

Psalm 7
Psalm 7
Matthew 1:18-25

“The Refuge of the Righteous”

December 18, 2022

You might think that someone who is so convinced of his own innocence would be defensive when dealing with others.

But in 2 Samuel 16, we hear about Shimei the son of Gera – a Benjaminite – who curses David and throws rocks at him, as David is fleeing from Absalom.

How does David respond to Shimei?

David says:

“If he is cursing because the LORD has said to him, ‘Curse David,’ who then shall say, ‘Why have you done so?’”

¹¹ And David said to Abishai and to all his servants,

“Behold, my own son seeks my life;
how much more now may this Benjaminite!

Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the LORD has told him to.

¹² It may be that the LORD will look on the wrong done to me,
and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing today.”

If I am innocent, then *God* will vindicate me.

It’s not my job to vindicate myself!

We’re looking at the theme of refuge during Advent.

Psalm 7 is the last of a group of five Psalms (Psalms 3-7) that explore the theme of refuge.

Psalm 1 begins with the “blessed man” –

and then in Psalm 2 we see that the Messiah – the anointed King –
is the Son of God,

the one in whom we must take refuge if we wish to be blessed,

“blessed are all who take refuge in him!”

And then the next five Psalms (3-7) explore what it means to take refuge.

So this Advent we are looking at these songs of refuge!

We’ve looked at the importance of complaint and lament –

but today we look particularly at how the LORD is the refuge of the righteous.

When you are innocent – it’s not *your job* to vindicate yourself!

“O LORD my God, in you do I take refuge;
save me from my pursuers and deliver me...”

Sing Psalm 7
Read Matthew 1:18-25

If you recall from our reading in Luke's gospel,
Mary is a relative of Elizabeth (and Elizabeth is a Levite).
We don't know Mary's ancestry.

What we do know is that *Joseph* is a descendent of David.
There are two genealogies in the gospels –
the one in Luke seems to trace his biological descent from father to son;
the one here in Matthew clearly shows the line of kings –
which suggests that this is the way in which Joseph
could trace his claim to the throne of Jerusalem.

I never tire of pointing out that the central point of Matthew's story
is the importance of *adoption*.

Some people think that Joseph assumed that Mary had been unfaithful.
I can only think of one word to respond to that:
Hogwash!

Matthew tells us that “she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” –
and so Joseph – being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame –
resolved to divorce her quietly.
Joseph – after all – is a *just man* –
and he understands that God has claimed Mary for a holy task.
If she is with child by the Holy Spirit –
if her womb has become quite literally a “holy place”
(for those who have been coming in the evening –
think of Leviticus 15)
I have no business going where God himself has dwelt!

But the angel of the Lord comes to him and says, “Woah!
Joseph, you are absolutely necessary for God is doing here!
Without you, this child cannot do what he is called to do!”

Why must Joseph take Mary to be his wife?
Because Joseph is a Son of David.
For Jesus to be the Son of David,
he needs to be adopted by a Son of David.

And Joseph was a just man.
And so when he saw what was the right thing to do,
he did it.

And thus our Lord Jesus was rightly called “the Son of David.”

This is part of why the Psalms are so fitting during Advent –
because as the Son of David – Jesus takes onto his own lips
the first-person singular of the psalms!

Psalms 7 is titled:

A Shiggaion^[a] of David, which he sang to the LORD concerning the words of Cush, a Benjaminite.

What is a “shiggaion”?

The word is only used here and in the preface to the song of Habakkuk 3.
It comes from a root meaning “to wander” or “stray.”
It probably has some connection to the idea of lament.

Because this is a lament which David sang to the LORD concerning the words of Cush –
a Benjaminite.

There is no one named “Cush” in the story of David –
but there are two people with very similar names –

both of whom appear in the story of Absalom’s rebellion:

- 1) there is Hushai the Archite, David’s friend,
who stays behind in Jerusalem to give bad counsel to Absalom,
and thwart the counsel of Ahithophel (2 Sam 17);
- 2) and there is the “Cushite” who is sent to tell David that Absalom is dead (2 Sam 18).

