

A Mighty Fortress

Psalm 46

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Last Sunday, as we began working on Psalm 45, I told you it inspired the hymn *Fairest Lord Jesus*. This morning, we encounter something similar. Psalm 46 inspired the famous hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, written by the Reformer Martin Luther. We really can't read and preach Psalm 46 without recognizing its influence on the Protestant Reformer.

Most people associate the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans with Martin Luther's conversion. And it is true: Romans 1:17, where Paul writes, "*The righteous shall live by faith*," was a key text that helped him come to true faith in Christ.

But most people fail to realize that Luther spent many years teaching the Psalms to his students in seminary. The Psalms were also pivotal in Luther's conversion and his perseverance in the faith.

The story is told that many times during the dark and difficult years of the Reformation, Luther would experience deep depression and discouragement. It was during those times that he would turn to his good friend Philipp Melancthon and say, "*Come, Philipp, let's sing the forty-sixth Psalm*." Then they would sing Luther's version:

*A sure stronghold our God is He,
A timely shield and weapon;
Our help he'll be and set us free
From every ill [that] can happen.¹*

Eventually, this version became "*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*." Luther went on to say:

*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.²*

Just a couple of Sundays ago we worked through Psalm 44. In it we saw how the enemies of God persecute the church, and in the end it simply left God's people crying out for help. Last Sunday, we saw in Psalm 45 how Jesus answers the prayer at the end of Psalm 44 when He rose up as the Bridegroom-King to marry His Bride. This morning we see in Psalm 46 how the Bridegroom-King is also the Warrior-King who protects His church.

What Psalm 46 does for us is it calls us away from fear and toward faith—NOT faith in pleasant circumstances, NOT faith in political stability, NOT faith in our own strength, but faith in the God who has finally and fully revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. It declares that in Christ, God has come near to us. It proclaims that in Christ, God has entered our broken world to redeem us. It proclaims that in Christ, God has provided our ultimate refuge for His people that cannot be destroyed.

So, before we get started on Psalm 46, let me lay some groundwork. First, notice the Psalm's literary structure. Psalm 46 has three stanzas with the Hebrew word *Selah* concluding each one. However, it has only two refrains. One refrain in v. 7 and the other in v. 11. They both read the exact same.

¹ James M. Boice, *An Expositional Commentary: Psalms, Vol. 2, Psalmagaints 42-106*, 387-388.

² Ibid, 388.

Second, we need to consider the historical background of Psalm 46. We don't know what prompted the psalmist to write this Psalm. Some scholars believe it was some key event in Israel/Judah's history where God delivered the nation. The two events most commonly cited are God's deliverance of Judah from the Assyrian king Sennacherib in 2 Kings 19. You remember the story: The representative of Sennacherib had boasted that they would destroy Jerusalem. King Hezekiah prayed to the LORD for deliverance, and He granted it. After that boast, Yahweh destroyed the entire Assyrian army, essentially ending Assyria's dominance over the world at that time. The other event often cited is Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from the Moabites and Ammonites in 2 Chronicles 20.

We really don't know the exact historical background for sure. However, what we have in this Psalm applies to a wide range of circumstances where victory in our lives seems impossible. For this, we can thank the Holy Spirit's inspiration on the writer or writers. Now, let's get to work on Psalm 46. I have two points to help us walk through the Psalm.

I. Trust the God who preserves His people with His presence (vv. 1-7)

Verses 1-7 speak of God's powerful presence that preserves His people amid the torrent of apocalyptic chaos and cataclysmic upheaval. So, in the middle of the chaos and upheaval, the psalmist doesn't begin with a request but with a declaration of faith. Look at this declaration in v. 1:

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

Notice how the psalmist makes his declaration. He uses the present-tense verb *IS*. This seems insignificant, but it is huge when you think about it. Listen, he's not asking God to become his refuge, strength, and help in trouble. He's not trying to persuade God to become faithful. He's making a declaration of faith in who he knows God to be. He's reminding himself and God's people who God already *IS*. Then he gives us three attributes of who God is for His people: *A refuge, their strength, and a very present help in trouble.*

Before we work through these attributes, I want to ask a question. When you are facing storms or a crisis in your life, how do you pray? Do you pray with confidence knowing who God *IS*, or do you pray and try to persuade God to become what you need? We need to be convinced of who God is and not who we believe God CAN or MIGHT be for us. God is the God of presence. He is the God of the here and now.

