

Christ's Advent in the Psalms

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

Psalm 46:1-11

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November 28, 2021

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Scripture

Today is the First Sunday of Advent in 2021. The word “advent” means “coming” in Latin. In Christian theology, it refers to the Coming of Christ. Christ’s First Advent took place almost 2,000 years ago. And he will come again for his Second Advent in the not-too-distant future.

This year, I am planning a series of sermons for Advent that I am calling, “Christ’s Advent in the Psalms.” Since Christ is the hero of the entire Bible story, we know that every portion of God’s word somehow points to him. Moreover, the Psalms are the ancient songbook of God’s people and they have something to teach us during Advent.

First, the Psalms instruct us to remember. They help us to remember that God is at work to save his people. In all the joyful or difficult circumstances of life, God’s people remember that God has a plan to save them. God’s timing is hardly ever our timing. But God is in sovereign control working all things for our good and his glory.

And second, the Psalms instruct us to wait. God’s ancient people waited centuries for the First Advent of Christ. But he came in God’s perfect time. We who are living on this side of Christ’s First Advent know that he is coming again. And so we wait with patience and anticipation for the Second Advent of Christ. At that time, he will wrap up history and present the kingdom to his Father. And we will experience the fulfillment of all God’s promises to his people.

On this First Sunday of Advent, I want to examine Psalm 46. This psalm expresses confidence in God in the midst of all

the dangers that confront us all the time.

Please follow along as I read Psalm 46:1-11:

To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamo. A Song.

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear though the earth
gives way,
though the mountains be moved
into the heart of the sea,

³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

Selah

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad
the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.

⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!"

¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah* (Psalm
46:1-11)

Introduction

It is helpful to know something about the titles of some of the psalms. In modern Bibles such as the *English Standard Version*, editors have a brief heading for each psalm. In the *ESV* it is written in italics, and reads as follows: *God Is Our Fortress*. That heading is not inspired. It is a modern editor's insertion to help readers get a quick description of the psalm.

Many of the psalms have a title in addition to the modern editor's heading. In my copy of the *ESV*, the title is written in all capital letters. So, for example, in Psalm 46 we have: **“TO THE CHOIRMASTER. OF THE SONS OF KORAH. ACCORDING TO ALAMOTH. A SONG.”** This title is inspired. It was written by the author of the psalm, and is part of the inspired word of God.

So, with that in mind, let me make a few comments about the inspired title. Psalm 46 was addressed **“TO THE CHOIRMASTER.”** That is something like a “dedication” that one sees at the front of a book or perhaps a musical score. The work is dedicated, for instance, “To my wife.” Here, Psalm 46 is dedicated **“TO THE CHOIRMASTER.”**

Next, Psalm 46 says that the psalm is **“OF THE SONS OF KORAH.”** This is a reference to the authors of the psalm. The **Sons of Korah** were descendants of Korah, who was himself a descendant of Levi. So, **the Sons of Korah** were responsible for ministry in the tabernacle and they were an important company of singers (cf. 1 Chronicles 6:33; 2 Chronicles 20:19).

Then the title of Psalm 46 says, **“ACCORDING TO ALAMOTH.”** The word **“Alamoth”** is related to the word for “maidens.” So, it may mean that this was a female choir, or a band of maidens playing tambourines (cf. Psalm 68:25), or a musical term written for soprano singers.

Finally, the title in Psalm 46 says **“A SONG.”** As you know, the Psalter is both a prayer book and a song book. You can pray the psalms and sing the psalms. This psalm was first written as a song.

Well, so much for the title of Psalm 46.

We don't know the exact occasion for which Psalm 46 was written. I think one commentator rightly states, “But as the crisis is left unidentified, and the psalm ranges far beyond any local situation, there is little to be gained by historical speculation.”¹ He also notes, “Its robust, defiant tone suggests that it was composed at a time of crisis, which makes the confession of faith doubly impressive.”²

Lesson

Psalm 46:1-11 shows us God's supremacy over all things. Let's use the following outline:

1. Our God Is Supreme Over Nature (46:1-3)
2. Our God Is Supreme Over Nations (46:4-7)
3. Our God Is Supreme Over Earth (46:8-11)

I. Our God Is Supreme Over Nature (46:1-3)

First, our God is supreme over nature.