Whether the “Cush” of Psalm 7 is Hushai, or the Cushite (or someone else entirely),
Psalm 7 urges us to hear this song in the voice of David, the King,
as he is pursued by his enemies.

What should you do when you are innocent – and yet your enemies are pursuing you?
The first thing is obvious: “flee to God for refuge” (v1-2).

1. What Should You Do When You Are Innocent? (v1-5)

a. “Save Me from All My Pursuers” – Flee to God for Refuge (v1-2)

*7 O LORD my God, in you do I take refuge;
save me from all my pursuers and deliver me,
² lest like a lion they tear my soul apart,
rending it in pieces, with none to deliver.*

“In you do I take refuge.”

Notice the image!

There’s a lion pursuing me –
who will tear me in pieces if he catches me!

“In you do I take refuge.”

They will tear my soul apart!

And there is none to deliver!

Just imagine being alone in the wilderness –
chased by lions!

As one writer put it:

“I have no warmth, no light, nowhere to turn.
No home. No friends. And now my last ray of hope is extinguished.”

“lest like a lion they tear my soul apart, rending it in pieces, with none to deliver.”

“O LORD my God, in *you* do I take refuge.”

The word here translated “refuge” is found 25 times in the Psalter--
15 times in book one (the first 41 Psalms)

The theme of refuge is one of the most prominent themes in Book One.

But it’s not just about the word “refuge.”

If you look at Psalms 3-7,
you will notice that only Psalm 5 and Psalm 7 actually use the word refuge,
but all five of them focus on the same idea.

“O Yahweh, my God, in you do I take refuge–
save me from all my pursuers and deliver me!”

When you are being chased by lions –
when you are hounded by bullies –
when you are abused and slandered –

the *first thing you do* is flee to the LORD.

O LORD *my God!*

How precious a thing it is to be able to say “my” God!

Of course – this doesn’t surprise you.

I’m a pastor – of *course* I’m going to say that the first thing you do is cry out to God!

So what’s the second thing?

The second thing you do is in verse 3:

Cry out “O LORD my God” a second time!

The first time, you cry out to him as your refuge and salvation.

The second time, you cry out in your protestation of innocence!

Listen to how David says this! (v3-5)

b. “If I Have Done This” – Take a Self-Maledictory Oath (v3-5)

³ O LORD my God, if I have done this,
if there is wrong in my hands,
⁴ if I have repaid my friend^[b] with evil
or plundered my enemy without cause,
⁵ let the enemy pursue my soul and overtake it,
and let him trample my life to the ground
and lay my glory in the dust. Selah

If I am guilty, let me be destroyed!

This is what is called a “self-maledictory oath.”

‘Malediction’ means ‘evil speaking’ –

so “self-malediction” means “speaking evil words against yourself.”

And the form of verses 3-5 is a standard “oath” form in the Bible.

“If so-and-so has done such-and-such,

then let thus-and-such happen to so-and-so.”

God himself often takes self-maledictory oaths –

essentially saying, ‘may I cease to be God if I do not do what I promise!’

Because, quite frankly,

if God ever failed in his promises, then he *would* cease to be God!

And here, the Psalmist proclaims a curse upon himself if he is guilty.

If I am guilty – if I have done evil to one who was at peace with me –
then let the enemy destroy me.

This is a terrible curse!

“Let him trample my life to the ground
and lay my glory in the dust.”

If I am guilty, let the lions win!

Let them tear me in pieces!

To take refuge in the LORD is to seek justice from him.

Notice that David does not say that he has *never* sinned.

Everyone knows that David had sinned!

He’s *famous* for his sins!

Rather, David says, “If I have done *this*” –

If I am in the wrong in *this case*,

then let him trample my life to the ground.

The self-maledictory oath is designed to vindicate the innocent.

The whole idea of a self-maledictory oath

is that you are calling down death and hell upon yourself if you are guilty.
In other words, you *really* shouldn't take this oath unless you are *really* innocent!

Probably you've heard children on a playground say something like,
"cross my heart and hope to die."

