

## February 25, 2017/Psalm 46 (ESV<sup>1</sup>) A Mighty Fortress

This morning we pause from our Colossians study and consider a glorious Old Testament text, **Psalm 46**. We mediated last Sunday on **Colossians 1:5** and the wonderful "hope laid up laid up for you in heaven" belonging to Christian people in the Gospel of Christ. This Psalm provides a look at a different facet of that same core reality. It teaches us about the guarantee of our hope.

**Psalm 46** was the inspiration for Luther's "A Mighty Fortress." Its occasion is not stated or known, but the tone makes clear that it was written in a time of trouble. As such, it stands as a grand and substantial statement of faith in God, and as encouragement to us as things around us seem to be coming unglued. Luther said "We sing this psalm to the praise of God, because God is with us and powerfully and miraculously preserves His church and His word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, and against all assaults of the world, the flesh, and sin." Thank God for **Psalm 46**.

What we will do this morning is this. I'm going to start by admitting together with you our context as we come to this Psalm. Then, in response and contrast I'll read the text aloud and offer a brief prayer. Then we'll meditate on **Psalm 46** a phrase at a time.

So, where are our heads as you and I as we come to this text? Well, Christian people are the most realistic people in the world. So ... we know that the world is broken and there is no hope of humans fixing it. We know that we and ones we care about are going to experience pain and potentially know real disaster. We know there is the possibility of withering debilitating illness, and some of us and those we love are living with it right now. We know that there is no certainty in our national economy. We know that our national politics are full of acrimony and profound selfishness and coarseness. We know that the Christian heritage of western nations is fading and awful practices like the killing of unborn children are widely sanctioned. We know that believing people around the

---

<sup>1</sup> Scripture taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Copyright 2000; 2001, by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

world are suffering horrible persecution for faith in Christ. And we know (or will know in a few years) that our bodies are decaying, and that life on earth is short and full of trouble. All this is true, but not at all the main point. This is the temporal bad news.

Please stand and I'll read the eternal good news that IS the main point, and pray, and then we'll work on the text. Christians, hear **Psalm 46**.

**Psalm 46:1 To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamoth. A Song. 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 hits 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**

Father, we thank You for Your holy Word. We thank You for telling us what is true about You, and Your world, and us. We ask to have hearing ears and hearts to rejoice. We pray that You will be honored as we meditate on Your Word. Help me, I ask, as I speak to do so with humility and grace, that Your people would be encouraged, I pray in Jesus. Amen.

You may be seated.

It has been a great pleasure to prepare to teach **Psalm 46**. It has done my soul good. In some ways, **Psalm 46** is completely straightforward, saying what it says. If you want a brief summary of its message, you can take the first and last verses. **God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ... The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.** This is the guarantee of our hope. This is the "plain facts" message of the Psalm. But rolling it over in our minds a phrase at a time can serve to make those facts bloom into heart-felt praise. So let's do that.

The Psalm breaks naturally into 3 stanzas, separated by the "Selah's." Derek Kidner titled 1-3 "God in the tumult," 4-7 "God in His city," and 8-11 "God exalted in the earth." Your note sheet is headed with these titles.

First, God in the tumult:

**Psa 46:1 To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamo. A Song. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.**

From one perspective, God cares for His people in two ways. He first protects His own from much trouble and harm, and second, in the trouble and difficulty that He does allow, He is there with them, being their only help and hope. He is both refuge and strength in those senses.

From a slightly different perspective, "refuge" speaks of external protection. It alludes to a stronghold into which we can flee in a time of danger. It is a fortress, a high tower, a shelter, or fort. He is our refuge.

"strength" speaks of internal empowerment. God gives courage to the weak heart. Barnes put it this way, " God is the source of strength to those who are weak and defenseless ... we may rely on his strength 'as if' it were our own ... we may feel as safe in his strength as though we had that strength ourselves. We may make it the basis of our confidence." God protects His own and is with them in trouble. In both the external and the internal, He is their only help.

The fact that God is a "present" help speaks of His accessibility and willingness to be found, and His adequacy for all situations. He has been found to be and always continues to be "enough" in trouble. And this is "very" much the case. This is a superlative. It is emphatically or exceedingly true that He aids His people. He is a very present help in trouble. And that being the case

**Psa 46:2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,**

**Psa 46:3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah**

Therefore, because of who He is and how He acts, we will not fear. We will not fear, no matter what, period. Nothing will cause us to fear. Brothers and sisters, what is described in verses 2 and 3 is the most fundamental trouble that could possibly be, the complete unhinging of the natural order, the very reversal of God's work on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of creation. It is the apparent undoing of what Paul tells us about Christ's sustaining work in **Colossians 1:17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together**. When it seems like pre-creation chaos is coming back, we will not fear. When the most solid things we know of in this physical world, the earth and the mountains, are rocked and the sea threatens to

engulf them, we will not fear. We will not fear, because God is our refuge and strength, an accessible and fully sufficient help.

Think about this. If it were that there was literally no place to stand, the whole of God's universe were seemingly to become unglued ... the Psalmist says that God's people would not fear. Now, put our temporal concerns (the kind of things I mentioned before we read the Psalm) up against this picture. They are nothing in comparison. Ought these troubles come to our minds? Sure. We're human. But is there reason they should control us, that we ought to genuinely fear? No. Our troubles and others even more serious, times even (as Barnes put it) "... when commotions and revolutions are occurring in the earth, and when everything sacred, true, and valuable seems to be in danger" will not cause God's people to fear.

