



RAY PRITCHARD

**WHEN THE
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How much dynamite do you need to blow up a dam?
It all depends on where you put it.

I learned that from watching a war movie called Force 10 from Navarone.

The good guys (led by Harrison Ford and Robert Shaw) have to blow up a bridge in Yugoslavia that is vital to the Nazis. When they see it, they realize they don't have enough explosives to do the job.

Mission Over? Not hardly.

The men decide to blow up a dam upstream that will unleash a torrent of water that will knock out the bridge. Harrison Ford and Robert Shaw dress up as Nazis, clamber down the steep steps to the bottom of the dam, find the right spot, put the explosives in place, and then turn to leave. The dynamite goes off, makes a huge noise, and nothing happens.

Outside the dam, the rest of the good guys hear the explosion. When the dam doesn't disintegrate, the team turns to the demolitions expert who lights a pipe and says, "Patience. You've got to have patience."

At the same moment, Ford and Shaw notice cracks forming in the foundation of the dam. Then water begins to spurt through the cracks. They run for their lives, barely making it out before the dam collapses, sending an avalanche of water hurtling downstream. When it hits the mighty bridge, the columns sway, then begin to crumble, and finally the bridge collapses at the very moment the Nazis are crossing with their tanks and jeeps.

That's the climax of the movie.

It's a lesson in the power of cracks in the foundation. If you know what you are doing, you don't need an atomic bomb to wreak havoc. A little dynamite in the right place will do the trick. All it takes is a few cracks, well-placed, at the right moment, and the whole thing comes crumbling down.

Those who attacked the institution of marriage laid their explosives in the right place. After the recent Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage, we can see cracks in the foundation with water pouring through. The dam will collapse eventually, washing away the traditional definition of marriage altogether.

Meanwhile, we wait.

That brings me to a familiar question from Psalm 11:3, **“When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”**

We don’t know exactly when David wrote this psalm. Many writers connect it to the time when Saul chased David in the wilderness (1 Samuel 23:13-14), but we can’t be sure. We know the psalm comes at a desperate moment when his enemies seemed to be closing in on him and his friends encouraged him to run away.

This psalm is best known for the question in verse 3: **“When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”** Many preachers have taken this text and used it to show that when the foundations are destroyed, there is nothing the righteous can do. They are left in a hopeless situation.

But that is not what David says.

When the foundations are destroyed, there are many things the righteous can do, but above everything else, they must first get a right view of God.

I am writing this message in light of the recent Supreme Court ruling that legalized gay marriage in all 50 states. *It’s not that we didn’t see it coming.* The larger culture has been trending that way for years. But the speed of the change was shocking. Many Christians feel that this decision signals a decisive attack on the foundations of society itself.

I happen to agree with that assessment and believe that hard times are upon us. *When a nation celebrates what God condemns, judgment from on high must eventually come.* No one can say how or when or where that judgment will come. But as certainly as God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, as certainly as the great empires of history have fallen, America will not escape God’s judgment.

Our Commitment

As we look at the first three verses that describe David’s predicament, let’s consider the commitment we must make as we face an uncertain future.

We Will Not Flee

“I have taken refuge in the Lord. How can you say to me, ‘Escape to the mountain like a bird!’” (v. 1)

It is not wrong to flee persecution. Jesus told his disciples, **“When they persecute you in one town, escape to another”** (Matthew 10:23). The brave Christians in the Middle East who face beheading by ISIS are not wrong to flee.

But sometimes you can’t escape, and sometimes the Lord calls you to stand and face whatever comes. *God’s people are not required to prove their faith by staying in one place when they could save their lives by fleeing to the countryside.* After all, David hid from Saul for years until the time came for him to become king.