That's a self-maledictory oath.

When a child says "cross my heart and hope to die"
they are saying that if they are lying,
they want God to strike them dead on the spot.

When we grow up, it takes a slightly different form.

Now we say,
"I'm telling the truth – I swear to God!"

That, too, is a self-maledictory oath,
calling God as witness that they are speaking the truth –
and therefore, calling upon God to *judge them* if they are not!

We should be very slow and very deliberate in taking such oaths.

Jesus warns us against rash oaths
when he says, "Let your yes be yes and your no be no."
Jesus is not saying that David was wrong for taking a self-maledictory oath.
Rather, Jesus is saying that you need to mean whatever you say –
and so *if* you take a self-maledictory oath,
be prepared to stand before God's judgment –
because at the final judgment, you will answer for every careless word!

So we see in verses 1-5 the two things that *you should do* when you are innocent.

Cry out to God for refuge.
Cry out to God for vindication.

We are usually rather quick to try to vindicate ourselves.

I do that!
I like being right – so I can jump really quickly to show how I was right!

But that's not my job.

Whose job is it?
God says that it's his job!

Look at verse 6: what should God do when you are innocent?

2. What Should God Do When You Are Innocent? (v6-17)

a. "Arise, O LORD" and Judge the Nations (v6-7)

⁶ *Arise, O LORD, in your anger;
lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies;*

awake for me; you have appointed a judgment.
⁷ *Let the assembly of the peoples be gathered about you;
over it return on high.*

Arise, O LORD –
this is the ancient war cry from the wilderness,
when Moses would say as the ark set forth from camp,
“Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered,
and let those who hate you flee before you.”
Just as when the ark came to rest, Moses would say,
“Return, O LORD, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel” (Numbers 10:35-36)

Last week, we heard “Turn, O LORD” (the same word translated “return” in Numbers).
If God does not turn – if things continue as they are – then we are in trouble!

And this week, we hear “Arise, O LORD” (which we also heard in 3:7).
The phrase “Arise, O LORD” and its variants occur more than 20 times in the Psalms

But they are especially loaded up here at the beginning of the psalter.
The beginning of the psalter has a lot of complaints, laments,
and pleas for God to arise and do something!

But there is also a plea for God to “return”!
Notice verse 7 –
“Let the assembly of the peoples be gathered about you;
over it return on high.”

As Moses had said – “return, O LORD, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel.”
But here the Psalmist sees God’s return to Israel as his return to his heavenly throne.

When God is seated on his heavenly throne for judgment,
that is when his people may find justice before him.

Think about the picture here:
God is seated in the heavenly court,
with all the assembly of the peoples before him.
This is the picture of the final judgment – the Last Day –
“you have appointed a judgment.”

Notice – it is a *picture* of the final judgment.
It is not the final judgment itself.
All throughout history there are lots of pictures of the final judgment –
pictures of the day when God will make all things right.
It’s true that in this age, we do not see perfect justice.
But from time to time, we see an approximation of that justice.

When David sat on his throne in Jerusalem – that was a picture of God’s justice.
But then, when Absalom and Ahithophel drove him out –
that picture was cast down and trampled in the dust.
And so David asks God to judge him “according to my righteousness.”

b. And Particularly, “Judge Me According to My Righteousness” (v8-11)

⁸ *The LORD judges the peoples;
judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness
and according to the integrity that is in me.*

We sometimes get so focused on the fact that “all have sinned,”
that we tend to be a little suspicious when people claim to be “good.”

We need to beware of the cynicism of the modern temper.
Postmodernism has a deep suspicion of those who claim to be “righteous.”
It’s really all about *power*, isn’t it?
It would be easy to judge David according to the hermeneutic of suspicion.

We see this all the time with divorce.

You hear that “so-and-so” got divorced.
You will always hear someone say, “It takes two to tango” –
as though both parties are equally at fault.

Psalms 7, verse 8, challenges this way of thinking.
David says, “Judge me according to my righteousness
and according to the integrity that is in me.”

Think about David and Ahithophel.
Or David and Absalom!