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing. Our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.

Now, "God in His city":

**Psa 46:4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.**

In verse 3, there is chaos, and the wild sea water threatens to swallow up even the mountains. But put up against that is this wonderful picture of a life-giving river of water in the city of God, Jerusalem. But from the perspective of a Christian, it's more than Jerusalem, it's the church of the redeemed, and eventually the new Jerusalem, God's heaven. The river in it is from God Himself, and God is in the midst of the city.

**Rev 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.**

**Rev 21:2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.**

**Rev 21:3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

**Rev 21:4** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

**Rev 22:1** Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb

**Rev 22:2** through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, 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 22:3** No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.

**Psa 46:4** There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

**Psa 46:5** God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.

How is it that Old Testament Jerusalem or the New Testament church of God is immovable/unshakable? How can there be stability when the very foundations of the earth seem to be coming unglued? It is that God is in the midst of her. He is her Chief Resident. That's a very present and comforting reality.

In verse **2**, the very mountains will be moved, and in verse **6** the word rendered "totter" is the same word as this "moved" in verse **5**. The

mountains and the kingdoms will be moved, but the city of God stands immoveable, because He is in her.

God will help her "right early"/"when the morning dawns." This is wonderful poetry and reminder of wonderful deliverances God has given His people. In **Exodus 14:27** it was at the break of day when the Red Sea rushed back in to drown Pharaoh's army. In **2Kings 19:35** when Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem got up in the morning, they found 185,000 dead Assyrian soldiers outside the city walls in their siege camp. And it was early in the morning on the first day of the week that the women went to the tomb and found it empty in **Luke 24:1**.

Of course, God's working is not limited to the early morning hours, but there is something especially beautiful and moving in pictures of the misery of a dark time fading away and the dawn bringing evidence of His deliverance.

**Psa 46:6 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.**

From chaos in the natural world to political upheaval and war and international conflict, none of that shakes the city of God. Worldwide economic turmoil and the dissolution of governments do not shake the city of God.

But the inherent instability of evil implies tumult/the raging of nations and the tottering of kingdoms. And it brings the judgment of God. Sin inevitably brings its own misery and additionally God punishes sin. God spoke and the world came into existence. When He speaks in judgment, the earth melts away. But none of this touches the church of God.

**Psa 46:7 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah**

The LORD of hosts is with us. This is Jehovah Sabaoth, the I AM of armies/hosts. He is with us. Luther: "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."

The God of Jacob is our "fortress." Some versions render this "refuge," but it's not the same word as in verse 1. This one implies an inaccessible height. It is then something like "high stronghold" down from which God's people look unscathed by what is going on below.

It is the God of "Jacob" mentioned here. The point of this phrase is the nature of God, not the person of Jacob. Jacob was not the model saint. It took him a lifetime to really learn to trust God. But He was God's, chosen of God and ultimately loving God. And God was with Him as He is with us. The covenant-keeper was God, not Jacob.

The "LORD of hosts" is God's title of divine power, the "God of Jacob" is His title of covenant relationship, and "God with us" is His name Emmanuel. In this verse, His immeasurable power and His Fatherly love stand next to each other and we're reminded of the same double truth that Eric pointed out in his sermons on Ruth. He is both powerful and full of grace and covenant affection toward His people.

Now comes "God exalted in the earth." This is a vision of things to come. It pictures God's power over the whole warring world.

**Psa 46:8 Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth.**

Come, behold ... come perceive/behold with the eye of a prophet. What? Come see God's power to destroy!!! That jars the sensibilities of post-moderns who are wrongly sure that the fact that God is love means that if we will just all hold hands and sing Kumbaya, everything will be rosy. But this is the truth.

Kidner put it this way: "Although the outcome is peace, the process is judgment. The reassuring words 'he makes wars cease ...' are set in context not of gentle persuasion, but of a world devastated and forcibly



disarmed." There will eventually be peace on earth, but not until Jesus returns in great power and judgment. The I AM will deal with evil, and there will be peace.

**Psa 46:9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire.**

Boice says "God is not a peace negotiator, He is a conqueror." He imposes peace. He breaks the bow, shatters the spear, and burns the chariots. He disarms His foes and those who would attack His people. There is the image here of the ruined army of Sennacherib and a siege camp in shambles becoming plunder for inhabitants of Jerusalem, protected by the LORD of hosts. This is the image of the burning remains of an armored column decimated by superior air power as it attempts to withdraw from a city it has occupied.

**Psa 46:10 "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"**

This is a command not primarily to God's people but to His enemies. The "be still" is not "be quiet and contemplative," but rather "Quiet! Leave off! Enough!" "Drop your weapons and desist!"

Again quoting Kidner: "... (it) is not in the first place comfort for the harassed, but a rebuke to a restless and turbulent world" It's much like the command of Jesus to the storm and lake "Peace! Be still!" Know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. Stop your noise and recognize your Master. Let God be God.

The Psalmist then comes back to where he was in verse 7.

**Psa 46:11 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah**

The fundamental here, the guarantee of Christian hope, is the presence with us of the promise-making and promise-keeping all-powerful God of creation and redemption. He is our refuge and strength, a very present

help in temporal trouble. He is with us in all things, even to the end of the created order. From His throne springs the eternal river whose streams make glad the city of God.

We are going to end this service by singing "A Mighty Fortress." Let's do this with real rejoicing and energy. This is very good news.