

“Total Security in God”

Psalm 46

I just finished reading a book called *Dead Wake*, which is about the last voyage the *Lusitania*, the world’s largest, fastest, and most luxurious ocean liner. In May, 1915, during WW1, a U-boat, a German submarine, fired a torpedo upon this passenger vessel, causing it to sink twelve miles off the coast of Ireland in just eighteen minutes. 764 souls survived. 1,198 perished—a good number of them children and infants.

The book is a compelling read for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that the author sets the stage for this terrible tragedy by introducing us to many of the crewmen and passengers and telling their stories. There are athletes, inventors, businesspeople, socialites, aristocrats, farmers, honeymooners, and authors. There are husbands and wives and fathers and mothers with lots and lots of children. By the time we actually read about the sinking of the ship late in the book, we feel like we know many of these characters personally, and we are endeared to them. And so when the ship goes down, we *feel* something.

We feel rage at the cold-hearted captain of the U-boat that gave the order to fire the torpedo knowing full well that it was not a warship, and then, through his periscope, calmly watched the ship founder and nearly two thousand civilians flounder in the sea. We feel compassion for the parents that were separated from their children, and even more for the children that were separated from their parents. We feel sorry for those who didn’t know how to swim, and who didn’t know how to properly don their life vests.

But as the author describes several of these passengers and crewmen and what they experienced during those eighteen minutes perhaps the strongest emotion the reader feels is terror. As he describes the chaos that ensued on board the ship—parents scrambling to find their children, lifeboats being hastily and clumsily deployed, many of which were destroyed in the process, explosions from the boiler rooms, the listing of the ship, people falling over the decks into the sea—we are given a description of what it is like to have absolutely no control, to be in the very heart of a catastrophe, and to come face to face with death.

It seems to me that’s the worst feeling there is. It is what we dread the most. And as I was reading it I couldn’t help but wonder, how would I have felt and how would I have reacted if I was on that ship.

I would think that might be the ultimate test of faith. Being in a catastrophic circumstance, during a time of war, surrounded by one’s enemies, staring death in the face.

That’s what the psalm we are going to look at this morning is all about. It is Psalm 46, and it begins with a bold proclamation.

¹ 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. Selah

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. Selah

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. Selah*

This is a familiar psalm—at least portions of it. The first verse inspired Martin Luther’s majestic hymn, “*A Mighty Fortress is Our God*”. And verse 10, “*Be still and know that I am God,*” is an oft-quoted phrase among Christians that has inspired lesser known choruses and songs. However, these two verses have often been isolated, obscuring the depth and richness of their meaning and application for the worshiper. This morning we want to look at the *whole* psalm, which is a beautiful portrayal of God’s absolute sovereignty over nature and nations, and the wonderful implications of this fact for us, His people.

Verse 1 is really a summary statement of what the psalm is all about. ¹ *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

In the ancient world a refuge was a place of shelter and safety from one’s enemies. It might be a fortress that is so secure its occupants feel confident the enemy cannot penetrate its walls. It might be a hiding place where its inhabitants feel sure the enemy would never find them. A refuge is place where people feel totally safe and totally secure.

The song writers, the sons of Korah, declare that *God* is our refuge. God is our fortress, our stronghold, our hiding place. In *Him* we find shelter, and rest, and peace, and protection. In *Him* we are totally safe and totally secure.

He is also our *strength*. He not only fortifies us from without, He fortifies us from within. Being in His presence actually supplies us with the inner strength we need to face the troubles and challenges of life and respond to them in a calm and courageous manner. And it’s not our doing; it’s not a strength that comes from our own reserves. It’s *His* strength that He gives to us when we are conscious of His presence and we put our trust in Him.

For we are told, at the end of verse 1, that He is *a very present help in trouble*. This phrase simply means that God is always alert, always ready, always prepared to respond to those who put their trust in Him during times of distress. What this means is that when we are in trouble we can be absolutely sure that He will give us His undivided attention—that He will be totally and thoroughly focused on our issues and our needs. We don’t have to wait in line and wait our turn because He’s busy dealing with someone else’s problem, or with some calamity on the other side of the world. We don’t have to wonder if He’ll flake out on us or if we’ll fall through the cracks. He’s an *ever-ready* helper.

