

PSALM 46

A MIGHTY FORTRESS

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God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (Psa 46:1).

Psalm 46 has inspired many Christians in times of trouble and danger. Martin Luther spent his life in constant peril because of the gospel and would turn his mind to this psalm when he was especially disheartened. His co-worker Philipp Melancthon recalls Luther saying at such times, “Come, Philipp, let’s sing the forty-sixth Psalm.” Luther’s famous hymn version of it begins, “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.” Luther commented, “We sing this psalm to the praise of God, because God is with us and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends his church and his word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, and against all the assaults of the world, the flesh and sin.”¹

Christians today continue to appeal to Psalm 46 in times of fear and peril. In the months following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, sermon after sermon was preached from this text. Psalm 46 gave Americans a godly perspective on the memory of great towers falling. “Therefore we will not fear,” verse 2, says, “though the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.” Psalm 46 shows what a difference God makes in difficulty and danger, in short, in a world like our own. The psalm contains three clearly divided stanzas, each of which directs our faith to trust in God.

¹ Cited in Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *A Treasury of David* (Peabody, NY: Hendrickson, n.d.), 1.2.344.

THE CHURCH'S GREAT STRENGTH

Psalm 46 first assures us that *God is the strength of his people*. Verse 1 begins, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” The following verses speak of great cataclysms that threaten destruction – the earth gives way, the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, the waters roar and foam, and the mountains quake and surge (Ps. 46:2-3). Nonetheless, with God as our fortress, the psalmist writes, “We will not fear.”

This description frankly acknowledges that we are weak and vulnerable in the face of any number of dangers. The psalmist speaks of upheavals in nature as a way of symbolizing the entire chaos of the world. They depict great and unexpected convulsions as types of the crises that may strike us as individuals, a church, or a nation. This psalm describes the world in which we live, and if we think we can manage it in our own strength then we have not paid attention to the record of history.

Despite all these upheavals, there is one great fact that makes all the difference: “God is our refuge.” God protects and shields his people from harm. In ancient days, a fortress was a powerful protection. Behind its ramparts, enemies were not able to get through to harm you. In the same way, God protects his people. Just to live near a fortress gave peace of mind; when trouble approached you could run for shelter. In the same way, simply reading these lines gives us a sense of peace and calm, for they tell us that God is near as our refuge and strength.

Many Christians attest to the fortress God is when tragedy strikes. Elizabeth Elliot gives this testimony. Her first husband, Jim Elliot, was killed by the Auca Indians in Ecuador to whom he was trying to witness the gospel. Her second husband, Addison Leitch, died a slow and difficult death with cancer. Elisabeth spoke of both these tragedies in terms of Psalm 46: “Everything that has seemed most dependable has given way. Mountains are falling, earth is receding. In such a time it is a profound comfort to know that although all things seem shaken, one thing is not: God is not shaken.”²

² Elisabeth Elliot, *Facing the Death of Someone You Love* (Westchester, Ill.: Good News Publishers, 1980), 8.

This being the case, churches should ask where they can hope to find our security and strength. Many churches try to gain security by piling up money. They are most interested in endowments and in connections with the wealthy. To be sure, God wants us to give to the work of the church, but money is not our source of strength. Or, we could bring in the most skilled people with the most up-to-date techniques; surely that, we might think, will secure us and make us strong. That is what Israel thought when they anointed Saul as their king – he was taller and stronger and more impressive than anyone else. But Saul was not a man of God and in time the nation was overcome. Yet again, we could trust our associations, seeking to be in the right denomination, with the right doctrine and policies or have the best members to join us. But Psalm 46 insists that none of these can really protect us or make us strong. Only God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in every kind of trouble.

THE CHURCH'S GREAT NEED

The first stanza identifies God as our refuge and strength. The second stanza, in verses 4-7, speaks of God defending his city.

This probably refers to an occasion when a great enemy rose up against Israel, laying low whole kingdoms in their advance. Verse 6 says, “Nations rage, the kingdoms totter.”

Many commentators think this psalm refers to the invasion of the Assyrian conqueror, Sennacherib, during the reign of King Hezekiah (1 Ki. 18:13-19:37; Isa. 36:1-37:38). Sennacherib led a vast army that overran the whole region and then came against Jerusalem. His envoys made mocking demands for the Jews' surrender. But on the advice of the prophet Isaiah, Hezekiah took his case to the Lord. In response to his prayer, God destroyed the Assyrian army in a single night. Isaiah 37:36 reports, “The angel of the Lord went out and struck down a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians.” Sennacherib withdrew in disgrace and soon was overthrown and murdered. This is how easy it was for God to deliver his people. As verse 6 exults, “He utters his voice, the earth melts.”

This makes the second point of Psalm 46: *the church's great need is for God to dwell within her*. Verse 5 explains why Jerusalem did not fall: “God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; God will help when morning dawns” (v. 5). Yes, the church and Christians will go

through periods of nighttime and darkness, but light will come in the morning if God is with her.

