

“Take Refuge in God”

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I want to start this morning by talking about the mountain.

Do you know about the mountain? Not the mountain as in going up to Boone or Blowing Rock, but rather the mountain that I heard so much about in ministry on the college campus.

The mountain is an image that is often used to describe religions and the idea that, “all religions lead to the same destination.” The metaphor of the mountain says that “each faith tradition has a different starting point and path” but ultimately ends up at the same place, all converging at the top. The idea is that all religions end up at the same place of “loving others” and “doing good.” This is the mountain and while it seems like a generous way of understanding religions and avoiding conflict, it is actually a rather painful way of understanding religion. It does not honor the actual teachings of each religion or respect the people who practice those religions.

One way this got played out on the college campus, was that one of my students was asked to pray at baccalaureate, but she was told not to say the name of Jesus. It may seem like a small thing, but she always prayed to Jesus. Her prayer was no longer going to be her prayer. What was intended to bring religious freedom led rather to the rejection of genuine religious expression.

I am indebted to author Skye Jethani for so many of these ideas. In his book *With*, he wrote, “Not only does this view (of the mountain) fail to honor each religion’s teachings, culture, and history of formation, but it seriously misses the common human longing from which all religions emerge.”

And here is one of the most helpful ideas I have ever read: You see, world religions do not all point to the same place, rather they all start in the same place, with the same problem.

The problem is that we live in a world where bad things happen, injustice and racism, cancer and divorce, and much more. In the language of the bible, we live after Eden, and we are all afraid.

And when we feel afraid, we seek control. We look for ways to control the chaos, to protect ourselves, and avoid evil and that is where religion comes in. Religion is a way to make sense of the world and often a way to try to gain control in the midst of chaos.

A more accurate image would be to flip the mountain. Instead of leading to the same place, all religions start in the same place with the same problems, but end up in very different places.

You and I live in a world with problems, pain, and evil. How will we deal with that? What do we do with our fear? What path should we take?

Maybe unsurprisingly, I want to invite you to turn to Jesus, to the God revealed in the bible, to take the same path David took 3,000 years ago. If you have your bible or want to turn in the pew bible, turn to Psalm 16.

Psalm 16 begins this way

*1 Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge.*

David begins by asking God to protect him, to keep him safe. And at risk of stating the obvious, the only reason for David to start a prayer this way, first thing, is that he is danger, he is not safe.

Now, we do not know the occasion for this song, for this prayer, but, as we talked about two weeks ago, David did not have an easy life. He spent years on the run from Saul. He spent decades of his life at war. David knows very well that we live in a world of pain and evil.

And in the midst of the chaos of his life, he paused and wrote this prayer, "Keep me safe, my God" because he says, "for in you I take refuge."

David had chosen a path for his life, a way to deal with the fear in his life. He chose God to be his refuge in the chaos.

This theme of God being David's chosen refuge is repeated over and over again in the Psalms

*Psalm 9:9 - The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.*

*Psa. 18:2 - The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*

When things are out of control, there is a place to hide, there is a safe place under God's protection.

"In you I take refuge," is a beautiful idea, but what does that actually mean? What does it mean that David took refuge in God?

I like that idea, but this is more than an idea. To take refuge in God is an action, or maybe better said, a number of actions. David, in the rest of Psalm 16, describes a path to walk, a way to live.

To take refuge in God is not just something that happens by magic. It is not like in the first Matrix movie, if you know it, Neo and Trinity are in the Matrix, the computer world and they are on the top of a building, running for their lives from Mr Smith, and there only hope of escape is a helicopter, except they don't how to fly a helicopter, so Trinity radios Tank who uploads into Trinity's brain the directions for flying a helicopter, and after some eye twitching, she instantly becomes an expert pilot.

That is not how life with God works. Ideas do not just get downloaded into our brains and then we live them. Imagine, you need patience, download, okay now you are patient. That would be awesome, but that is just not how it works.

