

“Confident in a Shaky World”

Psalm 46

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Luther loved this psalm. It inspired his hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God, and when he was discouraged and life was hard, he would sing it:

And were the world with devils filled,  
All eager to devour us,  
Our souls to fear shall never yield,  
They cannot overpower us.

The psalm breaks into three sections divided by the word “selah,” which might be a musical notation, or might simply mean, “Stop and listen.” Let’s look at each section in turn.

The first section: God is our refuge in natural disasters. (46:1-3)

Our strength is not our armies or our fortresses. It’s not in our economy, and it’s not in our personal will power. It’s not in our mastery over nature. Our strength is in the living God. God is total help for our total need. Like Paul writes,

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us (Ephesians 3:20)

Or, like the King James Version has it,

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think

The people in Bible times believed there are forces of chaos that always threaten the order of creation. We’re pretty protected from the elements, but still there are times we realize the forces of nature are out of control—with the Southeast Asian Tsunami, or with Hurricane Katrina, or with the earthquake in China just two months ago. But we don’t have to be afraid, because God won the victory over chaos in creation; he showed that same power when Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee.

So in verse 2, there’s a very clear consequence. The writer uses the word, “therefore.” Since God is all that, it means for us we will not fear. When God is on our side, fear is irrational. Like Paul says, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” That’s reason for giving thanks, and it’s why the writer praises God in this psalm. He says,

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. (Psalm 46:2-3)

Even if the earth is destroyed, even if the mountains crumble to the sea, even if the foundations fall around us, even if global warming melts the polar ice caps. Even if the powers are thrown down, even if the nations are destroyed, even if the church is persecuted, even if heresy is taught, even if the worst we can imagine comes about—nevertheless we can trust God. He is faithful, so there can't be anything that is ultimately a danger to us or to the cause of Jesus Christ. Even in catastrophe, our God will preserve us from all evil and prepare us for all good. God is our hiding place where no storm can overpower us, our strength that no one can take away from us.

Are there things that make you afraid? Sometimes we're afraid of what might come: disasters and persecutions, or more everyday danger. There are a lot of reasons to be afraid. But there's one great reason not to be afraid: because God is our refuge. So when life's waves crash over you, remember God still holds you in his hand.

The second section: God is with us. (46:4-7)

Verse four is a turning point in the psalm. The main point of the first three verses is "God is our refuge and strength." Now we see God is with his people.

Verse 4 refers to "the holy place where the Most High dwells."

Verse 5 says "God is within [the city], she will not fail."

Verse 7 says "The LORD Almighty is with us."

That's what the image of the river says. In the ancient Middle East, the great fear in times of war would be that the enemy would cut off the water supply during a siege. But if the city had food and a safe water supply it could hold off against an attack forever. The river is a picture of God's grace, always flowing, never drying up, the river of life we can drink of forever. It's not a flood that washes you away, but a constant stream that provides for all your needs.

You could say, God himself is the river, because verse 4 says the river makes the City of God glad, and God is in the city. God the Father is the river of living water. He told the prophet Jeremiah,

My people have committed two sins:  
 They have forsaken me,  
 the spring of living water,  
 and have dug their own cisterns,  
 broken cisterns that cannot hold water. (Jeremiah 2:13)

And we saw last week when we looked at Psalm 42, Jesus is the river of salvation. The prophet Zechariah says,

On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity. (Zechariah 13:1)

And God the Holy Spirit is the river of life.

Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. (John 7:38-39)

So the river is the grace of God, and that comes from the blood of Jesus poured out for us. It's the promises of the gospel, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

What I'm saying is this: God gives all of who he is, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to his people. His perfection, the fullness of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, they flow like a river of life. That's what Ezekiel saw in his vision of the new temple (Ezekiel 47:1-12), and John saw in his vision of heaven (Revelation 22:1-2), the presence of God among his people that brings life to barren ground. And when we get to heaven, we'll be watered in the river, where there's no sickness, no trouble, no sadness, no struggle with our broken human condition, no temptation, the place where we don't remember sin anymore, and where we only see past danger from the perspective of our present victory and joy.

God is in the city.

From the image of the river, now we move to the image of the city. The church is the City of God because he lives in it. He designed and built it to be the place where he lives. He's the ruler over the city.

It's a picture of security, because you're safe from marauders inside its walls. It's a picture of community, where we supply each others' needs. It's a picture of freedom from fear in this present darkness. It's a place ordered according to the Word of God.

If we are the City of God, we will not fall. Jesus is here, working through the power of his Spirit. It means that even though the world and the devil might tempt and trouble the church, the church of Christ will stand. Luther's hymn says:

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.

Verse 5 says, "God will help her at break of day." The prophet Malachi saw that was how salvation would come,

For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. (Malachi 4:2)

The night looks very dark, but daybreak's coming. Like in the movie "The Two Towers," when things look the worst for the people of Rohan, under siege by evil powers at Helm's Deep, the dawn breaks, and Gandalf the Wizard rides in on his stallion with 1000 fresh warriors; they chase the enemy into the forest, where they are annihilated, and the people are saved.