Jerusalem was not special because of its buildings, its culture, or its heritage, wonderful as these things were, but because of God's indwelling presence. This presence was visualized when the glory cloud filled Solomon's temple on Mt. Zion (1 Ki. 8:10-11). God dwelt amidst his people and that was Jerusalem's glory. Over the years, however, the people gave their hearts to idols. When they had fully turned away from God, after many warnings, God's presence finally withdrew. Ezekiel tells of seeing God's Spirit rising up and departing from the temple (Eze. 10:18-19). The dreadful word *Ichabod* was written there in letters of spirit – "the glory has departed." Not long afterward, the Babylonians were able to destroy the city that had stood so long. While God was within her, as in the psalmist's day, Jerusalem stood firm; but without God the city was easily overcome. This is a dire warning to churches today, many of which have turned from the true God to the false idols approved by the world. It is also warning to individual Christians. We think we can give ourselves to sin and it will be such great fun, but it never works out that way. The most important thing for the Christians' and the church's vitality and strength is that God should dwell in our midst.

Verse 4 makes a dramatic statement about the blessings of life that come with God's presence: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High." The church in which God dwells is made holy by his presence and is likewise called to a holiness suitable to its God. God's holy presence there is like a refreshing river flowing through his city.

Of all the great cities of the ancient world, Jerusalem was notable for not having been built beside a broad waterway. There was no river in Jerusalem. We are probably intended to recognize this irony, which directs us to look for a different kind of river and to see Jerusalem as a type of the church. Psalm 46 refers to a spiritual stream, the waters of which make God's holy city glad. The psalmist is not speaking about the geography of earthly Jerusalem, but of God's presence with the church of all ages. It is "the city of God" that rejoices in the life that God gives. Regardless of her difficult circumstances or danger, despite our folly and weakness, though we find ourselves in the most

barren wasteland, and though “this world with devils filled,” as Luther wrote, “should threaten to undo us,” nonetheless “there is a river” the streams of which make glad God’s church.

The imagery of a river flows all through the Bible. In the Bible’s beginning, Genesis 2:10 says, “A river watering the garden flowed from Eden” out into all the world. The Bible ends with a river flowing through the holy city yet to come. Revelation 22, the last chapter of the Bible, begins by saying, “The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city” (vv. 1-2).

This is the river to which Psalm 46 refers. It is a spiritual river. It is the river Moses made to flow out from the rock in the exodus. This is the river which spouted from the body of Jesus when he died on the cross. John 19:34 says, “One of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.” Jesus’ last invitation in the Bible in Revelation 22:17 speaks of this river to which all may come to drink: “let the one who is thirsty come,” he says; “let the one who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev 22:17).

What is this river, but the gospel grace of which the whole Bible speaks? The gospel flows through all of Scripture like a river. First come its tributaries in the early promises of the Old Testament. The river grows deeper as the ceremonies of the Law direct us to Christ and the predictions of the prophets speak of great events soon to come. The waters came to a full, brimming stream in the coming of Jesus, when the long-awaited saving events finally happened, then rose to a mighty flood in the apostolic age as the gospel overflowed into every corner of the biblical world. We can trace the river flowing through church history, everywhere refreshing, enlightening, and cleansing sinners by the grace of a loving God. This is the river that makes glad the city of God, by which the Lord dwells among his people as the gospel is preached, received, and relied upon for power and blessing. The gospel is the river by which God’s Holy Spirit comes, imparting to God’s people eternal life and every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Since the gospel is so important, we should be clear about what it is. The gospel is the message of Jesus Christ and the salvation he achieved for us by fulfilling all righteousness, dying for our sins, and rising up to eternal life. Jesus lived the life we should have lived and died the death we deserve to have died. Now Jesus reigns in heaven and on earth over God's spiritual kingdom, sending the Spirit to empower the faith and life of his church. Christ's is the hand that channels the mighty gospel river: it is through faith in Jesus that its waters flow to and through us. The psalmist says, "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress" (v. 7). This is true as Jesus Christ is preached and believed so that he reigns in the church. Jesus is called Immanuel, God with us. When he was in the boat, the disciples were not overcome in the storm. Likewise, when he is in the church as Savior and Lord we never will fail. When Christ reigns in the home there is love and strength. The heart in which Christ dwells enjoys "righteousness, peace, and joy" (Rom. 14:17).

What an encouragement this offers to Christians! Our great need is for God to dwell among us. We have other needs, but this is our true need. God is with us as we hear, believe, and rely upon the gospel, so that his grace flows like the living waters of a great, spiritual river. Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. [It] will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn. 4:13-14).

The gospel is God's provision for every need we might have as a church. Paul writes in Romans 1:16 that the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." I mentioned earlier that the Bible's last chapter, Revelation 22, speaks of the gospel river flowing through the heavenly city. It includes this description: "On either side of the river, [was] the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2). The gospel causes good things to grow in the places where it flows. Through the gospel, the Holy Spirit comes and bears his fruit in our lives: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22). The gospel also brings healing to our wounds and relationships. When we realize that we are forgiven by God's grace, we are eager to grant forgiveness to others. As we are grateful for what God has done for us, we are ready to show mercy and love for others and to offer

our lives in service. With the God of life dwelling in our midst, the gospel river makes glad the church and blesses our lives.

