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# Psalm 11

## meditation 1— Introductory

Individual psalms have varying authors, dates of composition, genres, original contexts, uses within temple liturgy, etc. Each psalm can be examined as a stand-alone composition in hopes of understanding this variety. Investigations into authorship or date or genre or original context, or temple use of individual psalms are all legitimate enterprises and can yield important and useful insights. However, because we often simply lack the data that would permit us to draw firm, once-and-for-all conclusions about these and other matters, such investigations tend to be highly subjective and always provisional. This is no criticism. Contrary to the desires and claims of some, we are not doing science here—as if “science” is the only legitimate approach to understanding the world around us. So, everyone is welcome to their own insights and to respond to the text and the messages it sends to them in their own unique and individualistic ways. Indeed, the writer of Hebrews suggests that the scriptures are there less to be read by us than to read us.

“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is *a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*”<sup>1</sup>

The reader of my previous meditations on Psalm 3-10 will observe that I now and then delve into such subjects as authorship, genre, original context, temple use, etc.<sup>2</sup> However, overwhelmingly my approach to the Psalms is more holistic and more focused on the psalms and the shape of the Book as we have come to possess it. I explore individual psalms not only as separate units, but as members of a whole. Someone, probably several someone’s knit the psalms together as they are today. Presumably, the ordering of the psalms had purpose and made sense to them. Considering and investigating the purpose and reason behind the ordering of the psalms is, as so many attempts demonstrate, also subjective. That too is O.K.

In my subjective approach to Psalms 3-7, I handle them almost as a distinct unit that addresses the same or a very similar situation. That situation is one of hostile and false accusation against an individual whom, for purely stylistic reasons, I identify as “the Psalmist.” In the midst of attacks upon his character and reputation, the Psalmist calls confidently upon God for defense and offers reasons for his confidence. In doing so, the Psalmist reveals much about the character of God as he understands and experiences it. At the same time and on the other hand, the Psalmist also describes his accusers and the motivations that move them to opposition against both himself and God. In these Psalms, then, the actors are 1) the Psalmist, 2) God, and 3) those who oppose both Psalmist and God.

Whatever, the original *sitz-im-leben* or temple use of Psalm 8, in its present setting, I understand the psalm to represent a sort of apotheosis. In it the Psalmist, always confident in God, finds even greater reason to marvel at God and His trustworthiness. He comes to understand that God’s trustworthiness and participation with humanity extends far beyond himself. It is global.

“YHWH, Our Lord, how preeminent is your fame the world over!”<sup>3</sup>

In my holistic reading of the Psalms, Psalms 9 and 10, once a single psalm, represent an insight that is corollary to God’s participation in human affairs the world over. The Psalmist is not the only one with a

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 4.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I approach Psalms 1 and 2, as so many others have and do, as a sort of introduction to the Book.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 8.<sup>1,9</sup>

committed opposition. It is not only his opponents that oppose God. Just as God’s influence is found throughout the world, so too is the influence of those who oppose the innocent, the downtrodden, the vulnerable, among whom the Psalmist is—and through them, God. With his awareness of the global presence of this opposition, the Psalmist takes time to explore in more depth the nature of this opposition, its activities and its motivations. In doing so, he names the opposition. They are the malevolently immoral.

In so naming them, the Psalmist has returned to the introductory Psalm 1, where he identified the malevolently immoral as standing in opposition to God and representing a danger to ordered society. Indeed, as we discussed in our meditations on Psalm 1, there, in the introductory Psalm, the Psalmist introduced the malevolently immoral before introducing God or the weapon—His word, direction, Tôrah—that God provided to fend off the malevolent immoral.

Anyway, Psalms 9 and 10 are as good a description of the malevolent immoral, the “principalities,” “powers,” “rulers of the darkness of this world,” and of “spiritual wickedness in high places” as anywhere in scripture.<sup>4</sup>

With this introduction, we are ready to examine Psalm 11, its meaning, and how and why it finds its placement and meaning within the Psalmist’s broader work.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: may 14, 2024)*

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<sup>4</sup> See Ephesians 6.<sup>12</sup>

## meditation 2— psalm 11.<sup>1-3</sup>

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the psalmist is challenged to question his trust in god

<sup>1</sup>It is to YHWH that I look for safety.