You build this kind of confidence in God by being in the Word of God, praying regularly, actively participating in a Gospel Life Group, studying the Bible with other believers, learning how to apply the gospel to your life, and worshiping. These are the basics of applying the means of grace God has given to grow in our knowledge of Him, so when the storms of life hit, our lives are built on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

Now, that we have in our minds that God is a present-tense God, let's look at these three present-tense attributes of God.

First, let's consider that God is our refuge. A refuge is a place of safety. It is where you go when danger is present. But here's the deal: The refuge is only as good for protection as the One who gives the protection. Verse 1 tells us that God *IS* our refuge. God as our refuge means that when we need shelter, safety, and protection, we can find them in Him rather than in some lesser person or place (J. Josh Smith, 322).

Where do you run when you need a refuge? To whom or to what place do you find refuge? Do you run to your family, friends, finances, or work? If you're not hiding in God, your refuge is in something inferior. If your answer is unclear or lacks confidence, you need to repent and return to Jesus. He is your refuge.

The next attribute we see in v. 1 is strength. Often, when we are in the storms of life, we ask God for strength. There is nothing wrong with that, but I want you to notice how v. 1 reads. The psalmist doesn't ask God to give him strength. He says that God *IS* his strength. That means the Christian's ultimate confidence is not "*I am strong enough to handle this,*" or "*God make me strong.*" The fact is: *God IS my strength!* It is simply an acknowledgment of who God is for us. It is having God in your life.

The last attribute is found in the phrase, “[God is] *a very present help in trouble*.” I love this phrase because it personalizes God’s help in our crises. It calls Heaven’s help down into the middle of our situation. The very presence of God in our trouble is comforting. We need a refuge; we need God to be our strength because we are weak, and all of this is sweeter when we realize God’s presence comes into the middle of our crisis.

What does it mean for God to be our *very present help in trouble*? It means He never left us, and He never will. When I think of this phrase, I think of Psalm 23. Listen to it and hear how the Lord helps us and shepherds us in life and in our sorrows and crises:

¹ *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

He leads me beside still waters.

³ *He restores my soul.*

*He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.*

⁴ *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*

*I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

⁵ *You prepare a table before me*

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶ *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me*

all the days of my life,

*and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.*

I think the beautiful imagery of Psalm 23 illustrates the kind of helper God is to His people. He is a present helper who doesn’t disappear when trouble hits our lives. He holds us up and never leaves us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. This is who our God *IS*. He is present in our lives, and He is actively working in our hearts and lives even when we do not realize it.

Next, vv. 2-3 lead to the fullness of the psalmist's confession of faith:

*Therefore we will not fear though the earth give 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*

Charles Spurgeon calls Psalm 46 the song of holy confidence. Let me show you why. Look at the word “*therefore*” in v. 2. The word *therefore* tells us that the psalmist’s confidence is based on who he understands God to be. Remember what I said earlier about how we understand who God is? We must be in God’s word with God people in a local church, learning with one another and encouraging one another to hold fast when the world seems to be collapsing. This is how you build up your holy confidence in God.

So, when it seems like the world’s coming to an end, the psalmist reminds us that because GOD is our refuge, we should not fear. He does not say there is nothing to fear. He says that because GOD is present, fear does not have the final word. Fear doesn’t rule his heart and rob him of this faith in God.

Then the imagery takes on an apocalyptic tone. He begins by describing the worst-of-the-worst circumstances in which he will trust God. He uses the word *though* four times to draw our attention to these cataclysmic events. He says, *though the earth gives way. Though the mountains fall into the sea. Though the*

waters roar and foam. Though the very mountains themselves shake with fear of the tumult of the sea, we should not and will not fear because God is present with us.

Listen to me: You will have events in your life that will rock your world. They will make you feel like the world is coming to an end and even make you feel like you don't want to live. You just want it to end.

What is it you need in that moment? Better question: Who is it you need in that moment? You need the personal presence of Almighty God. He will guard you, protect you, secure you, sustain you, and give you a place to rest.

How do we know we can trust that God is with us when it seems the very foundation of our lives and world is coming apart at the seams? Answer: We can trust Him and be sure He is with us because Jesus, the Son of God, left Heaven and entered our sin-infested and sin-broken world.

Jesus entered the greatest storm imaginable. On the cross, Jesus was abandoned by His closest friends, rejected by His own people, betrayed by those who should have loved Him, beaten by Roman soldiers, mocked by the onlookers, and then crucified to pay the penalty of our sin against God. The storm that Christ entered was worse than the collapse of the world, for He endured the infinitely powerful divine wrath of God against our sin. He endured hell on the cross.

