

Psalm 146 warns us not to trust people. Regardless of how trustworthy they are, the psalm warns us that there is a limit to the amount of confidence we can place in any person or thing. God alone is always faithful. That leaves us with a dilemma. We can't fully trust the people and things we see. But we can't see the God we can fully trust. So we tend to keep relying on less than reliable things that are seen. But psalm 146 is a challenge to our faith. It urges us to quit trying to play it safe by trusting what is unreliable. We can let ourselves float free of our supports and find ourselves in God's loving hands.

This challenge was meaningful to the first readers of this psalm. The setting is the Jewish community after the Babylonian exile. Times are not good. The people have been through an enforced exile in a foreign land after being defeated in war. Their restored community in Israel is small. They are still under the control of foreign masters--the Persians.

Where can they find the confidence to go on? They know that there is little point in trusting human leaders. Before their exile they placed enormous confidence in their king. They said that he was the breath of his people's nostrils and worth ten thousand of his countrymen. They said that he has the wisdom of an angel of God. They called the king the son of the Lord.

But how they were disillusioned. Many of their kings were weak and ineffective. Most of them were immoral. So psalm 146 strikes a responsive cord with its hearers when it says, "Put not your trust in rulers, in a son of man, in whom there is no help. 'When his breath departs he returns to his earth; on that very day his plans perish.'" Kings are sons of people, not sons of the Lord. They are as weak and mortal as the rest of us.

So that this community will not be disappointed by another flimsy support, the psalmist tells them to look to God. God will do what kings were expected to do but failed. Kings were the supreme court of their land. As such they had a special responsibility for poor and defenseless people. Those people had little protection against the influential rich. As the highest in the land, the king was responsible to protect the lowest. If rich people were trying to cheat such helpless people in a lawsuit, the king could stop them.

But once again the kings did not measure up to expectation. They did not stop the rich in their oppression of the helpless. So the psalmist turns to God because God is the only one who will carry out this duty faithfully. Unlike kings, the psalmist says that God does execute justice for the oppressed. God cares for unprotected people--strangers, widows and orphans. So the psalm concludes, "The Lord will reign forever." Earthly monarchs rule temporarily. But the only reliable King reigns forever.

We might affirm that thought in word but it's hard to put it into practice in our lives. We have many lifelines that give us temporary support and keep us from having to rely on God. Jeremiah reminds us of some when he says, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches." Wisdom, power and riches are supports. We're sharp enough to cover all the angles. We have power so we'll preserve our position. We have enough put away for a rainy day. Our savings and insurance can meet any emergency. But we're never wise, powerful or rich enough. Somehow these supports don't stand up when certain disasters strike.

Of course, many of us don't even have those supports to rely on. We struggle through life doing what we can to keep afloat. We work hard. We plan ahead. Usually our efforts keep us going. But we're well aware that they may fail. We can't cover every emergency.

Also, we rely on people. We trust our family to give us a firm base of support. We count on the work of fellow employees. We rely on the good will and helpfulness of church members. It's mentally healthy to trust other people. But none of them are infallible.

Then if all earthly supports are insecure, can we trust an unseen God? Psalm 146 assures us that we can. It says that this is a God who "keeps faith for ever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who give food to the hungry." In other words, this is a God who shows good will to people. God meets their needs. God cares for them physically—providing food and healing. God meets their emotional needs--vindicating them when they are treated unjustly, lifting them when they are bowed down with care, freeing them from feelings of restriction.

We might reply, "Well, I know a lot of people who have good intentions too. But good will isn't enough. They can't always carry through on their intentions." To which the psalm replies, this is the God "who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them." Not only does this God have good intentions, God also has the power to carry them out. God's power shows in the world God created and in which God continues to create. God's power and love for us make this a totally reliable Lord.

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