

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

Reformation Prelude, Part 3

Psalm 46

David Sunday

September 24, 2017

Heavenly Father, we're taking Your Word into our hands, and as we do, we pray that You would take our hearts into Your hands, that You would take Your truth and plant it deep within us. Shape us and fashion us into Your likeness. Take the truths that are in this psalm and make them truths that we cleave to; let them lead us to You as the God in Whom we trust. Turn our hearts away from other refuges that will not hold and get us more into the habit of turning more quickly and more aggressively toward You. You alone are "our refuge and strength, our very present help in trouble." We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Turn please to Psalm 46 which says:

- 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.*
- 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.*
- 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.*

Thanks be to God.

Fear. Anxiety. These are my Achilles' heels. This is where I have to focus the good fight of faith for my own soul, and it's a battle. It's a battle I've been fighting for a long time and it's a battle I expect I'll be fighting until the day I die. I wonder sometimes if I growing in this fight. Am I making progress? A lot of times I suspect it's three steps forward, two steps back. But as I was thinking about this psalm, I was reminded of another sermon I preached eight years ago, in December 2009. A few of you would have heard it, because this was before we became New Covenant Bible Church. It was on Philippians 4:5-7:

The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I remember beginning that sermon with a confession. This is what I said:

I have a problem. Can you help me? You see, I worry. Every day. Maybe even every hour. That's my problem. But you know, I have a lot to worry about. In fact, I made a list. I wrote down everything I've been anxious about just this week—31 separate issues. The truth is there are probably more and I'm worried that I may have forgotten a few. Some of them are trivial, like the noise under my car that tends to happen when it's really cold outside. Others are embarrassing to put on paper. Just writing all this down makes me realize that this worrying is a real problem. I mean, who would worry about something like that? But I do. I tell you, I do.

But to my credit, there are quite a few things on this list that I really need to worry about. I mean, you would worry too, if you knew, wouldn't you? Oh, you do know what I mean. Are you a worrier too? Then maybe you can't help me after all. What can I do? I'm really worried about this problem I have. How can I find peace? Is there relief for me? Can anyone help me?

I was thinking about that sermon, because I'm wondering if there's been any growth, any progress in these last eight years. As I read these words from December 2009, it struck me that I can't even remember what those 31 issues were. I thought, "What was that noise under my car?"

What car was that?” I started trying to think of what was going on back on December 20, 2009. If I tried really hard, I might have been able to drudge up a couple things that were on that list, but the fact is nothing I was worried about that week before Christmas eight years ago is a concern at all for me today.

But there was something that was happening in December of 2009 that we didn't even know about when I prepared that sermon. Had I known it, all my other worries would have evaporated into thin air. There was a stage four cancer growing inside my wife, as we'd find out six weeks later. That cancer, with all its implications, has remained a very real part of our lives ever since. And here's what we discovered in the middle of it: God is our refuge and strength. He is a very, very present help in trouble. That is true. That we have learned. He is our refuge. He is our strength. He is very present in times of trouble.

A worst-case scenario

Psalm 46:1-3 invites us to imagine the very worst that could happen. I don't know what you would put on that list. Here are a few things I thought of:

- The betrayal of someone you love dearly.
- An accident in which you unintentionally kill someone. Do you ever pray like I do sometimes when I'm driving, "Lord, please help me never to hurt anyone with my driving"? I know I would be distraught if, through some carelessness of my own, someone else was injured—or killed. That would be a horrible situation.
- A false accusation. Can you imagine what it would be like to be falsely accused, to have it made public, and to have all your friends flee from you? What would it be like to bear that?
- A temptation catches you unawares and you succumb—and you realize you've just committed a sin that's going to have some devastating consequences. That's a worst-case scenario.
- Maybe a terminal disease that's threatening your life.
- The death of a spouse or a son or daughter.
- A life of loneliness.
- Your professional reputation being destroyed.

My heart goes out to Wheaton College this week with all the news there. If we're not careful, we could judge things we do not know about. As fellow Christians in this community, I would think they're facing a worst-case scenario. There are people who are really, really under pressure this week in many different ways. That should be something for which we are praying.