Verse 1 states, **“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”** The word translated **“refuge”** in verse 1 means “a shelter, a rock of refuge.”³ The psalmist is

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 191.

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15, 191.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful*, 1st ed., “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2004), 173.

affirming that our God is a shelter to whom we may flee. Moreover, our God strengthens us in our troubles and crises.

To whom do we turn when we face troubles or crises?

Some people believe their security is in finances. And so they save more and more money in bank accounts, savings accounts, the stock market, and so on. Like the rich man in Jesus' parable, they say, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry" (Luke 12:19). But Jesus said that such a person is a fool, because death will come to that person and he or she will stand before God at the final judgment. Money cannot protect us from God's judgment. It does not even shield us from failure, sin, disease, or disaster.

Other people believe that they are secure because of their education, or talent, or skill, or ability. But even the best-educated and highly talented people may experience a devastating loss or a reversal of fortune.

And still other people believe that they are secure because of family, friends, or connections. And yet, because they are human, they are all prone to fail and disappoint. I was listening to the life story of Chuck Colson, who was special counsel to President Richard Nixon. For several years, he was a close confidant of the most powerful man in the world. But, when the Watergate scandal started crowding in on the president, he offered Chuck Colson up as a scapegoat. So, the best connection in the world provided Colson no security.

My dear friends, there is no comparable security to that which is found in our God. Only **God** is able to be **our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.**

Our God is able to help us even if the very worst imaginable thing were to happen, as the psalmist goes on to say in verses 2-3, **"Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart**

of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. *Selah.*” In ancient times, **mountains** were seen as objects of stability. But, even if the **mountains** themselves collapsed, our God is still supreme.

A virus, like the coronavirus, is not like a mountain. A virus is invisible to the naked eye, whereas a mountain can be seen. A virus moves about, whereas a mountain never moves. The psalmist’s point in both instances still stands: our God is supreme over nature.

II. Our God Is Supreme Over Nations (46:4-7)

Second, our God is supreme over nations.

In the midst of the chaos of nature, **“there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns”** (46:4-5). Here the psalmist is pointing to the city of Jerusalem, and there is even a foreshadowing of the new Jerusalem. The psalmist is saying that believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are citizens of **the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High**. In contrast to the mountains that will be “moved” (v. 2), **God is in the midst of his people in the new Jerusalem; she shall not be moved.**

Moreover, God will judge unbelievers in all the nations, as the psalmist goes on to say in verse 6, **“The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.”** Just as God spoke the present world into existence, he will speak at the judgment and the nations will fall.

This is a warning to every unbeliever. Turn to the Lord in repentance and faith while there is still time. When Jesus returns, all history is over, and God’s judgment begins. There will

be no second chance. And if you should die before Jesus returns, there is also no second chance. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 6:2 (in the *New Living Translation*), “For God says, ‘At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you.’ Indeed, the ‘right time’ is now. Today is the day of salvation.” If you are not a Christian, or if you are not sure if you are a Christian, turn to God in repentance and faith *today*.

The psalmist then says in verse 7, **“The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah.”** This is a refrain that is also repeated at the end of the psalm in verse 11. The **“hosts”** in the first part may refer to the armies of Israel or, more likely, I think, to the armies of heaven. The point is that **the Lord of the armies of heaven is with us**. This is an affirmation of God’s supreme power that is for us. And the word for **“fortress”** in the second part of the verse refers to “a stronghold, a high tower.”⁴ The reference to **“Jacob”** has to do with God’s chosen one. In other words, the second part of verse 7 is a reference to God’s grace that protects his beloved chosen ones.

So, our God is supreme over nature and nations.

III. Our God Is Supreme Over Earth (46:8-11)

And third, our God is supreme over earth.