When Absalom’s sister, Tamar (David’s own daughter), was raped by her half-brother,
David did nothing.
And even worse, David used his royal power
to commit adultery with Ahithophel’s grand-daughter, Bathsheba,
and then tried to cover it up by having her husband, Uriah, murdered.

So certainly David had sinned against both of these men.

Many have pointed out that David is claiming that *in this instance* he is innocent.
And that is true – as far as it goes.

But as verses 9-11 continue to develop the theme of David’s righteousness,
it becomes clear that he is making a bigger statement as well!

⁹ *Oh, let the evil of the wicked come to an end,
and may you establish the righteous—
you who test the minds and hearts,*^[c]

O righteous God!

¹⁰ *My shield is with God,
who saves the upright in heart.*

¹¹ *God is a righteous judge,
and a God who feels indignation every day.*

First, notice that God is a righteous judge.

He tests the “minds and hearts” –

or as the Hebrew would put it, “the hearts and kidneys”!

In English, you think with your mind, and you feel with your heart.

In Hebrew, you think with your heart, and you feel with your kidneys.

Jeremiah tells us that “the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt,
who can understand it?

‘I the LORD search the mind and try the heart’” (17:9-10)

(These are the same words as Psalm 7 – literally, I search the heart and try the kidneys!).

You are not competent to judge your own mind and heart.

You can easily get caught up in second-guessing your own motives!

I am not competent to judge myself.

But that’s okay – because I am not called to judge myself!

I am called to love God and love my neighbor.

God is the righteous judge.

In a world filled with deceptive advertising – in a culture where truth has perished –
God alone can vindicate the upright of heart.

But as you look at verses 9 and 10, you realize that we are talking about more than just
“in this instance I’m innocent!”

David is talking about how God will establish the righteous, and bring an end to the wicked.

God saves the upright in heart.

So when David says “judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness,”
what righteousness is he appealing to?

Here’s where we start to see what the angel of the Lord was saying to Joseph in Matthew 1!

David claimed to be righteous because he was the son of God.

This is the message of Psalm 2 that we saw a few weeks ago.

Since Israel was called to be the son of God,
and David and his seed were the embodiment of Israel,
the Davidic king was properly called the “Son of God”
–the Messiah (the Anointed One)
Indeed Psalm 8 will speak of humanity in this way:
man was created to be the ruler over all things –
and the Son of David is especially the fulfillment of this.

Jesus Christ, as the divine Son of God, has also come as the human Son of God.
He rules over all things, thereby restoring our place in the creation,
AND glorifying us through participation in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4),
so that we might share with him in the rule of the new creation.

God is a righteous judge.
If he has declared you to be his son–his heir–
then you may flee to him and say “vindicate me, Father!”
Because you have made me your child –
because you have declared me righteous in Christ,
Vindicate me!
Deliver me from my enemies.

After all, think about David!
There was nothing that David did to “earn” his place as a son of God.
He was the youngest son of Jesse—a shepherd boy.
And yet God raised him up to be King over all Israel.
It was all the work of God’s grace.
David is not saying,
“I’ve been so righteous in myself, that you owe it to me, God!”
No, he comes to God as a son to his father,
and pleads “save me from my enemies”

And because God has saved Jesus –
because God has delivered Jesus from death and raised him up to eternal life –
therefore God saves those who trust in Jesus –
those who are united to him by faith.

And, as the Psalmist puts it in verse 11:
God is indignant.
He sees the injustice of the wicked, and it really ticks him off!

Now, it’s tempting to think that God isn’t really all that indignant.
After all, bad stuff – terrible stuff – happens all the time.
And it doesn’t appear that God is doing anything about it!

But that’s where it’s important to notice *how* God expresses his indignation!

How does God bring justice?

That's where Psalm 7 concludes:

c. And Bring Justice upon the Impenitent (v12-16)

¹² *If a man^[d] does not repent, God^[e] will whet his sword;*

The word for 'repent' is the same word translated "turn" or "return."

We have seen the importance of "returning" several times in these first few Psalms.