And what is so comforting is that we can be assured of this even in the most frightening circumstances, which the song-writers describe in **verses 2-3**. 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*

What the psalmists have just described are the most fearsome natural disasters known to mankind. Earthquakes, landslides, avalanches, tsunamis, floods, volcanoes. What makes these things even more terrifying is that they are unpredictable, they are devastating, they are completely beyond our control, and if we get in their way we can be destroyed.

What is our natural reaction when we find ourselves in the midst of such catastrophic circumstances? I saw a film a few years ago called “*The Impossible*,” a true story about a

family that was vacationing on the coast of Thailand when the great tsunami hit in December 2004. The reenactment of that tidal wave overwhelming the guests at that resort was one of the most chilling things I've ever seen on film.

Just a few days ago, there was a BBC film crew climbing Mt. Aetna, Europe's tallest active volcano, when the mountain suddenly and unexpectedly erupted, spewing stones and boulders, and causing the crew to drop their gear and run for their lives. All the while the abandoned camera was filming, capturing their fear and panic.

What's our natural reaction when we encounter cataclysmic events? Our natural reaction is to be terrified and traumatized. But the psalmist says that if God is our refuge and strength, we don't have to be afraid even when we are facing the most traumatizing circumstances, like earthquakes, avalanches, tsunamis, floods, and volcanoes. We can be calm and courageous, because we can be assured that God is with us. And why is it comforting that God is with us? Because God is sovereign over nature.

In Acts 27 we are told the story of Paul's journey to Rome. He was a prisoner being escorted by the Roman military because he was going to stand trial before Caesar, and he was traveling by ship. On the way, they encountered a great storm—a Nor'easter. It was so severe that after three days the crew had to throw all the ship's cargo overboard. For several more days the ship was tossed to and fro in the sea and the crew were without food and everyone on board thought the ship would break apart and they would all be drowned. Everyone except Paul. He was just as calm as could be.

He finally said, *“Men...keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. ²³ Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me ²⁴ and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.’ ²⁵ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. ²⁶ Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island”* (22-26).

When they did run aground on the island of Malta, and all 276 men made it to shore, they were standing around a fire warming themselves when a poisonous viper bit Paul and attached itself to his hand. Acts 28 tells us that the islanders who saw it freaked out, and made an assumption that Paul must be a murderer and an escaped convict, and that this snakebite was divine justice (v. 4). But then we are told that Paul calmly shook the snake off into the fire, and went about gathering more brush (v. 5). Because he suffered no ill effects, the islanders then changed their minds and thought he was a god.

How would you feel if you had just been in a small ship in a severe storm on the high seas for several days, and you were nearly starving? And then you were in a shipwreck where you had to jump overboard and swim to an island where you didn't know if its inhabitants were hostile or friendly? And then as you were trying to dry off and get warm you were bit by a deadly snake?

Would you feel traumatized?

I want to suggest to you that the reason Paul responded the way he did is because he knew that God was his refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. When you really believe that God is with you and God is in control of the circumstances, and that God has more power than the ocean, more power than hurricane force winds, more power than the Roman military, more power than a venomous snake, then you don't have to be afraid. You *can* remain calm. You *can* keep going. You *can* be strong.

The message of verses 1-3 of Psalm 46 is that since God is our refuge and strength,

we can be fearless in even the most frightening circumstances.

That means you don't have to be afraid when the doctor informs you that your body is full of cancer, and there's nothing they can do about it. You don't have to be afraid when you're in a scary situation and you find yourself alone. You don't have to be afraid when you get that dreaded phone call in the middle of the night informing you that there's a crisis with a loved one.

By the way, verses 1-3 aren't telling us that we won't go through catastrophes and crises. God, who is sovereign over nature, could have prevented the storm that caused Paul's ship to sink and scared the wits out of every one on board but him. What these verses are saying is that we don't have to be afraid, because we are totally secure in God, even if something bad happens to us.

The song-writers go on to expand on this, describing a place of safety and security. Look at **verses 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.*

The *city of God* is one of the great themes of the Old Testament, and especially in the Psalms. Zion, or Jerusalem, even though it was a relatively small city, even though it was not the wealthiest city or the most impressive city architecturally; even though it is not located in a place that would make it a great commercial center, is portrayed in the Scriptures, from a theological standpoint, as the *center* of the world. That is simply because it is the place where God has chosen to dwell. In other words, the thing that makes Jerusalem consequential, the thing that makes Jerusalem strong, is that it is God's abode. God is in the midst of her.

