

A Mighty Fortress: The Christian Experience of Divine Support in Time of Trouble

Psalm 46:1-11

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me tonight to Psalm 46. We're working our way through the second book of the Psalms on Sunday evenings, and that will take us from Psalm 42 eventually to Psalm 72. And over and over we're asking what we learn about Christ in these Psalms and what we learn about Christian experience in these Psalms.

The first three weeks together in Psalm 42 and 43 and 44, we met the depths of Christian experience. Then last week in Psalm 45--a Messianic, royal wedding Psalm--we scaled the height of Christian delight in God and even considered something of how God delights in His people, His bride, His church.

Tonight, we're back in trouble again, but it's trouble in which we confidently celebrate God's support of us, the divine support we have in the midst of the most trying times. There are three scenes in the Psalm that's before us tonight. In verses 1 through 3, you meet the first scene. It's a picture of God's power over nature. It's a cataclysmic earthquake in which the world is unmade and shaken, and God's power over nature is displayed in that scene. The second scene in the Psalm is from verse 4 to verse 7. It's a picture of a city engulfed by a massive siege, an innumerable hoard of enemies surrounding it, and again God's power is celebrated over these attackers of His city. The third scene is from verse 8 to 11. It's a picture of a battlefield after the battle is over, and with the bodies of the enemy and his engines of war strewn all over the place. It's a battlefield aftermath in which the bodies of God's vanquished enemies are contemplated. And so God's power over the whole warring world is celebrated in that scene in Psalm 46. Let's prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed by looking to the Lord in prayer. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your word. We glory in the might and in the power of Your word. You spoke the world into being by Your Word, and by that same Word, You bring us to life in Christ. Give us then eyes to see and ears to hear the beauty and glory of Your truth, and to respond to it, in faith, in trust in the living God. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, we ask it, Amen.

Hear God's word.

For the choir director. A Psalm of the sons of Korah, set to Alamoth. A Song. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling places of the most High. God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered; He raised His voice, the earth melted. The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold. Come, behold the works of the Lord, who has wrought desolations in the earth. He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariots with fire. 'Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be in exalted in the earth.' The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

Before the dawn of the day of the bridegroom and His bride—that day that is pictured for us so gloriously in Psalm 45—the marriage feast of the Lamb in which King Jesus will receive His bride, His church, His people to Himself in glory, in the hall of splendor in Heaven on high; the earth will shake with commotions, wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famine, pestilence—all combining to perplex us.

But here in Psalm 46, we find the Mighty One giving strength to His own people in perilous times, in their time of need, just in the nick of time. I want to look at those three pictures, those three scenes that we've already described in this Psalm, together with you tonight. Let's look at that first scene in verses 1 through 3.

I. God can be trusted when the whole world goes crazy.

This is a picture of the challenges that are facing the people of God in this fallen world. It's the picture of a cataclysmic earthquake in which the whole world is unmade, the stable mountains are falling into the sea, the chaotic seas are swirling and foaming and covering the earth. It's a picture of Genesis 1 reversed, where all of the distinctions between land and sea that God has established are being undone. And so it's a picture of the challenges facing the people of God. And by showing us this picture, the Psalmist is reminding us of God's power, God's power to protect us against anything; and He reminds us of His power to

protect us against anything by showing us that we are safe, we are safe in the midst of the most violent upheaval of nature possible. His point is this: God can be trusted when the whole world goes crazy. Let's look at these verses together.

He begins by pointing us to who God is: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." This, by the way, is a classic example of praying the attributes of God as a way of moving faith to believe in the ultimate reality over our present circumstances. You see, we tend to read present circumstances, especially when they're traumatic, as the final word of reality, but behind them and under them and around them and over them is a greater reality, a larger reality, and as we pray back to God—who He is, what He's like, what He has done in the past, what He has promised to do in the future, the things that He does in His mercy towards us—our faith is moved to believe in that reality which transcends our specific circumstances. And the Psalmist points us to three realities about God in the very first verse.

The first thing is, God is our refuge. This is a word which speaks of God making us secure by defending us: He shelters us. Notice, by the way, this beautiful expression that God Himself is our refuge. It's not even that He provides us refuge; it's not even that He gives us refuge; it's that He Himself is the thing, the One whom we shelter in. We take refuge in Him. He's not merely the provider of our shelter; He is our shelter. He's our refuge. And so this speaks to that security that we gain, because God is our defense.