I love how this psalm does not hide the reality of life in a fallen world. It's not a rosy picture. There's a premise that underlies this psalm that life is full of trouble. God is our refuge

and strength, a very present help in trouble—not from trouble. Job said life is just a few days that are full of trouble. “*Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward*” (Job 5:7). Jesus said, “*In this world you will have tribulation*” (John 16:33). D.A. Carson said all we have to do is live long enough and we will experience suffering. And it won’t get easier as we grow stronger in the faith.

Spurgeon said, “God does not put heavy burdens on weak shoulders.” God educates and tests our faith by trials that increase in proportion to our faith. So as your faith grows, the trials increase too. Spurgeon goes on to say:

Do not think that as you grow in grace your path will become smoother and the sky calmer and clearer. Quite the contrary. As God gives you greater skill as a soldier of the cross, he will send you on more difficult missions. As he more fully equips your ship to sail in storms, he will send you on longer voyages to more boisterous seas, so that you may honor Him and increase in holy confidence.

The last battle may be the most fierce, as you prepare to be called from this life into your eternal home. This psalm is saying, “I want you to imagine the worst.” Can you picture verses two and three? “*The earth gives way...*” Picture the scenes from Mexico City and the recent earthquakes in your mind. See everything being shaken at once, people not knowing what to do. Where can you flee for safety when the ground beneath you is quaking and opening up?

Then picture driving along the interstate toward Denver, Colorado. You’ve gone through the Great Plains, and finally you see those snow-capped mountains on the horizon. You’re looking forward to going up into those mountains—that picture of stability and security. Then as you’re driving toward the mountains, suddenly you see them crumbling. You see them falling down—and then they’re gone. Then the next thing you know, there’s this tsunami-like wave rushing over the city of Denver, bringing everything in that city crashing down underneath the water. You’re on the interstate and that wave is coming toward you. The mountains are being moved into the heart of the sea and its water roar and foam.

Some trials seem totally out of control. It’s like the raging sea—you can’t do anything to restrain it, as it hurls up and down. The noise is so intense you can’t hear anything else. That’s the way some troubles are. They rush upon you all of a sudden, multiplying like swelling waves. They are deafening. They shake the strongest of people, like mountains trembling at the swelling of an ocean. That’s what verses two and three are depicting for us—worst-case scenarios in nature. Mountains and oceans trading places. The process of creation in Genesis 1- 2 being de-created as the land comes back underneath the water again. And God is telling us in these verses

that He's not promising us a trouble-free life. But He is promising us a shelter in the time of storm.

If we're going to live in a world that's bristling with danger and teeming with trouble, we need to know where to find refuge. I've heard Mike Bullmore say that we are refuge-seeking creatures. God's knows that's the way we are. The question He wants us to consider as we hear this psalm is, "Where will you go when you need a refuge? Where will you turn when the storm is raging?" He wants us to be thinking about this right now, when the storm is not raging, so that we will habitually have trodden a path into that refuge and know the way to finding it when everything turns upside down.

I was thinking about this last night as I was working here in my office. I planned to run home from here when I was done. I have my stuff here for running, and everything was going great. But I forgot that it's getting dark earlier this time of year, and I didn't get done in time. So I decided to run home in the dark. Last year when I lived in Elgin, I would fairly frequently run in the dark, because there were street lights. Now I live across Red Gate Bridge where there are very few street lights. I didn't realize how different everything looks at night in the pitch black. I've heard coyotes in my neighborhood and was thinking about that. I thought about all kinds of dangers. Right now you're thinking, "That's very foolish. Why were you running on Red Gate Road in the dark of night?" It wasn't because Kate was unwilling to pick me up. It was because I really wanted to get a run in. But I needed to know the way home, so that I could find it in the dark.

When the trials like this psalm is talking about come—when the wind is pelting you with rain, the thunder is so deafening you can't hear anything else and the lightning is terrifying—if you haven't become familiar with the path to safety before that storm starts raging, you're not likely to find it in the middle of the storm.

So this psalm is saying, "Here's where safety can be found. Here is a shelter that will hold." But you need to habituate your soul—you need to get into the habit of going there now—so that when the raging storm happens, you'll be familiar with the path. God is your refuge. Not Netflix. Not food. Not your best friend. Not antique shopping. Not porn. God is your refuge. Take refuge in God alone, because He is the only refuge. Wake up now and flee from idolatrous refuges, because when the storm comes, you need that beaten path.

