

Psalms 11:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?

Analysis

If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do? This verse presents the counselors' argument for why David should flee—the very foundations of society are collapsing, rendering righteous action impossible. The Hebrew "foundations" (hashathot, תְּשַׁׁתּוּת) refers to fundamental structures, supporting pillars, essential bases of ordered society.

"Be destroyed" (yeharasun, יְהִרְסֻן) means torn down, demolished, overthrown. The counselors see societal collapse—justice perverted, law ignored, order dissolved. When fundamental structures fail, when evil triumphs, when corruption reigns, what options remain for the righteous? The question implies: none. Flight becomes the only rational response to systemic breakdown.

"What can the righteous do?" (tzaddik mah pa'al, צַדִּיק מַה־פָּעֵל) captures helpless despair. Tzaddik (righteous one) describes those aligned with God's ways, living justly. Pa'al (do, accomplish, work) asks what effective action remains. The counselors see no hope—if society's foundations crumble, individual righteousness becomes meaningless. Better to flee and survive than stay and perish in the rubble.

Yet David's response (verses 4-7) rejects this premise entirely. The true foundation isn't human government, social order, or earthly institutions, but God Himself. "The LORD is in his holy temple, the LORD'S throne is in heaven" (v.4). Human thrones may topple and earthly foundations may crack, but God's throne remains eternally secure. The righteous need not despair when earthly systems fail, because their true foundation never wavers.

This verse speaks powerfully to Christians watching cultural decay, moral collapse, institutional corruption. When foundations seem destroyed—truth rejected, justice perverted, righteousness mocked—the question remains urgent: "What can the righteous do?" The psalm answers: Trust the Lord whose throne stands firm, whose eyes see all, who will judge righteously.

Historical Context

The image of collapsing foundations resonated throughout Israel's tumultuous history. When Jerusalem fell to Babylon (586 BCE), literal foundations were destroyed—temple demolished, walls razed, monarchy ended, priesthood scattered. Lamentations 4:1 mourns: "How is the gold become dim! how is the most fine gold changed!" Everything Israel depended upon collapsed.

Yet prophets proclaimed that God remained Israel's true foundation. Isaiah 28:16 declared: "Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation." When earthly kingdoms fell, God's purposes stood firm. The exile didn't mean God's failure but His judgment and ultimate redemptive plan.

Ancient Near Eastern cities literally depended on foundations. Building on bedrock versus sand determined whether structures endured. Jesus later used this imagery in the parable of wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:24-27)—hearing and obeying God's words creates unshakeable foundation; ignoring them leads to collapse.

Early Christians faced systematic persecution—Roman foundations of law and order turned against believers. The counselors' question seemed valid: "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" Pliny the Younger's correspondence with Emperor Trajan reveals how official Roman authority targeted Christians. Yet believers didn't flee but stood firm, trusting God's eternal throne even as earthly powers crumbled.

Throughout church history, when societal foundations collapsed—barbarian

invasions ending Roman order, Protestant persecution, Communist regimes attacking the church—believers asked this question. The psalm's answer remains: God's throne stands secure; trust Him rather than fleeing in despair. The righteous can live faithfully, pray, witness, and trust divine sovereignty even amid civilizational collapse.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. What cultural or societal 'foundations' seem to be collapsing in your context, and how does this affect your sense of security?
2. How can believers distinguish between legitimate lament over societal decay and faithless despair that forgets God's eternal throne?
3. What does it mean practically to build your life on God as foundation rather than earthly institutions, cultural norms, or political systems?
4. When earthly foundations crumble, what can the righteous do? How does verses 4-7's answer shape your response to cultural crisis?
5. How might fixation on crumbling earthly foundations distract from trusting God's unchanging character and eternal purposes?

Interlinear Text

בְּ	כִּי	בְּ שִׁתְ�וָת	בְּ	יִתְּהַרְּסֶן	אֵל	בְּ	זֶה	אֵת	כִּי	פָּעַל:	מֵה
H3588	If the foundations	be destroyed		what can the righteous		H4100				do	

H8356

H2040

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Additional Cross-References

Psalms 82:5 (Parallel theme): They know not, neither will they understand; they walk on in darkness: all the foundations of the earth are out of course.

Isaiah 58:12 (Parallel theme): And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.

2 Timothy 2:19 (Parallel theme): Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

Psalms 75:3 (Parallel theme): The earth and all the inhabitants thereof are dissolved: I bear up the pillars of it. Selah.

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