But the Psalmist doesn't stop there: God is our refuge...and He is our strength. Now this could point to God as the source of our inner strength and courage, but I want to suggest that though that is true, this means more. This means that God is the One who is strong when we are weak. Now why do I say that? Well, because of verses two and three. If verses 2 and 3 are happening, my friends, it frankly doesn't matter how strong you are. If the world is being moved out from under your feet, it doesn't matter how strong you are. You need someone infinitely stronger to take care of you if the world is being moved out from under your feet, and that's the picture of verses 2 and 3. And so the Psalmist is reminding us that we have that "someone stronger" in God. He is our refuge and our strength. He's strong for us when we are weak and unable to meet the challenges of our present circumstances.

And He is, thirdly, a very present help. He is exceedingly near, the Psalmist is saying, in time of trouble. Now you've heard me share before about trembling seminarians under the censure of R.C. Sproul as he examined the theological adequacy of their prayers. You remember that he had critiqued several young men in a row when he was teaching here in Jackson, and so one day when he called upon a fellow in the back row to pray, the fellow stood up and said, "Let's pray. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name..." hoping that he would not receive a critique for that prayer. One day there was a young man who prayed, "Lord God, be with us." And Dr. Sproul asked him, "So are you denying

the omnipresence of God? Are you saying God is not with us?" And he began to challenge the young man. Now he was trying to get him to think theologically about what he was asking, but the prayer, "be with us," "be near us," is a very Biblical prayer. It's not denying that God is everywhere at once, that He's omnipresent; it is acknowledging the special truth of the special nearness of God to His people in troubled times. That's what is being spoken about here in this Psalm. The Lord is especially near His people in trouble. We pray that way when we sing "Away in the Manger." You remember the stanza that goes, "Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay, close by me forever and love me I pray." Just like a child afraid of the dark says, "Daddy, can I sleep with you tonight?" because he wants to know the special nearness of his father, so also in times of trouble the people of God want to know the special nearness and care of their Heavenly Father.

You know, the Psalms themselves give us an intimation of this very truth. Turn back with me to Psalm 23. We've pointed this out before, but it's worth noticing again. As the Psalmist moves through the way God is dealing with him in the "Shepherd Psalm," Psalm 23, in verses 2 and 3, he speaks of God in the third person: "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for You are with me."

Notice the change from the third person to the second person. It's as if the Psalmist is saying that he senses the exceeding nearness of God to him, especially and even in the valley of the shadow of death. He knows God is for him—he's been celebrating that fact for three verses—but when he's in the valley of the shadow, there the language is, "You!" It's as if God Himself is standing by his side. The Psalmist is celebrating that truth: "He is our very present help." You see, the Psalmist is aware of a special nearness of God in troubled times.

And so he rehearses these truths about God to stoke his faith and trust in the living God in the midst of these traumatic circumstances, and now he draws this catastrophic picture. Look at verses 2 and 3. It's a picture of the unmaking of the world. You remember in Genesis 1, God divides the land from the sea. Here we see the land, even the highest land, thrown back into the sea, "We will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride." This is an almost apocalyptic description of the whole natural order being turned upside down.

True confession: Do you remember a few years ago when all those asteroid movies were out—you know, the world was coming to an end because an asteroid was going to hit us? Well, there was one in which the asteroid actually hit. I couldn't go see that movie because I just couldn't take looking at New York being swallowed up in a 1,000-foot tidal wave. I know some of you went ahead and

saw it anyway. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. But this is an even more catastrophic picture than that. This is a picture of the whole world turned upside down. The Psalmist is saying in verses 2 and 3 that even if the two most immutable, unshakable things that we can think of in the natural order, the earth under our feet and the mountains—the grand majestic mountains, whether you think of the Rockies or whether you think of the Smokies or whether you think of the Alps or whether you think of the Atlas or whatever mountains you think of—even if these things were hurled to the bottom of the ocean, even if the whole natural order were turned upside down, we will not fear for God cannot be shaken. The Psalmist is saying when the world is turned upside down, you run to God and nothing can shake you.

You remember in the movie *Rocky* when he's being beaten to a bloody pulp by Apollo Creed, and he keeps saying in the later rounds, "It ain't so bad. It ain't so bad"? This is kind of what the Psalmist is saying in verses two and three, "The world's going crazy. It ain't so bad. It ain't so bad." But this is not because he's resilient, but because he serves a God whose power is infinitely greater than all the forces in this world combined and exponentially magnified. You run to God and you let go the movables.

You know we have, we really have no idea of who we're dealing with when we're dealing with God. We can draw the most apocalyptic picture that we can imagine of the forces of this world collapsing; we can imagine the universe being reduced to a micro-nano-something in the heat of it's final consumption, and we still can't conceive of the almighty power of God which is far greater than that. And the Psalmist is resting in that, and he's running to God. And, friends, I want to say that's so important for you to remember tonight, because it is especially in time of trouble that we need to run to God and to acknowledge His control over all circumstances.

