

God is our refuge and strength \* Psalm 46

January 6, 2018 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

Often times, when I'm headed to a funeral, I'm listening to that song.

Often times, when I'm headed to meet with a family to plan a funeral, I'm listening to that psalm.

Often times, when I'm headed to the hospital to meet with someone who's in a difficult place, I'm listening to that psalm.

First off, it's a beautiful song. I think that they've captured the emotional weight of this psalm perfectly in the music they've written.

But even more, this psalm is a reminder that no matter how difficult the situation may be for the people involved, God is even more able and even more faithful to help them when they need it most.

And I suspect that some of us will be in that place at some point this year. And so I want to talk with you about it now, so that we are ready then.

Turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 46 and we'll start right off the top in verse 1. Psalm 46, verse 1. I'm going to work from the ESV of the Bible because that's the one I have memorized because of this psalm, but the NIV is a fine translation too. So Psalm 46, verse 1.

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

And there it is right there – the main idea of the psalm – the big idea for today – the one thing that I want you to take home –

GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH, a very present help in times of trouble.

GOD IS OUR REFUGE – that is, God is our hiding place, a defensive safe place to be when the storms hit. When trouble comes, He invites us to find shelter under His omnipotent wings. And His defenses will never fail - He is a refuge to us – a fortress, a stronghold, a solid ground from which we will not slip.

And GOD IS OUR STRENGTH – that is, God provides the strength that we need. When trouble comes, He is actively enabling us to stand and face it. I know that many of you have experienced that – you've gone through some trial and stood your ground and in the end said – 'It was God's strength that brought me through.' And that's what God does. He provides energy when we have none. He provides perseverance when our personal reserves are exhausted.

And He is a very present help in times of trouble. That is, He is most easily found when we need Him most. God will not fail us and He will not forsake us and He helps us by doing what we cannot.

GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND OUR STRENGTH, a very present help when we need it most.

Verse 2 – THEREFORE – since God is our refuge and our strength – therefore, we will not fear.

And that's the application. So straightforward message - Big idea – God is our refuge and strength; application – therefore we will not fear.

If God is with us, who can be against us? God's unfailing commitment to us and His unrivalled power mean that when trials come, we can face them with confidence knowing that He will bring us through, for good.

Now I think Allen Ross says something important here. He writes

“On the basis of these truths about God's provisions, the people of God are reminded that they need not fear even if their whole world were to come crashing down. The affirmation of confidence is clear: ‘Therefore we shall not fear’... This is the proper conclusion to the theology of the first verse. If God is a strong refuge, if God does give help in times of trouble, then there is nothing to fear. But a statement like this is as much an exhortation as it is an expression of confidence” (Ross, 95).

Translation – in the midst of troubles, we may not FEEL fearless. Frankly I think it's unnatural to think that we wouldn't be a little scared when things get rough.

But the fact that God is WITH us means we don't *have* to fear. And that author is right in saying this psalm is an exhortation. It is a call, an invitation, to stand defiantly in the face of trials and say ‘I WILL NOT FEAR BECAUSE MY GOD IS GREATER THAN YOU.’ And God will not fail us in that.

And just to drive that home, the psalmist imagines the worst of disasters – even if the whole world fell apart, we needn't fear, for God is there. Look at verse 2. God is our refuge and strength –

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 (Psalm 46:2-3 ESV).

The psalmist isn't just picking out random natural disasters here. The ancient Hebrew mind believed that the mountains stretched down to the foundation of the earth and that mountains were pillars that held the land up. And the sea wasn't just water – it was chaos, it was unknown, mythical danger – and if the sea attacked the pillars of the earth, then it would be as if the whole earth was crumbling. That would be a scary place to be.

And yet what does the psalmist say – even if all of this was to happen, even if the world was crumbling around me, I would need not fear, because God is there. To be a refuge and a strength, to give hope where there seems to be none.

Don't laugh at me, but a few months ago, I went in for a scope on my stomach and that was going to require that I have an IV and general anesthetic. Now, yes, I'm married to a doctor, but I don't do well around needles.