How, then, can you say to me:

“Flee to the hills, a helpless bird.

<sup>2</sup>Just look how the malevolently immoral draw back the bow string;  
they place their arrow on the string

to shoot from concealment at the truly upright.

<sup>3</sup>When the foundations are being torn down,  
what can the just do?” (author’s translation).

In my holistic reading of the Psalms, these first three verses of Psalm 11 represent a perfect follow up to Psalm 10. After expressing puzzlement and pain at God’s seeming absence (10.<sup>1</sup>), followed with a long meditation—perhaps more akin to diatribe—on the nature, actions, and motives of the malevolently immoral (10.<sup>2-11</sup>), the Psalmist pled once more that God would deliver him from their malevolent machinations (10.<sup>12-15</sup>). He ended with confident assertions that, notwithstanding the commitment of the malevolently immoral to harm others and their power to carry out their commitments, God would respond to the pleas of those victimized by the malevolently immoral—the downtrodden, orphan, and oppressed (10.<sup>16-18</sup>).

Psalm 11 begins where the Psalmist left off in Psalm 10: with an expression of trust in God.

“It is to YHWH that I look for safety.”

This expression of trust is not only offered in response to the challenges posed by the malevolently immoral, who make their appearance in verse 2. It is also offered in response to those who have or seem ready to simply give up the fight and yield to the onslaught of the malevolently immoral. Some, perhaps many, maybe even the majority have observed facts on the ground.

“Just look how the malevolently immoral draw back the bow string;  
they place their arrow on the string  
to shoot from concealment at the truly upright.”

Elsewhere, both before and after this Psalm, the Psalmist makes similar observations.

“But he, will not relent.

He keeps his sword sharpened.

He bends his bow and arms it.

He keeps his deadly weapons ready for use;  
his relentless arrows ready.”<sup>1</sup>

“The malevolently immoral brandish their sword,  
and draw back the bow string  
to bring down the disadvantaged and impoverished;  
to slaughter those who live an upright life.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 7.<sup>12-13</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 37.<sup>14</sup>

To the Psalmist's interrogators, the malevolently immoral look potent, persistent, and protected. The interrogators resort to the metaphor of the hunt. The malevolently immoral hunt from the protection of ambush. The victim does not see them coming. One wonders where these malevolently immoral hunters are concealed. Where do they hide. One suspects that if we were to put such questions to the Hebrew prophets, they would answer, "They hide in plain sight. They hide behind the screen of corrupt laws that transform, as if by magic, evil into good and what is immoral into that which is legal. We think, for example, of Isaiah's charge,

"Warning! To those who issue oppressive statutes  
and continuously write laws that afflict;  
that put redress out of the reach of the underprivileged  
and rob the poor among my people of justice,  
making prey of widows  
and plundering orphans."<sup>3</sup>

What better way to engage in abuse of others than by making abuse legal and righteous through law and government policy? This is part of the brilliance of the malevolently immoral. They turn everything upside down and use the levers of power to do so. Just like the GOP's leading anti-Christ candidate for U.S. president and his disciples.

Yes, in such circumstances, one can easily feel and ask, as the Psalmist's interrogators did,

"When the foundations are being torn down,  
what can the just do?"

There is, the Psalmist's interrogators maintain, nothing to do about it. As Darth Vader so succinctly warned, "Resistance is futile." And so, the Psalmist's interrogators remind him that he is nothing but a helpless bird, subject to the whims of the hunters. The best he can do is run. Head for the hills, where there are fewer hunters.

"Flee to the hills, a helpless bird."

Yes, it is indeed tempting, and often safer, to surrender. To go into hiding. Either actively fall in line with the malevolently immoral, or be complicit through silence and inactivity. These are the most common responses to their temptations, often offered with the utmost self-assurance.

In his celebrated vision of the tree of life, Lehi saw a great and spacious building. This building represented the wisdom and the pride of the world or, put differently, those things in which this world takes pride and in which it is skilled. It would be my view that this building's occupants were the malevolently immoral and those who fall prey to their temptations and wickedness. Lehi saw

"multitudes feeling their way towards that great and spacious building... and great was the multitude that did enter into that strange building. And after they did enter into that building they did point the finger of scorn at me..."