As we saw last time,

our only hope for salvation is if *God himself* turns!

Indeed, in the Hebrew it is clear that *our turning* from sin to God is based on God's own *turning* his face toward us.

We turn from sin to God –

because God has *first* turned toward us and been gracious to us in Jesus.

But of course, there is another sort of "turning."

Look at verse 16.

The one who does not "return" to God

will have his own mischief "return" upon his own head (v16).

¹² *If a man^[d] does not repent, God^[e] will whet his sword;
he has bent and readied his bow;*

¹³ *he has prepared for him his deadly weapons,
making his arrows fiery shafts.*

In verses 12-13, we see that *God* is the one who brings judgment –

If a man does not repent – if he does not turn back towards God,
then God will whet his sword, and bend his bow.

It can be tempting sometimes to leave God out of the picture.

We prefer to think of God as only doing "nice" things.

But God is not only the judge (verses 8-11),
he is also the executioner!

Psalm 7 describes Yahweh as a warrior God.

His arrows are fiery shafts – thunderbolts from heaven!

But while God is the judge,

he uses very ordinary means of bringing judgment.

Look at verse 14.

¹⁴ *Behold, the wicked man conceives evil*

*and is pregnant with mischief
and gives birth to lies.*

¹⁵ *He makes a pit, digging it out,
and falls into the hole that he has made.*

¹⁶ *His mischief returns upon his own head,
and on his own skull his violence descends.*

How does God bring judgment?
Through the wicked themselves!

In verse 14, we see how the wicked man conceives evil – he thinks out his plan;
he is pregnant with mischief – his plan matures and grows;
until he gives birth to lies.

In other words, v14 points out that the process of judgment begins in the heart of the wicked.

If you conceive evil,
then it is not surprising that you are pregnant with mischief,
and you give birth to lies.

And the lie is by nature deceptive – and even self-deceiving.

The wicked may not *know* that he is carrying a lie.
Absalom and Ahithophel may well have thought that they were doing the right thing!

“David has been such a catastrophe, that we need to save the house of David from David!
Let’s remove David from the throne –
so that Absalom can restore the honor of the house of David!”

But when the plan matures – and it’s time to give birth –
what comes out?

A lie.
Casting David out by rebellion will not bring salvation!

A bad tree cannot produce good fruit.
“But my motives were good!”
“I didn’t mean it that way....”

This is why righteousness is so important!
And so rare.

And that’s really the point of verses 15-16,
where we see that the wicked prepares a trap for himself.
He falls into the pit that he dug!

There is a certain poetic justice here.

Sin always destroys itself.
It may take a while!
But in the end, sin will self-destruct.

Think about how Satan inspired Judas to betray Jesus to his death –
thereby sending Jesus to the very cross
by which Jesus triumphed over sin, death, and *the Devil!*

Satan fell into the very pit that he dug for Jesus!

Conclusion: And So I Will Sing Praise to the Name of the LORD (v17)

¹⁷ *I will give to the LORD the thanks due to his righteousness,
and I will sing praise to the name of the LORD, the Most High.*

Finally, notice *the third thing* that *we* are to do.

The first was “O LORD my God, in you do I take refuge.”

The second was “O LORD my God, if I have done this, let me be trampled”

And now the third is “I will give to the LORD the thanks due to his righteousness.”

How are you doing with gratitude?

Do you *thank God* often?

If you are thankful to God for his glorious salvation,
make a point of telling him so!

If you are grateful for the righteousness that he has made known in Jesus,
then sing praises to his name!

Gratitude is really important!

When we see who Christ is – what Christ has done –
and when we ourselves for who we are – in him –
the only possible response is gratitude.

Thank you, Lord, that *you* are righteous.
And thank you, Lord, that *in* your righteousness,
you did not leave us in our sin and misery –
you did not abandon us to our enemies.

But when we were helpless – while we were sinners –
Christ died for us – the righteous for the ungodly –
in order that he might bring us to you.

Thank you for your steadfast love.

Thank you for your abundant mercy.

Thank you that you *will* save the upright in heart, for Jesus’ sake.