There's a movement within evangelical circles today to say, "No, when you run into trouble, this is what you need to do. You need to recognize that God didn't see this coming because the future is uncertain, and He has to take risks to just like you do, and so here's your comfort: God knows how you feel. He's been blind-sided too, but He's really quick on His feet, and He'll do the best He can."¹ And I want to say, that is utterly alien to what the Psalmist is saying here. All of these troubles, as great as they are, they're out of proportion in terms of the magnitudes of the kinds of troubles that we face. All of these troubles pale in comparison to the size of the Living God and His power to address those things and to remedy those things and care for us in the midst of all difficulty. We have no idea who we're dealing with.

You remember what the author of Hebrews says in Hebrews chapter 12 beginning in verse 26?

¹ The Openness of God Debate

“His voice shook the earth.” But now He has promised saying, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” This expression “yet once more” denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

You see, the Psalmist knows that, and he knows that no matter how bad it looks around him, his God is greater and his God has purposed to shake the things which can be shaken in order to make firm the things which will last forever, and by His mercy He has chosen you so that you yourself will not be shaken. That's the first scene: the world turned upside down.

II. When we are surrounded by our enemies we are as secure as if we were around the celestial throne.

Here's the second scene. Look at verses 4 through 7. Here the Psalmist again reminds us of God's power to protect us against anything, and he does it by showing us two things at the same time that seem contradictory. First, there is this picture in verses 4 and 5 of a serene city, the city of God; but then, when you look at verses 5 through 7, you realize that this city is under siege. The armies of the enemies of God are surrounding this city, and yet the Psalmist has given us a picture of God's power to protect against anything by showing how serene the city of God is even when she's surrounded by her enemies. It's another picture of the challenges facing the people of God in this fallen world, a city engulfed by an innumerable hoard of its enemies. And we learn here in verses 4 through 7 that when we are surrounded by our enemies, we are as secure as if we were singing the praises of the Lord Jesus Christ around the celestial throne in glory. When we're surrounded by our enemies, we are as secure as if we were in glory around the throne.

Here's a major scene change. In verses 4 through 7, we have a description of the city of God. By the way, that theme of the “city of God” is going to be a major component in the Psalms from this point out. The next Psalm which Derek will preach next Lord's Day evening, Psalm 47, will pick up this theme—so does Psalm 48, Psalm 65, Psalm 68, Psalm 76, Psalm 84, 87, 99, 122, 125, and then 132-134. This picture of the city of God as a picture of God's people is going to recur throughout the Psalms. And if it weren't a city picture, if it weren't an urban picture you would almost read verse 4 as if it were a scene of pastoral bliss. Here's a city laved by a river. Here's a city made glad by this river that is in the city of God. Here's a city that is called the “City of God.” Here's a city that is the dwelling place of the most High, the place in which He makes His visible

presence known amongst the nations. It's a picture of security, but verse 5 enters the reality check because this city is under siege.

But the city is going to hold; she's not going to be moved. And notice that word—it takes you back to verses 2 and 3 in the picture of the whole world moving—this city is not going to be *moved*. Why? Well, the Psalmist goes right back to this meditation on who God is and what He does. The city is not going to be moved, first, because “God is in her midst”; He's right in the midst of her. And, second, “God will help her”; God is her aid; God is her help; God will help her. And, thirdly, God will help her soon; “He'll help her at the dawn of day.” And for all these reasons, the city will hold.

And in verse 6 we have this beautiful, this glorious declaration: “The nations make an uproar, the kingdoms totter, He raises His voice and the earth melts.” God speaks the rebellion, the siege into oblivion. Does it remind you of something? Take your hymnals. Here's how Martin Luther catches this truth. It's right at the end of stanza three; he's spoken about a world that's filled with devils threatening to tear us apart, to undo us, and then he says, “But we will not fear because God has willed His truth to triumph through us.” Now his focus is not simply on devils and demons but on Satan himself, the Evil One, the Accuser of God's people: “The Prince of Darkness Grim, we tremble not for him; His rage we can endure because his doom is sure. One little word shall fell him.” Now that launches him into the final stanza: “That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them abides.”

God speaks the siege into oblivion. He spoke the world into being, my friends. There was nothing, and by His word, there was everything. By the same power of God, He speaks the enemies of His people into oblivion; He uses the weaponry of His word. No wonder this hymn was the battle hymn of the Lutheran Reformation. When things were dark, Martin Luther would turn to his understudy, Philip Melancthon, and he would say, “Come, Philip, let us sing the 46th.” There's a reason for that. It celebrates God's power over circumstances, and it celebrates the power of His word. His word speaks the world into being, unmakes His enemies, and brings new life to light in our hearts through Jesus Christ and through His Holy Spirit.

