹ</p> <p>יְהוָה בַּשָּׁמַיִם כְּסֵאוֹ</p> <p>עֵינָיו יִחַזֵּוּ</p> <p>עַפְעָפְיוֹ יִבְחֲנוּ בְּנֵי אָדָם :</p>	<p>4 I AM is in his holy temple;</p> <p>I AM is in heaven on his throne, (“heaven” = center word)</p> <p>His eyes see;</p> <p>his eyelids test the sons of mankind.</p>
<p>5 יְהוָה צְדִיק יִבְחֲנוּ וְרָשָׁע</p> <p>וְאַתָּב חֲמָס שְׂנֵאָה נַפְשׁוֹ :</p> <p>6 יִמְטֵר עַל-רָשָׁעִים פְּתִיִם אֵשׁ וְגַפְרִית</p> <p>וְרוּחַ זֹלַעְפוֹת מְנַת כּוֹסֵם :</p> <p>7 כִּי-צְדִיק יְהוָה צְדָקוֹת אֲהַב</p> <p>יִשְׂרָאֵל יִחַזֵּוּ פְּנֵימוֹ :</p> <p>12.0 לְמַנְצֵחַת עַל-הַשְּׂמִינִית</p>	<p>5 I AM tests the righteous and the wicked;</p> <p>and those who love violence, his soul hates.</p> <p>6 On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur;</p> <p>and a scorching wind will be their lot. (Ps 1:4-5)</p> <p>7 Because I AM is righteous, he loves righteous deeds;</p> <p>the upright will see his face. (Exod 24:11; Isa 33:13-22)</p> <p>For the director of music. According to <i>sheminith</i>.</p>

“What can the Righteous Do?”

Psalm 11

<p>1 By David</p> <p>In I AM¹ I take refuge. (Ps 2.12)</p> <p>How then can you say to my soul:</p> <p>“Flee to the mountain [little] birdie! [or “Flee like a bird to the mountain”]</p> <p>2 For look, the wicked bend their bows;</p> <p>they set their arrows against the strings</p> <p>to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart.</p> <p>3 When the foundations are being destroyed,</p> <p>what can the righteous do?”</p>	<p>A The King’s Trust in I AM</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The king’s resolute faith <i>contrasted</i> with his advisors’ (plural) fear driven counsel2. Look! The immanent threat of the wicked <i>they have armed their weapons their triggers are set you cannot detect them</i> <i>word play of images– “bend” vs. upright = “straight”</i>3. Their conclusion: Moral and social chaos with no recourse or appeal to a higher court
<p>4 I AM is in his holy temple;</p> <p>I AM is in heaven on his throne (<u>center word of poem</u>)</p> <p>His eyes see;</p> <p>his eyelids test the sons of mankind.</p>	<p>X The Pivot: I AM is Enthroned in Heaven</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. I AM is enthroned, in control, and unperturbed by the apparent chaos2. I AM has the best vantage point “to see” <i>gazing and sifting all mankind</i> 14 + 14 syllables , 6 + 6 words = 12
<p>5 I AM tests the righteous and the wicked,</p> <p>those who love violence, my soul hates.</p> <p>6 On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur;</p> <p>a scorching wind will be the portion of their cup.</p> <p>7 Because I AM is righteous, he loves righteous deeds;</p> <p>the upright will see his face.</p> <p>For the director of music. According to <i>sheminith</i>.</p>	<p>A’ I AM’s Execution of Justice</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Examining and sifting at the deepest level (Ps 5:4)2. A fiery judgment that consumes the wicked reminiscent of Sodom and Gomorrah3. Those who remain faithful to do acts of justice in the face of suffering will “see” the face of God <p>The psalm is handed over to the choir director to be sung by faith by all of God’s people.</p>

¹ “I AM” is the translation of “Yahweh” the name of God that denotes his covenant faithfulness to humankind. It is normally translated as LORD.

Psalm 11: Refuge in the Righteous King¹

This psalm, as a psalm of David, must have come from a time when David was hunted down by Saul, “as one hunts a partridge in the mountains” (1 Sam 26:20). The psalm is an *individual lament* with an emphasis on confidence in I AM.

The psalmist encourages his friends to look beyond the immediate, reasonable solution to God who sees both the righteous and the wicked (vv.4-7). This kind of confidence in the Lord can withstand trials, persecutions, and temptations. David knows in his heart that (1) the Lord is King (v.4a), that (2) he examines the works and words of all people, and that (3) he will reward each in accordance with his deeds. The wicked will be destroyed whereas the godly “will see his face” (v.7).

I. Refuge in God (11:1-3)

1-3 David’s confidence in the Lord described in 2 words, counters five lines of fear from his advisors. His confidence is grounded in years of walking with God. Therefore he is amazed at the lack of stability of his advisors. “*Flee like a bird*” (v.1) is an expression of quick escape in search of quietness (cf. 55:6; 124:7).

David quickly dismisses escape, even though it is a viable alternative. His advisors argue against him with facts. **First, the wicked slander him as they stalk like predators for the kill** (v.2). Their tongues are bent like bows; their words are “arrows” against the string. They lie in ambush and with their “tongues” hurl sudden abuse at the godly.