Here's what you'll find there: The door is never locked. There's never a "Sorry—No Vacancy" sign out in front of that refuge. You're always welcome there. You can trust in Him at all times. You can pour out your heart to Him. God is a refuge for us. And He's not only a refuge—He's also a strength. God could have prevented the trouble from coming, but instead He

allowed it to happen in order to draw you into the refuge. And when you find yourself in that refuge—in God—He gives you strength to resist and to prevail over the trouble. As Isaiah says:

He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:29-31).

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” I like the “very present” there in verse one. We know God is always present, right? He’s everywhere present. That’s true always. But I heard a pastor say, “When trouble comes, regular ‘present’ is not enough. ‘Very present’ is needed.” I don’t know what you’re facing today—it may be your worst-case scenario—but I do know this: if you are in Christ, you are not alone. He is very present, especially in your time of trouble.

John was testifying earlier to how he has been experiencing God’s presence and strength in these last couple of years in ways he didn’t know before. That’s because the God Who was always present in John’s life became “very present” in a time of vulnerability and need. The burden of this psalm is to persuade us to trust in this God, to find refuge in Him, to be strengthened by His very present help, even when our lives are turned upside down and shaken to the core. When we do trust Him, here’s the effect: “*Therefore we will not fear...*” (Psalm 46:2).

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

[From “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” by Martin Luther]

The effect of believing these truths is that we trust in God. I read something by Jerry Bridges that was pretty convicting, given my confession at the beginning of this sermon. He said, “God views our distrust of Him as seriously as He views our disobedience.” He’s a God Who deserves to be trusted at all times. He will not fail us. Do I view my distrust of Him as seriously as I view my disobedience?

A place of unshakeable security

Psalm 46:4-6 takes us from being outside in a storm to inside in the refuge—to a place of unshakeable security. The instability of the world around us is contrasted with the serenity and

security that can be found in the presence of God in verses four to six. I love how it begins: *“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.”* We’ve gone from roaring, foaming and scary oceans to a quiet, life-giving flowing stream like that which flowed through the Garden of Eden, and that which will flow through the new creation, giving life.

It’s that river that is spoken of in Psalm 1. For the man or woman who meditates on the law of God day and night and who does not follow after the counsel of the wicked, your roots go down deep. You’re like a tree planted by streams of water whose leaf does not wither, and in all that you do, you prosper. *“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.”* Jesus said, “Whoever believes in Me, out of his innermost being will flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). He was speaking of the presence of His Holy Spirit in the lives of those who trust in Him. There’s this river that makes you glad in God’s presence, even when everything in your life is being turned upside down. That’s what this psalm is saying. Jesus promised that if you are thirsty and come to Him and drink, there will be a satisfying, replenishing source that never fails you (John 4:13-14).

Continuing in verse four—*“the holy habitation of the Most High”*—refers to a holy city because God dwells there. Verse five: *“God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved.”* Even though the mountains are being turned into the heart of the sea, this city has a foundation that goes so deep and keeps the city inviolable in the middle of the most earth-shattering storms on the outside. He keeps the city secure. She shall not be moved. *“God will help her when morning dawns.”*

The older I get, I have some nights when I just cannot sleep. I was thinking about this phrase at about 4:00 in the morning: *“God will help her when morning dawns.”* There will be help in the time of need. I got a text right before church this morning of a family in our church who’s going through a terrible trauma that happened in the middle of the night. *“God will help her when morning dawns.”* I like how the King James Bible puts it: *“God shall help her, and that right early.”* Right early.

You’ve done everything you know to do. You’ve called everyone you know to call. You’ve exhausted your strength. You’ve fallen flat on your face and said:

Other refuge have I none
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee
Thou, O Christ, art all I want
Still support and comfort me

[From “Jesus, Lover of My Soul” by Charles Wesley]

Your only help is found in Him. Your only refuge is in Him. You're clinging to Him. This psalm is saying, "This help will come precisely when you need it. God's never late. He's always right early."