And so the nurse sat me down in this big chair to put an IV pick in and I said 'Um... I'm not really good with needles' and she said 'oh don't worry, dearie, you'll be fine' and she started to do her thing and then all of a sudden, the earth started spinning around me and I said to the nurse 'Um... I don't feel so good' and she said 'oh yeah, you're looking kind of pale' and then I started to fall out of the chair and she caught me and called over some other nurses and said 'we need a bed over here quick' and so there I was lying on the bed, heachey, nauseous feeling, the world spinning around me, not sure what was happening – and you know what words were going through my head?

God is my refuge and strength – a very present help in trouble. Therefore I will not fear though the earth give way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea...

It was a little scary, but I felt a confident assurance that God would bring me through. And sure enough, He did.

Now as the psalm continues, the psalmist gives us another picture to strengthen our confidence in God. The first few verses are about the world crumbling; verse 4 paints a picture of another difficult time.

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.

I want you to picture in your mind an ancient city; you've got people and animals all crammed together in narrow streets. There's a wall surrounding the whole of the city to provide a ring of security for everyone inside.

And yet... you can hear the sounds of an army encamped all around you. This psalm sounds to me like it's describing a city under siege and the people inside need help. That's why a river would be such a big deal. They're trapped inside, with an army outside waiting to destroy them if they come out, or for them to starve and die of thirst if they stay in.

But with God, what does the psalmist say: God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved.

(That's actually the very same word from the mountains in verse 3 – the mountains may totter – but the city will not).

Why? Because God is there. Because God will not let His people fall. Because God is there with them.

And God's presence is like a river that flows into the city to give life to the people inside who need His help. In a city under siege, you need water; and in a life under siege, you need God. He will provide.

And yes, let's acknowledge - it may be difficult along the way. A city under siege is not the nicest place to be. The chemotherapy ward is not the nicest place to be. God has not promised us a trial free life – in fact Jesus Himself says – 'in this world, you will have troubles; but take heart, for I have overcome the world.' God doesn't necessarily promise to preserve our belongings or our convenience, but He absolutely promises to preserve us when we run to Him with faith. Jesus Himself suffered immeasurably and He invites us now to trust Him in our suffering. And since His suffering guarantees us eternal life, we can trust Him in the midst of our suffering. And He absolutely promises to be with us every step of the way. Giving life and strength shelter. And He is working for good.

So verses 4 and 5, we see God sustain this city under siege, and then in verse 6 – the camera zooms out to show this conflict on a broader scale – the nations rage, the kingdoms totter. The enemies of God attack one another, they fight one another, they lay siege to one another, they war with one another, attempting to get more for themselves, attempting to demonstrate how superior they are compared to their neighbour –

And God opens His mouth and the earth melts. This is unbridled, unmatched power. The nations roar and rage and beat their chests to show how awesome they are and God simply opens His mouth and they fall apart.

And look at what verse 7 says – God puts that unbridled, unmatched power to work for the benefit of His people.

The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. (Selah) That's another line that was going through my head as I lay on that cot in the hospital – it gave me confidence knowing that the LORD of hosts was with me; that God was there are my fortress.

Now, let's unpack that, because, what exactly does that mean?

What's a LORD of hosts? Does that mean that He's the best at throwing dinner parties?

No – that word 'hosts' has its roots in military language – it's the word that you use to talk about the king's army – the army that He uses to overcome His enemies and protect His people.

So put that with YHWH – that's the LORD – YHWH of the armies – and we're talking here about the divine warrior who leads the heavenly armies in battle for His Kingdom and His people.

And what is it about this divine warrior backed up by an unbeatable army that this psalmist is interested in? He is 'Emmanuel.' He is WITH us. He is with YOU. When you go to the specialist, when you go the hospital, when you're riding in an ambulance, the LORD of the heavenly armies is standing over your shoulder, ready to go to war for His Kingdom and Your wellbeing.