Jerusalem means city of peace, and it is intentionally meant to be contrasted with all the cataclysmic events in verses 2-3. And so in verse 4, instead of menacing seas there is a quiet, life-giving river, a water supply in the heart of the city where God's people can find refreshment.

And in verse 5, the city that cannot be moved is contrasted with the supposedly immovable mountains that have fallen into the heart of the sea. The reason for the city's stability? God is in the midst of her. And when God is present, everything is stable; everything is secure.

Even when, **verse 6**, *⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.* The same voice that brought the planets and galaxies and all created things into existence can speak again, and dissolve those same things. He's sovereign. He's in control. Not just over nature, but over nations. Nations rage, kingdoms totter. These are nations and kingdoms that, from a human and military standpoint, are much stronger than Israel. They have much bigger armies and far more resources.

But when you have the sovereign One living among you, it doesn't matter how small you are or how little you have. What matters is that *He* is your refuge and strength. Because His power is far, far greater than their power. He can defeat those nations by just speaking a word. He can defeat those nations by having them turn on themselves in battle, like He did with the Midianites when Gideon went up against them with 300 men and a bunch of clay jars (Judges 8). He can defeat them by dispatching His heavenly hosts, like He did when the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah (2 Chron. 32). He can do whatever He wants because He's all powerful and He's absolutely sovereign.

Which means that since God is our refuge and strength, we can be fearless in even the most frightening circumstances or when surrounded by our most powerful enemies.

And that ought to make us cry out with joy, **verse 7**, *⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah*

This is the refrain of the psalm, which will be repeated in verse 11 at the end of the second stanza. But it is intended to be the climax of the song. Everything in the song has built to this crescendo, and now the Israelite community sings with gusto, *⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

The LORD of hosts means the God of angel armies. And I hope you know that human armies are no match for angel armies. One of my favorite stories in the Bible is when the king of Syria was trying to capture the prophet Elisha because Elisha, through divine revelation, was revealing all his battle plans to the king of Israel. So the king of Syria dispatched his army to Dothan, the town where Elisha lived. And we are told in 2 Kings 6, *¹⁴ So he sent there horses and chariots and a great army, and they came by night and surrounded the city.*

¹⁵ When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" ¹⁶ He said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." ¹⁷ Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. ¹⁸ And when the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, "Please strike this people with blindness." So he struck them with blindness in accordance with the prayer of Elisha (2 Kings 6:14-19).

Again, God is sovereign over nature and the nations. And when He is our refuge and strength, we can be fearless in even the most frightening circumstances or when surrounded by our most powerful enemies.

Let's look at the second stanza, the last part of the psalm. **Verses 8-10.** *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.*

A short while ago I finished reading through Ezekiel in my personal devotions, and I was struck how many chapters (25-32) are prophecies about God's judgments upon other nations (Ammon, Moab, Philistia, Edom, Tyre, Sidon, Egypt, and Lebanon). After Ezekiel I read Daniel, where the last half of the book are detailed prophecies given to him about the empires of Babylon, Assyria, Greece, and Rome.

The theme of all these prophecies is that Yahweh, the God of Israel, creator of heaven and earth, is sovereign. He is in charge of the nations, raising up kings and kingdoms, even though these kings and kingdoms don't even know him. He is orchestrating circumstances and events to accomplish *His* purposes, because He has a plan that is ultimately going to result in the annihilation of evil and the triumph of good.

There is going to be a reckoning one day. The God of Israel is the judge of all the earth. The nations will not give an account to the gods they worship, for their gods are no gods at all. They will give an account to the God of Israel, who has chosen, in His sovereignty, to be the God of a relatively undistinguished people, and to dwell in a relatively undistinguished city.

Therefore, it would behoove nature and all nations to, **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!”*

We often think of this verse as a message of comfort to those who are troubled. But it’s really a rebuke to a restless and turbulent world. It means, “Be quiet! Shut up!” It’s similar to the rebuke Jesus made to the raging sea when he said, “Peace, be still.”

