

Psalm 11

Evening Prayer Monday Week 1

Office of Readings for the Common of a Martyr

Faced with evil, the psalmist refuses to flee. He asserts his faith in God who is just. He is certain that those who live a good life will experience God's presence and vindication. They will 'behold God's face'. The title reads: 'To the leader. Of David.'

The psalmist's life is under threat. People are telling him to flee for his life. The 'me' in verse one translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. See the article 'Being' in the Introduction. In advising him to flee to the mountains they are ignoring the deepest longings of his heart, which take him, not to the mountains, but to YHWH.

He describes the wanton ruthlessness of those who pay no regard to God (see Psalm 1). The 'upright' are those who live honest lives. See the article 'Upright' in the Introduction.

Israel is founded upon faith in YHWH, who cares for the poor and needy. When this foundation is destroyed by the ruthless, where can those who are faithful to the covenant go to find redress?

Praying this psalm as a Christian we are reminded that 'the foundation is Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 3:11).

This is the answer to the question posed in the previous verse. The righteous look to YHWH, the just judge – a theme that recurs throughout the Bible:

YHWH, great in counsel and mighty in deed; whose eyes are open to all the ways of mortal human beings, rewarding all according to their ways and according to the fruit of their doings.

– Jeremiah 32:19

As disciples of Jesus, our lives will be judged by how we respond to him and to his revelation concerning God:

Jesus of Nazareth commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.

– Acts 10:42

**¹In YHWH* I take refuge;
how can you say to me*,
'Flee like a bird to the
mountains?'**

**²For look, the irreligious
are bracing their bow,
they are fitting their
arrow to the string,
to shoot from the shad-
ows at the upright* in
heart*.**

**³When the foundations
are destroyed, what can
the just* do?**

**⁴YHWH dwells in his holy
temple, YHWH, whose
throne is in heaven,
whose eyes look down
on the world, whose gaze
examines the people on
the earth.**

Divine punishment

⁵YHWH tests the faithful and the wicked. With all that he is, he hates the lover of violence.

⁶He will cause coals of fire and sulphur to rain down on the wicked; a scorching wind shall be their lot.

To say that YHWH ‘hates’ is to speak of the incompatibility of certain things with God.

YHWH, you abhor the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

– Psalm 5:6

There are six things that YHWH hates, seven that are an abomination to him.

– Proverbs 6:16

‘With all that he is’ translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. See the article ‘Being’ in the Introduction.

On the subject of divine punishment see the article ‘Anger of God’ in the Introduction. In Psalm 7:14-16 it is clear that we bring upon ourselves the evil effects of our evil actions. Behind the language of this present psalm is the classical description of the ‘punishment’ of Sodom and Gomorrah. Compare the following:

YHWH rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from YHWH out of heaven.

– Genesis 19:24

The streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulphur; her land shall become burning pitch.

– Isaiah 34:9

I will pour down torrential rains and hailstones, fire and sulphur, upon him and his troops and the many peoples that are with him.

– Ezekiel 38:22

Let burning coals fall on them!

– Psalm 140:10

The New Testament employs the same symbolic language:

One of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God.

– Revelation 15:7

I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, ‘Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.’

– Revelation 16:1

They will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

– Revelation 14:10

The key point here is that evil has evil effects. It matters what we do and we cannot pretend that we can do evil and not suffer the consequences.

This is a beautiful and traditional conclusion to the psalm, and the reason for its use in the liturgy of martyrs. We might reflect upon the following:

Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.

– Genesis 32:30

With Moses I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of YHWH.

– Numbers 12:8

In my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

– Job 19:26-27

Jesus said:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

– Matthew 5:8

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul quotes:

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.

– 1Corinthians 2:9

Paul writes:

Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

– 1Corinthians 13:12

We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

– Romans 5:2

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2Corinthians 3:18

Christ in you, the hope of glory.

– Colossians 1:27

⁷For YHWH is just* and he loves justice*. The upright* shall behold his face.