But there are times when we must not flee. *Sometimes you have to stand and fight.* This is one of those moments. When David’s friends encouraged him to flee the country, he replied, “I have taken refuge in the Lord.” If God cannot protect him, then running to Egypt won’t keep him safe. I apply that same principle to the current moral crisis in America. I have no doubt that things will get worse in the near future. Open hostility toward Christians will increase. Some will lose their jobs because of their convictions. Others will find their careers stymied because of overt anti-Christian hatred. Some will face huge fines (like Aaron and Melissa Klein, the bakers in Oregon who refused to bake a cake for a lesbian wedding) for standing up for their convictions. Churches will face the loss of tax exemption. Increasingly believers will be marginalized and ridiculed. Christians who dare to speak out against the prevailing tide will be vilified on social media. Some will receive threatening phone calls. They will discover that other Christians don’t want to be around them.

We will no doubt be disappointed by evangelical leaders who cave to the gay marriage position. Suddenly they will discover biblical support for two men getting married that no Bible scholar had discovered in the previous 2000 years. Their itching ears will lead them away from the Bible into the depths of moral compromise. Professing themselves to be wise, they will become fools.

All of this was foretold in the New Testament. Truly the “perilous times” of 2 Timothy 3 are upon us.

How will we respond?
Will we run and hide?
Will we flee from the battle?

Sometimes you have to stand and fight.
You may lose the battle.
You may be wounded.
You may not survive.

We have to stand and fight for what we believe.
We leave the results in God’s hands.
As they say in the Coast Guard, “You have to go out. You don’t have to come back.”

This is no time to flee, and there is no place to go anyway.

We Will Not Fear

“For look, the wicked string the bow; they put the arrow on the bowstring to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart” (v. 2).

David is being quite literal. At one point Saul tried to kill David with a spear. Later he sent his army after him. The arrows they were shooting were not metaphorical. When those arrows hit, they drew blood.

In response to the Supreme Court ruling, a group of evangelical leaders issued a statement called “Here We Stand: An Evangelical Declaration on Marriage.” (You can find it online at www.erlc/erlc/herewestand.) The statement begins with these words:

As evangelical Christians, we dissent from the court’s ruling that redefines marriage. The state did not create the family, and should not try to recreate the family in its own image. We will not capitulate on marriage because biblical authority requires that we cannot.

When the state issues a decree that profoundly opposes what God has said, we have no choice but to dissent publicly. As one of the signers of that document, I have no illusions about the battle we are in or the opposition we will face. But truth is not a popularity contest. It is important for Americans to know that we will not cede to the courts the right to redefine marriage in our society.

It’s always good to know what you are up against. That way you won’t be surprised when trouble comes.

We Will Not Fret

“When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (v. 3)

The word translated “foundations” refers to the moral and spiritual underpinnings of any society. What can the righteous do when the foundations crumble beneath them?

Do they quit?
Do they despair?
Do they run away?
Do they become bitter?
Do they resort to violence?

For Christians in the Middle East, this is not a rhetorical question. What do you do when your community is destroyed by ISIS?

Christians in America now face that question in a completely different way. The foundations are being destroyed before our eyes. When you see the White House lit up in rainbow colors, you know we are seeing Romans 1 come true in our day.

What will the righteous do?
What can we do?

What do you do when the foundations are destroyed? Answer: It all depends on how big your God is.

If you’ve got a small God, you’ve got a big problem.
If you’ve got a big God, you’ll be okay even when the bad guys seem to be winning.

Our Confidence

Notice what David doesn’t say. He doesn’t call for the army to mount an offensive. He doesn’t say, “Let’s run for the hills.” He doesn’t raise money for a big political campaign. In modern terms, he doesn’t organize a social media blitz.

For David (and for us) it’s not about the *what*; it’s about the *who*. To be sure, tactics matter. *There is certainly a time to go to war to protect your nation.* We’ve seen clearly that it matters greatly who occupies the White House. There can be no doubt that social media played a big part in the recent changes in American attitudes about gay marriage.

But in times like these, we need God first and foremost. When the foundations are being hacked away, we’ve got to go back to the First Principles. That’s what David does in verses 4-7.

God’s Presence

“The Lord is in His holy temple; the Lord’s throne is in heaven” (v. 4).