And the end result is not man’s comfort, but God’s glory. “I will be exalted among the nations! I will be exalted in the earth!” That is God’s grand, eternal purpose. And it compels the song-writers to repeat the refrain on a very triumphant note, ¹¹ *The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah*

This psalm is about God’s sovereignty over nature and nations. But it is also about the total security that the people who belong to Him possess, because not only is He sovereign, He is our refuge and strength. And since God is our refuge and strength, we can be fearless in even the most frightening circumstances or when surrounded by our most powerful enemies.

I read portions of another book this week that is a New York Times bestseller. It is called, *Lies We Believe about God*, by Wm. Paul Young, who is also the author of *The Shack*. One of the things he claims is a lie to which he devotes an entire chapter is, “God is in Control.” He writes, *“I don’t believe that the word control, in the sense of deterministic power, is part of God’s vocabulary. We invented the idea as part of our need to dominate and maintain a myth of certainty...Control does not originate in God, but submission does...God submits rather than controls and joins us in the resulting mess of relationship, to participate in the possibility of life...”* (42-43). And then he devotes his next chapter to how God submits to us.

I need to tell you that the portions of this book that I have read are extremely troubling, some of them downright appalling. And it doesn’t bode well for the theology of the Shack—either the book or the movie.

The whole point of Psalm 46—no, the whole point of the Bible, is that God is sovereign. That simply means that God is in control. That is the theme that runs throughout Scripture. And if God is not sovereign, we’re in trouble!

So I want to encourage you to put your complete trust in God. As I said, trusting Him does not make you immune to disasters or catastrophes or pain or suffering. But if you know Him and you belong to Him through faith in Jesus, you can go through anything without fear, because you know that, ultimately, you are in His hands. He is your refuge and strength. Even if harm comes to you, even if death comes knocking at your door, you’re going to be okay.

One of the passengers on the Lusitania was Rev. Henry Wood Simpson of Rossland, British Columbia. He survived the sinking and wrote about his experience afterward. He described himself being underwater for a period of time, wondering if he would ever come out. But when he did he said his life jacket held him in a position of comfort. He said, “As I was lying on my back smiling up at the blue sky and white clouds, the moments in the water were almost enjoyable. I found it a most comfortable position, and lay there for a bit very happily” (288). As he swam toward a collapsible life raft occupied by survivors, he said someone on board started singing, “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow,” and then everyone joined in and we all put a good deal of heart into it.” He said, “An hour passed, then two hours. The sea remained calm; the afternoon light shifted hue. It was a beautiful sunset, and all so calm and peaceful” (288-289).

The author of the book doesn't make the connection between Reverend Simpson's peaceful demeanor and his faith in God. But I wonder if he was conscious that God was His refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

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Main Idea: Since God is our refuge and strength, we can be fearless in even the most frightening circumstances or when surrounded by our most powerful enemies

First Stanza (1-7) A Mighty Fortress is Our God

An assertion of our security in God (1)

God is our refuge and strength

God is an ever-ready helper

The result of our security in God: Fearless in even the most frightening circumstances (2-3)

During earthquakes (2a)

During landslides and avalanches (2b)

During tsunamis (3a)

During volcanoes (3b)

The security of the city where God dwells (4-5)

Continual refreshment and peace (4)

Totally stable and indestructible (5)

The sovereignty of God over the nations (6)

Refrain: Yahweh is with *us*; he is *our* fortress (7)

Second Stanza: God will be Exalted Among all Nations (8-11)

An invitation to see the LORD’s works (8-9)

He brings utter destruction (8)

He makes perfect peace—even eliminating the weapons of war (9)

An invitation to know the LORD—especially his glory (10)

Refrain: Yahweh is with *us*; he is *our* fortress (11)

Family Life Group Application Questions

“Total Security in God” Psalm 46

Main Idea: Since God is our refuge and strength, we can be fearless in even the most frightening circumstances or when surrounded by our most powerful enemies

God is our refuge and strength whether we are conscious of it or not. But our fear or lack of fear in any given circumstance is based on our *awareness* of God as our refuge and strength at the time. How can we maintain a *continual* awareness of his presence, his sovereignty, and his omnipotence?

Are you presently facing a circumstance in which you are tempted to be afraid? What, specifically, can you do to find refuge in the Lord right now?

Think about some brothers or sisters in the Lord who are fearful or anxious because of their circumstances. How can you encourage them to find their refuge in the Lord?