So that's the LORD of hosts part. What about 'God of Jacob'?

Well, that roots us in history, in a specific time and place. This God is not just some cosmic abstraction – He is the God of Jacob – who was the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. He's the God of Israel. For generations, God had treated Jacob's descendants with power and grace and now the psalmist says – that power and grace is available for us. Just as God had sheltered Jacob and Joseph and Judah and Moses and Joshua and Daniel, God would shelter him. God will shelter us. God will be to us a fortress, literally an inaccessibly high place, to keep us safe and to preserve us through danger (Ross, 101).

The LORD of hosts is with US; the God of Jacob is OUR fortress. When we put our faith in Jesus, we are grafted into Jacob's family tree and God is just as much with us and He was with Jacob when he was on the run for his life, trying to get away from the brother whose birthright he had stolen.

When trials come, know this – the Lord of the heavenly armies is with you; the God of Jacob is your fortress.

And then as the psalm continues, the psalmist gives us ANOTHER picture to illustrate what God can do as LORD of hosts.

It being near Christmas time, you've probably seen some version of Dickens' Christmas Carol, with the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. Well, similarly, the psalmist gives us a vision of the future, and like the ghost of Christmas future was intended to help Scrooge then, this vision of the future is intended to help us now.

Look at verse 8:

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. (The NIV says 'shields' – they're following the Greek translation of the OT rather than the notoriously difficult Hebrew) – but listen –

Look what the psalmist says – he walks us out onto the battlefields of the earth and says – look! Look what God has done. No one can stand against Him. No sword, no shield, no spear. No car accident, no cancer, no conflict can stand up to Him. HE WILL BRING IT TO AN END. He promises to be with us forever in a land where death shall be no more and mourning, crying and pain will be a thing of the past.

*He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.  
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 21:3-4 ESV).*

How do we respond to that? Verse 10 -

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

Given that verse 8-9 are talking about war, this probably pictures God appearing on the battlefield between two warring armies and saying in an earth shattering voice STOP! Enough! Be still.

And for us, and our warring hearts and whirling thoughts, we need to hear it too – STOP what you are doing – be still and know that God IS GOD. He is not an idea or a pleasant thought, He is not a crutch for needy people or opium for the masses – He is the sovereign King of the universe, worthy of worldwide praise – and He is committed to us. He deserves our trust and our utmost adoration.

He says – ‘Be still, know that \*I\* am God. Not you. I know what I’m doing. And I’m working for good. I promise. You, rest in Me and see things through MY eyes and I will make things right.’

And at that point, I think there’s nothing left to say, but to repeat what the psalmist himself has already repeated – verse 11:

11 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah (Psa 46:8-11 ESV).

That’s a powerful psalm and it has given me confidence and boldness time and again. I’ve linked the ‘song’ version of it to Langford’s Facebook account so if you want to hear that again, it’s available that way. But I’ll tell you – that psalm is incredibly important to me right now. A couple of months ago I decided ‘I need to preach on this psalm’ but we were in the middle of Judges and it didn’t really work for Advent, so I made a mental note to preach on it just after the New Year. And so I decided on Psalm 37 for last week and then psalm 46 for this week.

And then Christmas Day, my dad said to me ‘let’s go for a walk, privately’ and so we took the dog out around the block and that’s when he told me that he’s been diagnosed with an aggressive, potentially life threatening cancer. They’re still doing tests to find out what can be done and how to proceed but it has been a huge shock for everyone in our family. It’s one of those ‘world crumbling’ moments.

But you know what? God knew two months ago that we would need Psalm 46 for the new year and He planted that seed in my mind then to encourage me now. God knew that we would need His encouragement and His strength to press on, and so here we are.

I do want to ask you to pray for my dad, Ross, and my mom, Beth, as they walk this road but I also want you to know this: The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Whatever lies ahead for you this year – I want you to remember and draw strength from the fact that even if the world were to crumble around us, we needn’t fear – God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

**BENEDICTION**

11. Eph. 6:23-24 – Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.