This is David’s way of saying God is everywhere. He is sovereign over the whole universe. *I admit that it doesn’t always look that way.* When you read the headlines, it can seem as if the whole world is spinning out of control. We know ISIS wants to attack America. With the rising spiral of violence in our world and our own slippery slide into the pit of moral corruption, it’s easy to conclude that God either is not on his throne or he doesn’t care what happens on the earth or perhaps there is no God at all.

But right at this point we see the fundamental difference between a believer and an unbeliever. We believe there is a God who sits on the throne of the universe, a God who is absolutely sovereign, a God whose ways are far above our ways, a God to whom the whole human race must someday give an account.

Was God shocked by the murders in Charleston?
Was God caught by surprise by the crisis in Greece?
Was God unprepared for the Supreme Court decision?

The answer to all such questions is a resounding no. Our God is never surprised, never asleep, never startled by evil, never shocked by natural disasters, and never astonished by Supreme Court decisions.

I have been thinking lately of what one of my Greek teachers in seminary liked to say. Dr. S. Lewis Johnson remarked that the hardest verse in the Bible to believe is Genesis 1:1, **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”** “If you can believe that,” Dr. Johnson said, “you won’t have any trouble with the rest of the Bible.” The truth of that statement eluded me for a long time. I couldn’t get it because I had never really thought about Genesis 1:1 in its larger context. *But it is hugely important that the Bible begins with a declaration, not an argument.* The Bible simply declares that God is, and that he created all things. Twenty years ago Dr. E. V. Hill preached a powerful sermon at a Promise Keepers gathering in Chicago. In his own unforgettable style, he preached for 40 minutes on just two words: “God is.” He said it over and over again. He whispered it and he shouted it. He illustrated it, declared it, proclaimed it, and dared anyone to deny it. It wouldn’t seem likely that you could preach that long on just two words, but he did, and when you think about it, you could preach a lot longer when your topic is as profound as “God is.” Once you get it settled in your heart that “God is,” a lot of other problems will be solved as well.

Perhaps we should keep Isaiah 6 in mind. That magnificent passage begins with the words “In the year that King Uzziah died.” That note is important because Uzziah was one of the best kings Judah ever had. When he died, the nation was plunged into turmoil. A golden age in Israel’s history was drawing to a close. Would the people continue to walk with God or would they return to idolatry? In that fateful moment, Isaiah came face to face with the living God. He says it this way: **“I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple”** (Isaiah 6:1).

Where is God? He’s not nervously pacing heaven wondering, “Who will I get to replace Uzziah?” Not at all. At that critical moment, God is where he has always been. Seated on his throne.

God’s Judgment

“His eyes watch; He examines everyone. The Lord examines the righteous and the wicked. He hates the lover of violence. He will rain burning coals and sulfur on the wicked; a scorching wind will be their portion” (vv. 4-6).

No one gets away with anything.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it this way: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Though the wheels of God grind slowly, they grind exceeding small. Be sure your sin will find you out.

These words of David remind us that there is a solemn and eternal difference between the righteous and the wicked. That difference is sometimes easy to see in this life, sometimes not so easy. Suppose you go to a football game and look up in the stands. It’s easy to tell who is rooting for the Bears and who is rooting for the Packers. *The fans let you know which side they are on.* But spiritual allegiance isn’t always easy to determine. Suppose you go to a cemetery and walk around. In that quiet, peaceful setting, saints and sinners rest side by side, six feet under the green grass. You can’t tell the righteous from the wicked simply by reading the gravestones.

But God knows.
That’s the whole point of these verses.

God sees everything. He reads every heart, knows every thought, hears the words whispered in the darkness, and he knows us better than we know ourselves.

A day of judgment is coming for those who mock God and reject his Word. In an image that reminds us of Sodom and Gomorrah, God promises to rain burning coals and sulfur on the wicked. The scorching wind of judgment will wipe the smile off their faces.

We dare not water down these solemn words.

God’s Deliverance

“For the Lord is righteous; He loves righteous deeds. The upright will see His face” (v. 7).

The Lord stands up for those who stand up for him.
He takes the side of those who side with him.