Second, the wicked lurk in the dark. The battle is not in the open, where one can see it. So it is under the cover of evil. It is pervasive and yet not easy to spot. The wicked are deceptive and filled with treachery.

Third, the foundations are destroyed. The word “foundations” (*shath oth*) occurs only here with this meaning (elsewhere “buttocks,” 2 Sam 10:4; Isa 20:4). The “foundations” appear to be a metaphor for the order of society (75:3 [NIV, “pillars”]; 82:5; Ezek 30:4): the “established institutions, the social and civil order of the community” (Briggs, 1:89-90). This order has been established by the Lord at creation and is being maintained, as H.H. Schmid puts it: “All factors considered, the doctrine of creation, namely, the belief that God has created and is sustaining the order of the world in all its complexities, is not a peripheral theme of biblical theology but is plainly the fundamental theme” God’s justice and law are being replaced by human autonomy and its resultant anarchy.

Fourth, the wicked are fully intent on making anarchy the way of life. They haunt the “upright in heart” (*yishre-leb*), that is, those who are characterized by their integrity.

Perhaps David is disconcerted with his own thoughts, as he speaks to himself. A tension has developed. There are two kinds of responses to the immediate threat: **escape or refuge**. It seems that reason dictates *escape*. The godly seem to be powerless against such treachery. In view of this, he asks, “What can the righteous do?” The psalmist has already answered this counsel by his personal expression of trust: “In I AM I take refuge” (v.1). The emphatic “in I AM” is reflected in the NIV. Trust and confidence in the Lord mark this psalm (cf. vv.4, 7), **not escape, but asylum with God!**

¹ Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, [EBC](#) 5; ed. Frank E. Gaebelein and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), paragraph 26272.

II. Yahweh Is the Righteous King (11:4-6)

4-5 The psalmist looks beyond both his advisors and his enemies to the Lord, raising his eyes to heaven. God's palace is in heaven (18:6; 29:9; Mic 1:2; Hab 2:20)! God is "holy," and from his throne in heaven he sees all mankind. The "throne" of God is a symbol of his royal rule and authority to judge (cf. 9:7; 47:8; see the appendix to Ps 5: Yahweh Is King).

The Lord's eyes "test" mankind as he patiently observes their feverish activities (MT, "his eyes see, his eyelids examine the sons of man," v.4b). The "eyelids" (or "pupils") are here a synonym for eyes (hence NIV, "He observes ...; his eyes"). Craigie argues persuasively for retaining the translation "eyelids": "Thus, although it is clear that in prosaic terms the word ... in this context means 'his eyes,' the poetic brilliance may lie precisely in the fact that the poet used the term 'eyelids'" (*Psalms 1-50*, p. 132).

עוף - q. fly; pol. fly about; hitpol. fly away; עוף (ʿōp), nom. bird; עֵפְעָפַיִם (ʿapʿappayim), eyelids

OT1. The vb. denotes a movement, frequently a very rapid movement, and refers variously to forces who "swoop down" on their enemies (Isa 11:14), arrows (Ps 91:5), birds (Gen 1:20; Deut 4:17; Hab 1:8), the days of one's life (Ps 90:10), dreams (Job 20:8), clouds (Isa 60:8), locusts (Nah 3:16), a flying scroll carrying away the curse and the accursed (Zech 5:1, 2; Curse), riches (Prov 23:5), seraphim (Isa 6:2), serpents (Isa 14:29), sparks of fire (Job 5:7), sword (Ezek 32:10, NIV brandish), and Zion's treasure-laden ships (Isa 60:8).

2. The sight of birds in the sky was a marvel for the ancient Hebrews. Far from looking at the flight of birds for omens or signs, they saw these creatures as part of God's creation. Nevertheless, large birds, such as the נֶשֶׁךְ, inspired them with awe. It is little wonder that the way of birds became a metaphor for God's relation with the world. On the one hand, God is awe-inspiring as he makes his entry into the world of creation. On the other hand, God is loving as he cares for his people.

3. In a derived way, the metaphor of flight also expresses something about human kings. But, unlike God, they are all too often characterized as filled with power and pride. Like birds, they swoop on the nations and loot and destroy, as if they were birds of prey. Yet, human kingdoms are also in God's hands. He uses them for his purposes, and he sets them aside in his judgment.

Many of these occurrences are figurative or metaphorical. The images convey encouragement or rebuke and judgment. For example, Isaiah comforts the people with these words, "Like birds hovering overhead, the LORD Almighty will shield Jerusalem; he will shield it and deliver it, he will 'pass over' it and will rescue it" (Isa 31:5).

It may seem that God, by his inactivity, does not care; but he sees and examines the wicked together with the righteous (vv.4-5). The verb "examine" (*b-h-n* "test") denotes the activity of the smith in the process of purifying gold or silver (cf. Jer 6:27-30; 9:7; cf. Ps 7:9). The holy God may not immediately judge the wicked, but his holiness excludes any love for those who "love violence."