And Jesus did not abandon us when He paid for our sins. He stood in our place and endured what we deserved. He died, and then on the third day, he rose from the grave. *Therefore*, if you belong to Christ, the greatest catastrophe imaginable has already been dealt with—your sin. Your Savior endured Hell to pay for your sin so you would not have to go to Hell. Your condemnation has been removed because it was laid on Him. The curse of eternal death that was upon you was defeated when Jesus rose from the dead. Your future resurrection is secure because Jesus will return for His people. This is a rock-solid truth and promise paid for by the blood of Jesus. As Luther wrote in his hymn:

*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
does seek to work us woe;
his craft and power 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.
You 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.*

We can sing these verses with a holy confidence, knowing that Jesus has won the victory over all earthly powers.

As we come to the second stanza in vv. 4-7, the imagery changes dramatically. Listen to vv. 4-5:

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.

In verses 2–3 we saw raging waters. Now, in v. 4, we see a river bringing gladness to God’s people. The contrast between these stanzas is intentional. The enemy brings the waters of chaos, but God leads us by streams of water that make us glad and, as Psalm 1 says, the Living Water of God causes us to bear fruit in season, and we never cease to flourish.

It is the glorious Living Water of God that causes us to thrive even in circumstances and situations that seemingly are impossible. God gives us His Spirit, His Word, and His people to help cultivate our hearts so that the Living Water goes deep.

In the first stanza, the psalmist had faith as the world was imploding. Now, in v. 5, we see that God’s city is a firm foundation. In the midst of all the raging nations, chaos, and fears, there is a river whose water makes glad the people of God because it is the presence of God, and the presence of God gives peace to His people.

Verse 5 directly contrasts with vv. 2-3 where everything is shaken to the point of destruction. God’s city will not be shaken. Did you catch the reason God’s city will not be shaken or moved? It is because God is present in His city. He is in the midst of His city.

So, here’s the bottom line: Our stability as God’s people doesn’t come from our political power or influence. It is not achieved with military strength. It is not found in our bank accounts, wealth, treasure, investments, or retirement. Neither is it found in our wisdom, education, or achievements. It is not found in our networking with powerful people. The only reason you will not be moved is because of the Spirit of God’s presence in your life.

Next, v. 6 expands the power of God’s presence in the midst of the chaos.

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

Verse 6 echoes Psalm 2, where the nations rage and the kingdoms stagger, but when God speaks, creation responds.

The psalm presents a breathtaking contrast between human rebellion and divine sovereignty. The nations rage, but God remains King. Kingdoms totter, but God’s city stands firm. Human beings make plans, but when God speaks, the earth melts at the power of His voice.

Then the refrain in v. 7 brings these two stanzas in Psalm 46 to a close:

The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

This refrain is the theological heart of the psalm. “*The LORD of hosts is with us.*” The Hebrew title “*LORD of hosts*” presents God as the sovereign King over the heavenly armies. He is the “*LORD of Armies.*”

And yet this mighty God says: “*I am with you.*” The God who commands heavenly armies is the God who dwells with his people.

Then notice God’s personal name: “*The God of Jacob.*” Why Jacob? I love what the psalmist does here. Because he is about to emphasize our helplessness and inability to do anything. I mean, think about it: Jacob was hardly a model of human godliness. He had major flaws and was corrupt. He was fearful. He was deceptive. He was a schemer. It took him a lifetime to learn to trust and obey God. Yet God bound himself to Jacob by covenant grace.

The title “*God of Jacob*” reminds us that God’s protection rests not on the greatness of God’s people or the faithfulness of God’s people, but on the faithfulness of our God. He is the God of all who are weak, sinful, struggling, and yet with their weak, trembling faith, trust Him as their only hope of salvation.

This title for God is good news for us who look at our lives and say,

"Why would God help me? I am so weak and worthless. I still struggle with the same old sins over and over. I repent and want to change, but I continue struggle."

Brother and sister, keep wrestling with God like Jacob. Keep repenting, keep turning to Jesus, keep trusting in Him, confess your weakness and helplessness, and you will see that Christ is your refuge and strength.

Do you know why you will eventually overcome? It is because Jesus is the True and Better Jacob who willingly became weak to die in your place and for your sin. Rest in the True and Better Jacob who is the strength of the weak and a place of rest and protection for the weary.

II. Worship the One who destroys the storm (vv. 8-11)

Now, the imagery and tone change again in the third stanza. Let's consider what the psalmist is calling us to do in v. 8:

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

He is calling us to worship. This is our purpose for which God designed us in life. We are worshippers. The question is, what are we worshipping? Who are we beholding?