THE CHURCH'S PURPOSE AND WORK

The final stanza of Psalm 46 speaks of the church's purpose and the way it is achieved. The psalmist reflects upon the great victory God has won against the mightiest enemy powers. He comments on the astounding ease with which God triumphed. What is the purpose of this? God says, "I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth" (Ps. 46:10). Here, in the display of God's glory, is the purpose for which the church exists and the ultimate end for which the gospel was given.

Psalm 46 speaks of two ways in which the church serves the purpose of God's glory in the world. The first is through her witness. Verses 8-9 say, "Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire." The psalmist is calling the people to look out from the walls of God's city onto the desolation of Sennacherib's army. God is able to destroy every enemy of his people with just the power of his Word.

"Come and see the works of the Lord" – this is the church's message to the world. "Come and see," says the church, inviting all to look upon Jesus. Christ has conquered sin and death. He has set the captives free. He has given sight to the blind and proclaimed good news to the poor. Jesus has shined a great light to people living in darkness and given power for sinners to live as saints. Declaring this great saving achievement of Jesus is the work of the church.

There is a second way in which the church serves the glory of God. In verse 8 the church is speaking to the world – "Come and see" – but in verse 10 God is speaking to the church – "Be still and know that I am God." Being still does not mean we are undertake lives of mystic contemplation, becoming passive and inactive. Rather, we are called to stand before God and rely utterly on his power. We are to cease relying on our power and our man-made strategies to manufacture success. Instead, we are to be still before the Lord and know that he is God. It is as the church does God's work in God's way, patiently and

happily awaiting his timing for his blessing, that we honor God and bring glory to him in this world.

The way to be still before the Lord is to wait upon his Word. Indeed, all of Psalm 46 is an appeal for Christians to seek God through his Word. How does God's strength become ours? The answer is through God's Word. We read these verses and find that we are receiving the strength of which they speak. How does God dwell among his people today? The primary answer is through the Word he has given and which he attends by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In terms of our calling to glorify God, how do we bear testimony of his great works to the world? The answer is through the preaching and witness of the Scriptures. Finally, how are we still before the Lord, waiting on him? The best answer is by taking our stand on God's Word, doing God's work in God's way, and looking for the Lord to give the power that will glorify him through our lives.

I mentioned the example of Elizabeth Elliot, who found strength from God in light of the death of her two husbands. A more recent example is that of Lisa Beamer. Her husband, Todd, became famous as one of the men who regained control of a hijacked airplane that crashed on September 11, 2001. In an interview, Lisa tells of how she found comfort and strength in God. She says, "I can't see all the reasons [God] might have allowed this when I know he could have stopped it... I don't like how his plan looks from my perspective right now, but knowing that he loves me and can see the world from start to finish helps me say, 'It's OK.'... Faith means that, regardless of circumstances, we take him at his word that he loves us and will bring us to a good result if we just trust and obey him."³ Truly, God is a support for all who trust in his Word. Therefore, we find a refuge and strength in the Lord as we preach, teach, believe, witness, and obey the Word of God.

STANDING ON THE ROCK

Psalm 46 shows us our great need: for God to be with us, our fortress and strength, a present help in trouble. This is a reality for us to remember not only in times of danger but also when the trial has passed, when the electricity has been restored, and when life

³ "Finding Hope Beyond the Ruins," *ModernReformation* Vol. 11. No. 5, Sept/Oct 2002, 25.

seems safe and normal again. We need God as our fortress and strength, and we need to live before him in quiet, trusting submission so that he will be exalted on the earth.

Martin Luther realized his need for God's protection, and he also realized that if God is with us we truly have nothing to fear. But how was he sure that God was with him? The answer is Jesus Christ, God's Son, who came to this world to save and protect all who come to him in faith. Luther knew that the greatest storm is the coming judgment of God at the end of history, when God's wrath will lash out in unabated fury at all who have sinned. That is something truly to fear, and Luther knew that the only fortress strong enough to withstand it is the cross, where Jesus died to put away our sin and restore us to God's love. He also knew that the Savior he found at the cross is strong enough to protect us from every storm. Luther wrote, "And though this world with devils filled / should threaten to undo us / We will not fear for God hath willed / his truth to triumph through us... / his kingdom is forever."⁴

Can you say that? Can you say that you know you will triumph through the worst that this world can give you – even death itself? If not, then your great and urgent need is to be able to say, "The LORD of hosts is with me, the God of Jacob is my fortress." Until you know that, you have every reason to fear the storms that will surely come, of various types and sizes, most especially the storm of God's wrath in the final day of judgment. But if you will come to Jesus Christ in faith, receiving him as God's own Son and your Savior, then God will be with you: God will protect you and provide for you and show you his glory. And though the earth gives way and the mountain falls into the heart of the sea, you will not be overcome, for God will be your fortress. You shall not be moved, for God will help you when the morning dawns.

⁴ Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," 1529.