The psalm says God is within the city, so it won't fall. Help's coming with the break of day. Even if the nations are in turmoil, it's under the command and control of God. The second section concludes with the affirmation, "The Lord of hosts is with us" (Psalm 46:7). But what do we mean when we say God is with us?

God is glorious, and he rules from heaven as his throne. But God doesn't just reign from on high; he comes to where we live. In the Old Testament times, he showed his presence through a pillar of fire and a cloud to lead his people in the desert, and he met his people in the temple. God didn't just stay remote on his heavenly throne, he also made himself known to his people.

The psalms say a lot about the beauty of Jerusalem, most often called Zion. Have you ever thought about that? It wasn't beautiful because the natural setting was stunning, like Seattle or Hong Kong or Vancouver. It wasn't beautiful because the architecture was the world's most splendid, like Paris or Rome. The glory of the city was that the Lord showed himself there like no other place. What's beautiful about the city was God!

Today he dwells in the middle of his people, because Jesus tells us,

For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."  
(Matthew 18:20)

The church is the City of God, not built with human hands, and we are a temple for the Holy Spirit, and in that way the church on earth is a little now like the church will be one day in heaven, when he brings the "up there" down here. The church is beautiful, because God lives here.

So, God is with us whenever people get together in Jesus' name, whenever we share the good news about Jesus, whenever we celebrate worship like he tells us to. And he's present whenever he chooses to act. In all our struggles, the Lord will stand with us.

That's the weight of the language of verse 7--God is our fortress, our stronghold. If you take shelter in the fortress, it doesn't matter if you're weak, you're safe there.

The third section: God fights the battle for us. (46:8-11)

The psalm goes on to say, “Come and see the works of the Lord.” It’s an invitation for the citizens of God’s city to go out from the city gates to see how the enemy has been destroyed. If God gave us an invitation like that, it would be very clear who won the victory. It’s like the story of the time Jerusalem was under siege by an overwhelming army. Four lepers decided they had nothing to lose since they were starving anyway, so they decided to surrender to the enemy to get something to eat. But when they got to the enemy camp it was empty, because the Lord caused them to hear the sound of a great army coming to attack, and they panicked and ran. (2 Kings 6:5-7)

It’s God’s battle. God’s saying, Come look at the victory I’ve won. So when you read history, read it with eyes to see the hand of God in preserving his people. When you read the newspaper, read it to see God’s providence in holding up his church and making his name known. The desolations he has brought on earth have the nations in an uproar, but they can’t undo his purpose. It’s like in Psalm 2,

Why do the nations conspire  
and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth take their stand  
and the rulers gather together  
against the LORD  
and against his Anointed One.

The One enthroned in heaven laughs;  
the Lord scoffs at them.  
Then he rebukes them in his anger  
and terrifies them in his wrath. (Psalm 2:1-2, 4-5)

The Lord is at work. Look at what he’s doing, and you can see his power, wisdom, and justice. And everything he does is for his glory and for our good. Because God will destroy the weapons of war and will make peace. There are two ways you can make peace—by bringing people together to agree, and by force. God can do both. He breaks the bow, snaps the spear, and burns the chariot.

When ancient armies would conquer an enemy, they would pile up the weapons of the enemy and burn them. It meant the enemy no longer had the means to rebel. We see that image in Isaiah’s vision of peace, when he talks about God shattering the rod of the oppressor. He goes on,

Every warrior’s boot used in battle  
and every garment rolled in blood  
will be destined for burning,  
will be fuel for the fire. (Isaiah 9:5)

God fights the battle for us, and that means it’s decisive. “He makes wars to cease.”

Consequence: Be still and know he is God.

Verse 10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God." What's that telling us to do? I think it means we trust him for what he's doing. If life's hard, or we're disappointed, we can say, "I don't like this, Lord, but help me see what you're doing in it." So be still, and let God be God in your life. Notice he's there.

There's a film that came out about twenty years ago called "Babette's Feast." It's about a small faith community in Denmark. They forgot about God's presence with them, and life had become cold and grey. One day a French woman who lived with them prepared a feast in celebration of their founding. The feast was lavish, incredible, so good it opened the believers' eyes to the fact God was with them, and that his grace is even more lavish than our mistakes.

When we don't let God be God in our lives, we go to one of a couple extremes:

we either act like our sin is no big deal, or

we despair over our guilt.

In other words, we downplay God's holiness, or we dismiss his love. But Psalm 46 reminds us that God is God. He's beyond your comprehension. He will execute his justice, and one day will destroy all his enemies and ours. There's no storm that he can't silence, no wrong he can't make right, no sin he can't forgive, no person he can't save.

God is with us in Christ. Don't be too busy to notice. Be still, and know he is God.