Psalm 46 gives us a different kind of command. It calls us to "*Look at God.*" We are to "*Come, behold the works of the LORD.*" Listen, when the foundations of the world are shaking, the solution to our anxiety and fear is not pretending the problem doesn't exist. The solution is seeing the problem in the light of God's greatness.

Yet often, here's what we do: When we are afraid, we become intensely focused on our circumstances. We come and behold our problem. We analyze the threat, trying to figure out how to defeat our "enemy." We replay the painful conversations or event like a DVD stuck on repeat. We calculate every possible outcome as if we can fix it. We look at the news and imagine the worst. Am I the only one who does this?

Then v. 9 reminds us of God's sovereign power over all the universe. Look at v. 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.*

What has happened? God brought desolation on all the earth. God is sovereign over all of this chaos, and He is bringing it to an end. God alone has the authority to end wars. One day He will completely break the ability of mankind to make war and destroy lives. That is God's responsibility.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. I am not saying we, as Christians, should be passive in the face of injustice or suffering. Scripture calls us to pursue righteousness, love our neighbors, defend the vulnerable, pray for our leaders, work for peace, and, as much as possible, *be informed, responsible citizens who vote for candidates who strive to practice conservative biblical principles. This can be difficult because very few politicians follow Christ. We do the best we can with our vote and remember we are electing a politician and not a pastor.* However, the bottom line is this: Our hope does not rest in human power or on political victories. It rests in Christ.

Let me be very clear: The kingdom of God does not depend upon the success of a political party. Christ's church does not rise or fall according to earthly kingdoms. Jesus said: "*I will build my church.*" That promise is stronger than any cultural trend, voting block, or political party. Well, I've got to keep going. Look in v. 10.

Verse 10 contains one of the most popular statements in the Bible:

"Be still, and know that I am God."

These words are often printed on inspirational artwork and coffee mugs. But in context, these words are much more than a peaceful devotional thought. They are actually the only command found in Psalm 46.

The command comes on the heels of God destroying everything that destroys. He has caused the nations to cease raging. Kingdoms have collapsed, and the weapons of war have been shattered. Now, He says, "*Be still.*"

This phrase means something like "*Cease striving*." It commands us to stop striving with one another and with God, and to quiet our hearts so we may focus on who God is. Who is He? He is the Destroyer of everything that destroys, and now there is complete peace.

Also, in v. 10, God commands his enemies—and by implication calls His people—to recognize His sovereign authority over all things. Listen, the issue is not simply that we need to chill out but that we are called to worship. We are called to behold the Sovereign King.

Now, we come to the final refrain in v. 11:

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

We've dug into the refrain in v. 7, but now let's dig deeper in v. 11. I want to drive home the gospel as we wrap up Psalm 46. I want to ask: *How is the LORD of Hosts with us?* Because this is what we've been hearing from Psalm 46 the whole time.

The truth of Psalm 46 climaxes in Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew describes Jesus as *Immanuel*, meaning "God with us." Psalm 46:7 and 11 tell us that, "*The LORD of hosts is with us.*"

Psalm 46 finds its ultimate fulfillment in the God who came in Christ to be with us. He entered our broken world filled with storms and battles with the enemy. The eternal Son of God took on human flesh. He entered our world and lived among sinners. He touched the unclean. He welcomed the broken. He calmed storms. He confronted demons. He raised the dead. Ultimately, the Son of God went to the cross. The God who is our refuge did not merely shout instructions from heaven. He came to be present with us. Jesus came down into the storm to destroy everything that destroys by giving Himself to be destroyed on the cross because of our sin. This is the glory of the incarnation. As Luther said in his hymn:

*And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God has 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.*

And that little word that "*fell him*" came from Jesus on the cross when He said, "*It is finished.*"

And the good news gets even better because in Christ, God's presence is promised in the person of the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit, Christ dwells with and in His people.

Therefore, Christian, when you feel alone, remember: You are not alone. When you cannot see what God is doing, remind yourself that God has not left you. When the nations rage, remember: Christ is King. When kingdoms totter, remember: Christ's kingdom cannot be shaken.

As the last stanza of Luther's hymn says:

*That Word above all earthly powers
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!*

We must remember and preach to ourselves that God is our refuge, our strength, and present with us in the storms of our lives. He will eventually destroy everything that destroys. So, brother and sister, be still and behold Christ. He is your God, and He is with you.