6 In his time God will judge the wicked. Then the examination will be by fire, and they cannot stand through his judgment. The “fiery coals and burning sulfur” (brimstone) will consume them, just as it destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Gen 19:24; Deut 29:23; Ezek 38:22). Another image of judgment is the “scorching wind,” the *sharab* or *hamsin* as it is known in Israel today. The hot desert wind blows over the Middle East during the changes in season from spring to summer and from summer to fall. Its effects are devastating, as the beauty of vegetation changes over night into parched, withered plants (cf. Isa 21:1; 40:7-8; Jer 4:11). The wicked will be like the flowers of the field, which are here today and gone tomorrow.

Destruction is the wicked’s “lot,” which translates the Hebrew idiom *menat kosam* “portion of their cup”). It is reminiscent of the head of a household who gives each member a cupful to drink at a meal. Thus God gives the wicked a “cupful” of his wrath (cf. Isa 51:17, 22; Ezek 23:31-33). Even our Lord drank the cup of God’s judgment like a grievous sinner (Matt 26:39) for our sake. Because of Jesus’ work on the cross, God’s patience with evil, Peter reminds us, is an expression of his grace, permitting men to repent. But one day he will rain down fire on the earth and destroy the ungodly (2 Peter 3:7-10).

III. God Is the Refuge of the Righteous (11:7)

7 The “righteous” (*saddiq*) God loves those who do righteous acts (*sedaqoth*; NIV, “justice”; cf. Isa 33:15-16). He who sees and examines all men promises that only the “upright” (*yashar*) of heart (cf. v.2) will see him (cf. 17:15; 63:2; Matt 5:8; 1 John 3:2; Rev 22:4). To see the face of God is an expression of **deliverance from adversity, of close communion, and of the reality of God’s blessed presence** (cf. 23:6; 63:2) in this world and in the world to come.

Reflections:²

1. The psalm is designed in such a way that the word ‘in heaven’, God’s vantage point from where he observes and tests human beings, is positioned in the arithmetic middle of the text and also in the middle of the three words in v. 4b constituting the meaningful centre on word level.
2. The author used special devices to highlight the two middle verselines in the central strophe, v. 4, which constitutes the larger meaningful centre on strophic level. The most spectacular device is that the 12 words of v. 4 have altogether 52 letters, with 26 in v. 4a- b and 26 in 4c-d.
3. In terms of the 67 words of the poem (emended text), the middle word is ‘in heaven’, God’s heavenly vantage point ($67 = 33 + 1 + 33$), but the meaningful centre is constituted by the 3 words of vs. 4b ($67 = 32 + 3 + 32$): **in heaven is his throne**.
4. It is significantly flanked by the *kabod* number 32 on either side, which symbolizes the glory and the presence of God.
5. As Van der Lugt has pointed out, the twelve words in the middle strophe, v. 4, have altogether exactly 52 letters, with 26 (13 + 13) in 4a-b and 26 in 4c-d. This seems to have been consciously devised to highlight the two occurrences of the name YHWH at the beginning of both v. 4a and 4b. The remarkable word order in 4b can be explained as deliberately designed to achieve 13 letters, the numerical value of the word ‘*echad*, ‘one’, symbolically signifying YHWH’s uniqueness. The ‘normal’ word order, $\text{E}y\ll \text{ma HKA} -\text{ab hwv} \text{hy}\tilde{\text{A}} \text{'}\approx\text{s-i} - \text{ik}$, ‘the throne of YHWH is in heaven’, would have 12 letters!

² Casper Labuschagne <https://www.labuschagne.nl/ps011.pdf>

6. It is also worth noting that the central strophe, vs. 4, marks the beginning of the description of what *YHWH* does or is expected to do (vs. 4-7 – column **d**). Several devices highlight this central strophe. Therefore, there is every reason to believe that the author intended the middle strophe, coinciding with the two middle verselines, to be the larger (and a most fitting!) meaningful centre of his poem:
7. the divine name in Ps. 12:6 - see Observation 5 in my Analysis of Psalm 12. For further examples of this particular device, see the General Introduction, "The centre of the text" under "Special devices to highlight the meaningful centre".
8. the plight of the just being menaced by the godless, and in vs. 4-7, the description of what God does. God is not addressed directly; the words of the speaker are directed to his adversaries instead, but naturally in the presence of God.
9. The divine name numbers **17** and **26** have been woven into the text as follows:

vs. 1-3 vs. 3-5 vs. 2-5 vs. 1-5 vs. 5-7

17 words before *atnach*

26 words in total, with **17** before *atnach* **26** words before *atnach*

17 words after *atnach* (MT)

26 words in total.

The use of 38 words to describe God's actions does not seem to have any special significance; neither does the use of 28 words to depict the plight of the just.

The strange placement of the *atnach* (in the middle of a colon!) in v. 5b may be explained as deliberate in order to achieve the divine name numbers after the *atnach* in vs. 2-5 and 1-5.

6. The name *YHWH* occurs 5 times (vs. 1a, 4a, **4b**, 5a, 7a), as in Psalm 12.