"But," Lehi tells us, "we heeded them not."<sup>4</sup>

Nor is our Psalmist. He is having none of it. He does not buy what the malevolently immoral or those who surrender to them are peddling. He has his own question for his interrogators.

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 10.<sup>1-2</sup>, author's translation

<sup>4</sup> See 1 Nephi 8.<sup>31, 33</sup>

“How, then, can you say to me:  
‘Flee to the hills, a helpless bird.’”

He is not helpless, subject to the whims of the malevolently immoral. He has God on his side. He will continue to trust God, as we will see in the following verses.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: may 14, 2024)*

## meditation 3— psalm 11.<sup>4-7</sup>

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the psalmist responds to the challenge

<sup>4</sup>YHWH is in His temple preeminent.

YHWH is in heaven on His throne.

His eyes observe.

His glances evaluate mortal beings.

<sup>5</sup>YHWH approves of the just,

but for the malevolently immoral, those devoted to violence,

He feels true abhorrence.

<sup>6</sup>He casts down upon the malevolently immoral

coals of burning sulfur;

and a scorching wind is their destiny.

the psalmist's reaffirmation of trust

<sup>7</sup>Because YHWH is just;

because He loves doing what's right,

the upright look ecstatically upon Him (author's translation).

Psalm 11 begins with the Psalmist's response to those who observe the machinations of the malevolently immoral and conclude that they cannot be resisted or stopped. Some who observe these machinations have concluded that any who might oppose the malevolently immoral, such as the Psalmist, are helpless in the face of the onslaught and the total collapse of all that had previously seemed normal and reliable. Even God, it seems to many, is powerless in the face of the onslaught. The Psalmist, however, keeps his eyes on the prize: God and His concern for and action in behalf of those who trust Him.

“It is to YHWH that I look for safety.

How, then, can you say to me:

‘Flee to the hills, a helpless bird.

Just look how the malevolently immoral draw back the bow string;

they place their arrow on the string

to shoot from concealment at the truly upright.

When the foundations are being torn down,

what can the innocent do?’”

God is not like that famous God, Bel, who might nap, sleep soundly, party, become drunken, or be absent as he vacations in some distant and exotic land. He is very much present. He is very observant. He is watching and weighing all that He sees. He sees the machinations of the malevolently immoral. He sees the collapse they induce at society's center. He is appalled at what they do, just as those are who know and live by God's grace-filled instructions for a secure life and an enduring society. God will not remain silent and inactive. The Psalmist has been pretty confident of this. God will act to stop the seemingly unstoppable. But how?

There are times when the Psalmist seems to suggest that God puts a stop to the machinations of the malevolently immoral by letting nature take its course; allowing natural causes and effects to have their sway. “Let them fall prey to their own malicious intentions,”<sup>9</sup> the Psalmist prays.

“The misery he intended for another will come back on him;  
his own violence will come down upon him.”<sup>10</sup>

“Nations have sunk in the very pit that they themselves dug;  
their feet ensnared in the trap that they themselves hid.”<sup>11</sup>

But, here, the Psalmist resorts to something closer to imprecation in which God is far more active.

“He casts down upon the malevolently immoral  
coals of burning sulfur;  
and a scorching wind is their destiny.”

This is about the most involved God has been in direct action against the Psalmist’s enemies, the malevolently immoral, since Psalm 3, when the Psalmist anticipated God

“hitting all my enemies in the mouth—  
shattering the teeth of the malevolently immoral.”<sup>12</sup>

Imprecation will grow in number and severity as we proceed through the Psalter. One does not want to be identified as a malevolently immoral individual. The consequences are severe and lasting. These divine consequences are not indicative of divine vindictiveness. They are less “punishment” of the “malevolently immoral” and more protection of the downtrodden and oppressed who trust God rather than their own devious machinations for security and fulfillment. As we have discussed elsewhere, the downtrodden and oppressed have a right to existence and happiness. It is not divine vindictiveness to protect that right.

God’s judgement, which is fundamentally the protection of the downtrodden and oppressed who trust Him is just and right. It produces profound love and appreciation for God.

“Because YHWH is just;  
because He loves doing what’s right,  
the upright look ecstatically upon Him.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: may 14, 2024)*

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 5.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 7.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 9.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 3.<sup>7</sup>