The chorus of verse 7 has a refrain of confidence ending it. And it's another meditation on God; in fact, it thinks about four aspects. First of all, He's the God of armies. Does it mean troops or stars? I don't know, but it sure does remind you of that day when Elisha and his servant are surrounded by their enemies, and as the servant goes out he sees the hosts of Elisha's enemies, the hosts of Israel's enemies, have come in a raid against them. And he's terrified, and he comes back to Elisha. and he says, “What are we going to do?” And Elisha says, “Those who are with us are more than those who are against us or with them,” and the servant's eyes are opened to see the hills full of horses and chariots of fire. And here's this picture again: He's the God of armies. He has hosts and hosts and

legions of angels at His disposal, protecting His people. He's the God of armies, but even better than that, He's on our side. Those that are with us are more than those who are with them! He's on our side—and we're back to Luther's rendition again, aren't we? "We will not fear for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us." And the stanza before: "Were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing." The God of hosts is on our side.

And He doesn't stop there. He's the God who made promises to us. He's the God of Jacob. He's the God of the covenant. He's the God who has pledged to be faithful to His people. And He's "our stronghold," and this word is a picture of a fortress that's on an inaccessible height. Nobody can get to it. And you always have this picture in light of verses 2 and 3, of this fortress on an inaccessible height, and the mountains are being thrown into the sea, and the fortress is still there. Nobody can get to God's people. They're secure because of who He says He is, because of what He does for us. And the same Word that spoke the worlds into being protects you from all your enemies. That's why the hymn writer can say, "In Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken," do you remember how he puts it, "With salvation's walls surrounded, Thou mayest smile on all Your foes." Because the Lord of hosts, the God of armies, the God of Jacob is with you. And that's why William Plumer can say, "No real harm can befall the child of God walking in the path of duty." Nothing can touch us. That's why the early Church, when contemplating the death of Christ on His cross at the hands of His enemies can pray in Acts 4:27, that "Together were gathered against your servant the peoples of the city, and the Pharisees and the Scribes, the leaders of God's people, to do whatever Your hand had predestined to occur." "No real harm can befall the child of God walking in the path of duty." And that's why we sing with faith, "We Rest On Thee" or "It Is Well With My Soul" or "Be Still My Soul The Lord Is On Thy Side" or "If Thou But Suffer God To Guide Me." That's why we can sing those hymns in confidence.

III. Remember what the battlefield's going to look like when God is done.

One last picture, verses 8 to 11, it's the final picture. This picture is a future picture. Now the battle is over, and this picture is used by the Psalmist to remind us of God's power to protect us against anything, by showing His complete victory over all the forces arrayed against us. It's a final picture, a picture of the future when the challenges facing the people of God in this fallen world are ended. It's a picture of the desolation of all God's and all our enemies.

And the point is this: Remember—maybe we need to say "pre-remember"—what the battlefield is going to look like when God is done. Verses 8 through 11 have the same function as the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation gives us the end before it has come to remind us of the certainty of the victory that is coming. The whole point of the book of Revelation is this: we win! It's a picture to stoke your hope because of the certain future that is coming. That's what Revelation is;

it's a picture of God's victory.

And this is a picture of the aftermath of God's judgment against His enemies, His war against His enemies. "He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth," not through negotiation, not through the Department of State, but through obliterating everyone who stands in His ways. God speaks to the opposition. Look at verse 10: "Cease striving and know that I am God." This is not like God's word for Moses to the children of Israel at the Red Sea, "You stand still and watch what God is going to do to you." This is God speaking to His enemies, "Silence! I will reign." This is God's announcement of His rule and judgment against them. "Knock it off!" He says. "I will reign on earth."

And the city of God doesn't make this happen. The people of God don't make this happen. We're simply called to trust and to be faithful. God does this. This informs our whole approach to the Christian life. You see, the world thinks that God's word is so weak. How can God's word overthrow the world? You just watch it. "Be silenced! I will reign." God, by His word, accomplishes His victory. All we're called to do is trust in that word and be faithful in walking in its way. And we stand still, and we, as His people, behold Him bring about the salvation that He has promised. May God enable us in the midst of our own troubles to trust in Him, even as the Psalmist did. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, it is one of the most encouraging thoughts that we could possibly have: "That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them abides." Help us to remember that that word is for us, as we have trusted in that word. If we've not trusted in that word, O God, show us that battlefield again. We don't want to be amongst the carnage of those under the judgment of God. We want to be with the people of God, in the city of God, with walls of salvation surrounded, and yet smiling upon our foes because of the God who is our refuge and strength and very present help in time of trouble. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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