To take refuge in God is a beautiful idea, but it is something that David had to do. It is something that we can and should do.

For the rest of our time, I want to walk through the 8 small and meaningful ways we see David take refuge in God in Psalm 16. I know that 8 is a lot, but this chapter is a buffet of ways to find safety in God. My hope is that as we talk through the ways David took refuge in God that you will emulate one or two of his practices this week and begin to take refuge in God.

First and this is a bit unspoken, but David acknowledges that most of the circumstances of his life are outside of his control. It may be that the circumstances of his life made that very obvious, but this is an important step.

Most things in our lives are outside of our control. To be clear, we have control over our lives, we have agency and choices and that is an amazing gift from God. In the United States, we have this high value for individualism and freedom and choosing our destiny. You can and do have choices. The problem is that we have less control over our lives than we wish we did.

One study I heard about this week was a study of Americans that determined that we have 15% percent of the control over our lives we think we do.

We have control just not much of it. Two Wednesday's ago, I took some time alone with God and just began to write out the things that I do not have control over. My kids are having great school experience, but kids can change and be horrible to each other for no reason at any moment. Watching a friend's health crisis and the hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of health expenses, I cannot ensure financial security. I can't make that happen. I cannot heal broken marriages or give people faith. I cannot assure my health or my family's health.

O God, keep me and the people I love safe. So first, acknowledge that your life is outside of your control, maybe make a list. And then David asks God to keep him safe.

When David came face to face with the chaos of life, he *prayed*.

And embarrassingly that is not my first response. When I feel the chaos of life, I eat my feelings and then over exercise, or I spend hours distracting myself on my phone or listening to podcasts, all kinds of things to distract myself or medicate my fear. Only after all of these things do I pray. One way to take refuge in God is to pray first, but even if you pray last, the path to refuge in God is to pray. Pray "God save me."

And it really can be that simple. Often, we don't pray because we think we have to pray "the right way." But that is a lie. Pray. Simply and directly, ask God for what you want. God keep me safe.

Taking refuge is something we do. We take refuge in God by acknowledging how much of life is out of our control and by praying to God.

David goes on in v.2, I say to the Lord, *"You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing."*

Action 3, David *acknowledges that God is the source of all the good things in his life*. We often will ask if God is good, then why do bad things happen? which is a legitimate question. But so is the question, if we are living on a cosmic accident ruled by the survival of the fittest, then why is their beauty? Why should we care about human rights and the needs of the poor? What is the point of art and creativity? Why do the mountains leave us speechless? And good friends make us smile? Why does real love make our hearts skip a beat?

Because God is real and he has put in the world beauty and truth and goodness. This week is a great week to acknowledge this. One way to take refuge in God is to acknowledge God as the source of everything good and say thank you. Thank you God...

David goes on and says,

*3 I say of the holy people who are in the land, "They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight." 4 Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips.*

The Hebrew here is a bit confusing, but ultimately what David is saying is that *he joins the holy people, the saints in the land in their worship of God alone*. We gather together on Sunday mornings for worship and all week long in small groups and in part this is us hiding in God. We worship together to remind ourselves we are not alone in taking refuge in God. Action 4 is to worship God with others.

Not only that but we *refuse to chase after other gods*. In David's day, other gods had names like Baal, Asherah, and others. But in our day, other gods have different names. Tim Keller in his book *Counterfeit Gods* makes the case that in our day the counterfeit gods are good things that we make more important than God. He said this may be for us "career, family, children, a spouse, achievement, a political cause, physical attractiveness, romance, human approval, power, comfort, financial security." All of these things, we can make the most important things in our lives.

One small example was this last Monday I had a great day. A friend surprised me at work. Another friend bought me a puzzle which I love. I got to meet with two members of our church who want to start new communities to help grow marriages and encourage moms. It was a great day. And Tuesday morning, I woke up and my only thought was how do I make today like yesterday. I want to feel as good today as I did yesterday. In that moment, feeling good was the most important thing.