H.B. Charles, Jr., says, "Whenever God shows up, it's the right time. He may not come when you want Him, but He's always right on time." He will help when morning dawns. Outside the nations are raging and the kingdoms are tottering, but you're inside the city, you're looking out and you're safe from the tumult on the outside.

But then God does something. He utters His voice and you watch it happen. The earth melts before your very eyes. You're safe and secure from all alarm inside the city of God. Isn't that an amazing picture? "Look, it's melting out there and we're safe!" Why is that? "*The Lord of hosts is with us...*" (verse seven). That's why. He's the Lord of heaven's army; the Lord Who has all the power of the universe at His command. He is with us.

Do you think—as I sometimes do—there's no way such a great God could be with a sinner like me? After I've been worried about 31 things this week that have shown how little I trust Him, is He really with me? Well, this psalm says, "Oh, yes. The Lord of hosts is also the God of Jacob." Verse seven: "*...the God of Jacob is our fortress.*"

Alec Motyer says, "God, Who in Himself is every power, resource and sufficiency, is with us. But He is with us, too, in all His condescending tenderness, patience and care, for He is the God of Jacob, the most crafty and least worthy of the patriarchs."

Jacob was a schemer, a manipulator and a cheater. God is saying to us, "In all your frailties, dear one, with all your compromises and all your shortcomings—all the ways you have not trusted Me, I am still with you." If you are a child of God and you're trusting in His Son Jesus Christ, God wants you to know today that He could not love you any more than He loves you right this very moment—and He will not ever love you any less. He has set His love upon you, not because you deserve it or earn it, but because of Christ. He is your God.

Friends, notice that this place of unshakeable security is a city. It's not being out there on your own. If we follow the Scriptures through to see how this theme develops, it's within this city of God where we are surrounded with the people of God. These are the people who belong to Jesus Christ. This is the church of the living God. This is the place where Christ dwells. He is the temple and we are His body. He dwells in our midst. We are His holy habitation.

This psalm is encouraging us to think about when your world is being turned upside down and you feel like everything is just caving in. One of your temptations—one of my temptations—is to go into isolation, to go into hiding, to be out there on your own, taking care of yourself. I'll never forget Ross Stern coming to church the Sunday after his wife Jan died. He said, "I have

determined not to self-medicate through this affliction. I need the body. I need to be with God's people."

When everything's being turned upside down—even when some of God's people are acting like Jacob and you're not sure you want to be there in the church—there's a temptation to isolate yourself. God is saying, "Don't do that." This is where the river of gladness flows. This is where the streams of security are found. Don't go into the desert of isolation. Stay connected to Christ and His people in His local church. Know that God is there in their midst. Even though we're so much like Jacob, here is where help is to be found. Not outside amid the wolves, but inside where the Good Shepherd is tending His flock, making us lie down in green pastures, leading us beside the still waters (Psalm 23). Don't isolate. Stay in the city of God where there's a river that makes the people there glad, safe and secure.

A vision of invincible victory

Finally, in the last stanza, we see a vision of invincible victory. So you're going through this trial. You're feeling like, "God, how long? This isn't feeling like 'right early.' This is feeling like prolonged agony. God, help me. Deliver me." God is saying, "What you need to do right now is stop gazing at your circumstances." Gaze at God; glance at your circumstances. Get the aerial view. Think about the works of the Lord in the past. Think about what He will do in the future. Realize you're in the middle of a great story. Get rid of the spiritual nearsightedness that keeps you so focused on the trial you're going through right now. Have your vision refocused so you can see farther out, so you can get the aerial view, so you can realize that you are in the middle of a story that has its tragic moments for sure, but it's a tale of triumph. It's ultimately a fight song of victory. He must win the battle. His Kingdom is forever.

Verse eight: *"Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth."* Look at how He has fought, how *"He makes wars cease to the end of the earth"* by disarming His enemies. *"He breaks the bow and shatters the spear."* He burns their chariots that are full of ammunition.

We don't know if there was a particular historical circumstance that prompted this psalm, but there is one in 2 Kings 19 that has many of these traits. It's when King Hezekiah was surrounded by the Assyrian army in Jerusalem and it looked like the end for God's people. But in 2 Kings 19:32-34 the Lord said this concerning the king of Assyria:

He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not

come into this city, declares the Lord. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.

