

Today's Psalm caught my attention this week. With a LOT of oppressed children in the news recently, how can we not linger on any passage of scripture that begins, "The Lord will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in time of trouble?"

We all know that God is a refuge, a place of safety. Scripture depicts us safely "in the palm of God's hand," or safely "under God's wing." And scripture calls God a "refuge," a "fortress," a "rock," a "strong tower," and a "stronghold."<sup>1</sup> We turn to God when we are in trouble or danger, or just plain troubled by what is happening in our world.

This has been a week for calling on God. My intention isn't to get political, so I'm afraid if I try to characterize what has troubled us as a nation this week, some or all of you will be upset about the words I choose or the words I leave out. What's troubled me this week, though, is children being ripped away from their families, possibly to never be returned to their families.

Some of you, if you had the chance, would say that this has been going on for a long time and to be upset about the practice now is to be politically biased. Others of you, if you had the chance, would focus blame only in the here and now. I'm not ascribing blame, though. What I'm doing is sharing my distress at discovering what's been going on for however long it's been going on for whatever purpose it is supposed to serve, regardless of who's responsible. What I'm doing is saying very clearly (I hope), "What's been done to these children we have heard about in the news this week is very wrong, morally indefensible."

But, are these children the "oppressed" of whom our Psalm speaks?

According to my dictionary, those who are oppressed are "those who are treated cruelly" by those in power. There is no clause in the definition of "oppressed" that would indicate blame. In other words, those who are oppressed can be guilt-free or guilt-TEE. Because the children we heard of this week were treated cruelly, taken from their parents and families with no way of return in sight, they were oppressed.

But were these children the oppressed people our Psalm today is talking about when it says, "The Lord will be a refuge for the oppressed?"

We humans usually think that people who are guilt-TEE **deserve** oppression. God, however, knows that we **all** are guilt-TEE. And God loves us beyond measure, guilt or no guilt. So when scripture says



that God is a refuge for the oppressed, God is a refuge for ALL oppressed, no matter what their guilt-status. This is good because WE ARE ALL GUILTY. And only the one who is without sin gets to cast stones.

Once we stop judging, once we stop ascribing blame to other people, we begin to see that WE are the ones at fault. WE needed to have stopped injustice and cruelty and oppression (NOW and in the PAST). Our failure to stand against injustice and cruelty and oppression in the past should not bind us to the need to do so now and in the future. If we get so focused on ascribing blame that we do not act on behalf of the oppressed, we ourselves have become the oppressors.

What will YOU do for the oppressed this week? Oh, I know. You wonder, “What can **I** do? The problem is so massive, so huge—giant-like, really—what can I do when all I have is this little slingshot and five small stones?” When we think things like that, we forget that God is in the boat with us, God is at hand, waiting to be called upon, waiting to be in relationship with us, waiting to act on behalf of the oppressed and to convict the heart of the oppressors.

Our gospel lesson reminds us that God is always in our boat with us. God’s not asleep, as we suppose, but in our boat waiting for us to call on him. And, like it or not, God is always on the side of the oppressed, always on OUR side unless we are the ones doing the oppressing.

Our Psalm says that those who do not call upon God “dig their own pit,” get so mired in their own thinking they see no need for change. Those who do not call upon God oppress others, trample others, in their frantic efforts to save themselves. Those who live in fear always seek others to sacrifice on their altar of fear, just like those who are drowning grab onto anything or anyone who floats.

God will never forsake those who seek him. So, the answer to my question, “But, are these children who have gotten our attention this week the very “oppressed” ones of whom our Psalm speaks?” depends on whether those children, or their parents and families, called on God to save them.

I think they **did** call upon God. Because God woke up a lot of his people to go help end oppression in that situation. God said, “Fear not, I’m here with you all, here to turn the guilt-TEE into guilt-FREE people, here to turn your attention away from guilt toward actually doing something about these children and doing something about our collective tendency to oppress others.”

And if you are thinking the situation with oppressed children is all over, look around. You will discover there are a lot of other oppressed people, even children (especially children).

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<sup>1</sup> Refuge and strength (Psalm 46:1); refuge and fortress (Psalm 91:2, Psalm 71:3, Proverbs 14:26, Isaiah 25:4); rock and fortress (Psalm 18:2); a strong tower (Proverbs 18:10); and a stronghold (Zechariah 9:12, Jeremiah 16:19)

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