David stands on the peak of faith and says, “Though the battle may be hot and we may be surrounded, God will win in the end.” *This is the true position of those who believe God and his Word.* I have told and retold the story of Richard John Neuhaus, founder of *First Things* magazine, and a valiant defender of the moral and spiritual values of the Christian faith. When he arrived in a city in Pennsylvania for a speaking engagement, the man who picked him up at the airport was bemoaning the sorry state of affairs in American culture and how bad the times were. After listening for a while, Neuhaus finally replied:

“These may be bad times, but they are the only times we are given.
Remember, hope is still a Christian virtue, and despair is a mortal sin.”

He's right on all counts. These are bad times because our leaders are spiritually corrupt and morally blind. But why should we despair? If God is on the throne, then we should rejoice because these are our times. We don't have to ask, "What will America be like in a hundred years?" The great good news is, I don't have to stay alive for another hundred years because I serve a God who is eternal. He will still be on the job long after I go down to the grave. *That's David's final answer to the many perplexing problems of this life.* Those who know and love the Lord will see his face. We will behold the Lord in the most personal way possible.

Today we walk by faith.
Today we stumble along through this life.
Today we struggle.

But today is not the last day. *There is a better day coming for the people of God when all will be made right.* Between now and then we will have many days when the foundations seem to be crumbling around us and the wicked rise up and threaten us.

But the wicked will not have the last word. Those who scoff at the Lord and his Word will be consumed with the fire of God's judgment. Between now and then we move forward by faith, believing that our trials are sent by God to improve us, not to destroy us.

Take the long view because we're in this for the long haul. Let's go back to that question in verse 3 for a moment:

"When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

Make no mistake. The foundations are being destroyed right in front of our very eyes. Long-held moral values are being jettisoned in favor of a new morality that is really no morality at all.

What can the righteous do?

I have no political advice to offer even though I'm in favor of political action. Christians need to take their convictions with them into the voting booth. We ought to write letters, speak out, refuse to be intimidated, support good candidates, and run for office ourselves. I'm not in the "roll over and play dead" category.

We cannot retreat, and we will not run away.
We will not give in to fear.

When the foundations are being destroyed, we need a fresh view of God and a long view of history. The God who sees all things will judge the wicked and bring them down in the end, and the righteous will see God's face.

Earlier I mentioned the "Here We Stand" statement signed by many evangelical leaders. The statement ends this way:

Outrage and panic are not the responses of those confident in the promises of a reigning Christ Jesus. While we believe the Supreme Court has erred in its ruling, we pledge to stand steadfastly, faithfully witnessing to the biblical teaching that marriage is the chief cornerstone of society, designed to unite men, women, and children. We promise to proclaim and live this truth at all costs, with convictions that are communicated with kindness and love.

That strikes the right balance for all of us in these difficult days. How then should we live? As I ponder that question, I keep coming back to the same conclusion. I can summarize it in three words. We need tenacious, winsome courage.

Tenacious means we don't give up.
Winsome means we face life with a smile, not a scowl.
Courage means we do what needs to be done.

Tenacious means we keep on keeping on.
Winsome means we don't lose our temper and say something stupid.
Courage means we take our stand for the truth.

Tenacious means we keep on praying.
Winsome means we are cheerful when others attack us.
Courage means we do hard things without complaining.

Tenacious means we love people anyway.
Winsome means we display grace under pressure.
Courage means we speak up instead of wimping out.

Fear not, child of God. No one knows what will happen tomorrow. But our God is faithful to keep every one of his promises.

Don't be discouraged, not even a little bit. In this hour of moral crisis, God has opened a huge door for gospel proclamation. When the foundations of society are destroyed, we can say to men and women everywhere, "Christ is the firm foundation, the cornerstone that will never be shaken."

Let's wrap up this message with a good prayer for all of us:

"Lord, grant me tenacious, winsome courage as I go through this day. When I am tempted to give up, help me to keep going. Grant me a cheerful spirit when things don't go my way. Give me the courage to do whatever needs to be done. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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