And feeling good is not a bad thing, but it is not the most important thing. The most important thing is to be a disciple of Jesus, to love God and others. And some days that means sitting with people in moments of pain. Feeling good can not be the most important thing. So in that moment, I had to say a short prayer of surrender, God I surrender to whatever you have for me today. Your will be done.

So like David, action number 5 is we have to refuse to chase after other gods. To find refuge in God is to surrender to what God has for us, saying not my will, but your will be done.

David goes on to say in verses 5 and 6 that God is his special treasure. Even when David was on the run and lost everything, he had God and that was more than enough. That is still more than enough.

And then in verse 7 David says, *7 I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me*.

*Action 6 is to do what God says to do*. To listen to God's counsel is to do what the Lord says. The Hebrew for heart here is actually the word for kidney, which back in the day was the seat of the conscience. Now we think of our hearts as being the place where our conscience is. David says I take refuge in the Lord by keeping the 10 commandments and the other parts of the Laws. One part of taking refuge in God is to do what God said to do. Jesus in John 15 says it this way

*9 "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain (take refuge) in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.* Number 6 is do what God says to do. Pick one command of Jesus, give something away, pray for an enemy, ask for forgiveness and see if you don't feel more at home with God.

Verse 8 says *I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken*.

*Action 7 David takes is he keeps his eyes always on the Lord*. This is what has become known as practicing the presence of God. All day David thinks about God. One of the wild things we believe as Christians is that God is right here with us all day long, all week long and David has found a way to keep God in his mind all the time. How could we remember that God is with us all day long? One small way is

to pause in the middle of the day and pray. Interrupt your busy day to pause and remember God. Keep your eyes on the Lord.

Then finally action 8 is found here in verses 9-11

*9 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, 10 because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. 11 You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

David says, when I take all these steps and hide in God, my heart is glad. Pause for a second, when was the last time you were truly happy?

David was so glad, he broke out in song and that is not all. David says, I know that the Lord will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will my body see decay. He says he knows his future. He will be filled with joy and pleasure with God. Now these ideas of resurrection of the body and eternal life were not common in the Old Testament at this point. David, in this way, acted as a prophet and gave a glimpse into the future. Both Peter and the apostle Paul pick up on this in the book of Acts. Peter quotes these verses from Psalm 16:8-11 and then says in Acts 2

*“Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. 30 But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. 31 Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. 32 God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.*

The whole story of the bible and the whole Christian faith hinges on the reality of the resurrection. If Jesus was not raised from the dead, then what we are doing is an enormous waste of time and money. And yet, as Peter said a few verses earlier in Acts, God raised Jesus from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. Jesus is alive and there were 500 witnesses. Jesus was the first born from among the dead and now we know that there is something more powerful than sin, death, evil and fear. There is the resurrected Jesus.

This is where the path of Christianity leads, it leads to the resurrection of our bodies and an eternal good future in God’s presence. We said earlier that all religions start in response to fear and the desire to control. And while as people, there is nothing we fear more than death, yet in our story, death is not worth fearing. What David knew and what we see most powerfully in Jesus is that the loving relationship with God that we have now will go on uninterrupted into eternity.

So all that to say, the final way David takes refuge in the Lord is that he *remembers the resurrection* and his good future in God’s great universe. We are invited to think about the resurrection. Think often about the love and power of God. You have nothing to fear in death. What awaits those who take refuge in God is a future full of joy in the presence of Jesus.

There you go. 8 different actions you can take this week to take refuge in God. Hiding in God is not just a nice sounding idea, it is something that we do. Remember the goal is not to do all of them this week, just pick one or two and start where you are. Not where you wish you were. In your real stage of life and with your personality, take refuge in God. Acknowledge you are not in control and pray to God.

Acknowledge God as the source of all good. You are worshiping with others right now. Don't make a god out of a good thing, rather do what God said to do, take a break in the middle of the day and remember God. And think often of your good future with God. What God has begun in you, not even death can interrupt. Take refuge in God.