The third stanza of Psalm 46 is a vision of things that are yet to come. It pictures the outcome of God’s judgment over the earth. The psalmist bids us to see what he sees in verses 8-9, **“Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the**

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful*, 1st ed., “Be” Commentary Series, 173.

spear; he burns the chariots with fire.” This is a picture of God’s victory over the entire earth.

And then, God speaks in verse 10, **“Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”** When I was a young Christian, the first part of verse 10 was often the verse that was used to urge me (and other Christians) to have a Quiet Time. **“Be still.”** Be quiet. Stop everything you are doing. And then you will **“know that I am God.”** But that is not what God is saying here. Instead, God is shouting to everyone, “Shut up! Be quiet!” Then he goes on to affirm that he alone is God. And God concludes with this powerful affirmation, **“I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”** The final purpose is not our ultimate comfort but God’s glory.

The psalmist then closes the psalm with a repeat of the refrain of verse 7 in verse 11, **“The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah.*”** The psalm closes with an affirmation of God’s power and his grace.

So, our God is supreme over nature and nations and earth.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the supremacy of God over nature, nations, and earth in Psalm 46:1-11, let us affirm that God is our refuge and strength.

Robert Morgan, in his book titled *Then Sings My Soul Special Edition: 150 of the World’s Greatest Hymn Stories*, writes:

We think of Martin Luther as a great reformer, Bible translator, political leader, fiery preacher, and theologian. But

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he was also a musician, having been born in an area of Germany known for its music. There in his little Thuringian village, young Martin grew up listening to his mother sing. He joined a boys' choir that sang at weddings and funerals. He became proficient with the flute (recorder), and his volcanic emotions often erupted in song.

When the Protestant Reformation began, Luther determined to restore worship to the German Church. He worked with skilled musicians to create new music for Christians, to be sung in the vernacular. He helped revive congregational singing and wrote a number of hymns.

Often he “borrowed” popular secular melodies for his hymns, though occasionally a tune brought criticism and he was “compelled to let the devil have it back again” because it was too closely associated with bars and taverns.

In the forward of a book, Luther once wrote: “Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits.... A person who... does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God... does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs.”

Luther's most famous hymn is “Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott,”—“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Based on Psalm 46, it reflects Luther's awareness of our intense struggle with Satan. In difficulty and danger, Luther would often resort to this song, saying to his associate, “Come, Philipp, let us sing the 46th Psalm.”

This is a difficult hymn to translate because the original German is so vivid. At least 80 English versions are available.⁵

Here is a version of the lyrics that we sing today:

⁵ Robert Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul Special Edition: 150 of the World's Greatest Hymns Stories* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

A mighty fortress is our God, / A bulwark never failing;
/ Our helper he amid the flood / Of mortal ills prevailing. /
For still our ancient foe / Doth seek to work us woe; / His
craft and pow'r are great, / And armed with cruel hate, / On
earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide, / Our striving
would be losing; / Were not the right man on our side, / The
man of God's own choosing. / Dost ask who that may be? /
Christ Jesus, it is he; / Lord Sabaoth his name, / From age to
age the same, / And he must win the battle.

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. / The prince of darkness
grim, / We tremble not for him; / His rage we can endure, /
For lo! his doom is sure; / One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly pow'rs, / No thanks to
them, abideth; / The Spirit and the gifts are ours through /
Him who with us sideth. / Let goods and kindred go, / This
mortal life also; / The body they may kill: / God's truth
abideth still; / His kingdom is forever.⁶

Luther beautifully captures the heartbeat of Psalm 46 when says in the second stanza, “Did we in our own strength confide, / Our striving would be losing; / Were not the right man on our side, / The man of God's own choosing. / Dost ask who that may be? / Christ Jesus, it is he; / Lord Sabaoth his name, / From age to age the same, / And he must win the battle.” Christ Jesus won the battle at his First Advent. Let us keep looking to Christ as we wait for his Second Advent. Amen.

⁶ *Logos Hymnal*, 1st edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995).

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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