Do you know what happened in that story? Listen to 2 Kings 19:35-37. *“And that night the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went home and lived at Nineveh. And as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god”—who is not a refuge and a strength or a very present help in trouble—as the king of Assyria is worshipping his idolatrous refuge, “Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword.”* God’s people were delivered.

Keep verse five in mind here: *“God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.”* This psalm is saying, “Come, behold those works of the Lord. He brings desolations on the earth. He protects His people.”

Friends, let’s look forward from Psalm 46. Let’s remember how God ultimately disarmed the rulers and authorities of this wicked world. Colossians 2 says that God did it by becoming weak and vulnerable. He did it by having His Son nailed to a cross. And when Jesus was hanging on that cross, with His arms stretched out wide, He was disarming the rulers and authorities, putting them to open shame by triumphing over them on His cross. He was winning the victory over God’s enemies. Jesus was breaking their bows, shattering their spears and burning their chariots with fire. In the process He’s saying to His enemies, “I welcome you to become My friends, if you will repent and believe in Me.”

One day every knee is going to bow and every tongue is going to confess, “Jesus, You will be exalted among the nations. You will be exalted in all the earth.” Every atheist knee is going to confess that. Every Buddhist knee is going to confess that. Every Muslim knee, every Hindu knee, every Baptist knee, every Catholic knee, every agnostic—every knee shall bow, every tongue will confess, “Jesus, You will be exalted among the nations. You will be exalted in the earth. You are Lord of all.”

So when we hear Him say in verse ten, *“Be still, and know that I am God,”* don’t hear a whisper there. Don’t think of a “Precious Moments” figurine holding a little plaque that reads, “Be still and know that I am God”—something real sweet and calming. Instead, think of your Savior Jesus in a boat with His disciples. He’s in the back sleeping. They are terrified at a raging storm that’s happening. They finally wake Him up, “Master, don’t You care that we’re perishing?” He stands up and with the voice of sovereign majesty, says to the waves, “Peace. Be still.” And immediately the storm is hushed. They ask each other, “Who is this? Even the wind

and the waves obey Him.” He’s the One Who says, *“Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”*

The question for us is do we believe that *“the Lord of hosts is with us”*? Do we believe that *“the God of Jacob is our fortress”*? David Jackman says, “If we believe that God is actively ruling His whole creation, including the detailed circumstances of your life, then we will trust Him. And if we don’t trust Him, it’s probably because we don’t really believe in Him.” If we really believe the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress, look at the effect that this psalm says it will have on our lives—and what a beautiful affect it is.

Listen, God’s not calling us to perfection here. He’s calling us to movement. “Move toward Me as your refuge. Move toward Me as your strength. Trust that I will be your very present help. Whatever you’re facing right now, know that I will not fail you. Know that I am with you.” When we run to Him for refuge, look to Him for strength and trust His very near presence, this psalm says fears will flee. We’ll be glad as we drink from the river of His salvation and we’ll find ourselves steadfast, immovable and unshaken by our trials.

We’ll marvel at His melting voice as He speaks and the earth melts. We’ll behold His wondrous works in the past and they will give us courage to be confident in His victories in the future. We’ll say, “The prince of darkness grim—we tremble not for him. His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure.” We’ll be still and cease striving, relaxing in unconditional surrender to His sovereign and supreme power. Then we will go out and make disciples of all the nations, knowing that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ. He will be exalted among the nations. He will be exalted in all the earth.

That’s what trusting in God during times of trouble can do in your life. That’s how it can change you, shape you and mold you into a person who’s no longer captive to fear and anxiety, but who is rejoicing in Who God is for you. As we think about this prayer, I want to get close to the Rock of Ages. I want to hide under Jesus, the Rock of Ages.

I want you to consider something Spurgeon: “I have learned to kiss the wave that strikes me against the Rock of Ages.” Kiss the wave. Kiss the troubles. Kiss whatever causes your heart to be struck against that Rock of Ages. As we pray for more nearness to Christ, have you learned to kiss the wave that strikes you against that Rock?

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