

MARTIN LUTHER'S PSALM

Psalm 46

- 1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
- 2 Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;
- 3 Though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling.
Selah.
- 4 There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.
- 5 God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn.
- 6 The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted.
- 7 The Lord of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge.
Selah.
- 8 Come, behold the works of the Lord, Who has made desolations in the earth.
- 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the 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 refuge. Selah.

We are repeatedly reminded by various commentators that Psalm 46 is called, "Luther's Psalm." In times of extreme opposition, Martin Luther would say to his friend, Philip Melancthon: "Come, Philip, let us sing the 46th Psalm." Many a saint in times of trial have found courage and comfort in this Psalm as they rested in the truth that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (verse 1).

The general consensus among biblical scholars is that the Psalm references the destruction of Sennacherib's Assyrian army (2 Kings 18) that came against Jerusalem, called "the city of God", in verse 4. Psalm 46 has a strong message for those without and within Israel, whose attitude and actions toward God and God's people are hostile.

The Psalm is divided into three stanzas, each ending with the word "Selah." The word was a musical signal meaning "pause." However, it also has a meaning for the non-musician which is, "Pause and think about that." So, let us "pause" and contemplate the truths in each of the three stanzas as follows:

Stanza #1 – CONFESSION IN THE MIDST OF CALAMITIES

In attempting to assuage the fears of the people of Israel, the psalmist creates scenarios of the worst types of natural calamities that he can think of and then says, in essence, "God is greater – He is in control."

A. *The Calamities That Are Mentioned* – vs. 2-3

- 2 Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed,

and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;
3 Though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains
shake with its swelling. Selah.

Can you think of more calamitous catastrophes than the removal of the earth, or the Appalachian, Alleghany, Blue Ridge, Rocky and Sierra Nevada mountains being tossed into the oceans? Or floods so great that they would disturb those same mountains? The psalmist is trying to paint the most calamitous situations that he can think of at the time.

The question is posed to Jeremiah, "So, Jeremiah, if you're worn out in this footrace with men, what makes you think you can race against horses? And if you can't keep your wits during times of calm, what's going to happen when troubles break loose like the Jordan in flood?" (Jeremiah 12:5 *The Message*)

This Psalm not only had a message for ancient Israel but it has a message for present day Christians as well. An everlasting truth that is articulated in this Psalm is echoed in Proverbs 18:10 – "The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous run into it, and are safe."

Psalm 46 is a great musical treatise on the sovereignty of God. Regardless of the extreme urgencies and emergencies in life, none can possibly be greater than God can handle. The psalmist's confession in verse 1, is one that all trusting souls can make.

B. *The Confession That is Made* – v. 1, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

The Lord is present in the lives of all of His people – He is "a very present help in trouble." However, it takes but very little trouble to disturb, upset and throw completely off balance the spiritual equilibrium of some saints. I have known saints who lost their sanctification when the garbage disposal would not work; when the milk was discovered to be spoiled; when the red-light at the intersection got stuck on red; when they were delayed at the check-out counter by a slow clerk, etc.

What will they do if, as the psalmist said, the earth is removed? What if the mountains are thrown into the ocean? What if there are floods and earthquakes – "Though its waters roar and be troubled though the mountains shake"?

Can you make the confession of faith that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" as you experience lesser turbulences in life than the psalmist lists in verses two and three? Can you stamp Romans 8:28, "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose", upon "all things" in your life? Let us remember that no matter what happens in our lives, great or small, God is in control and He "is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." May that always be our confession.

News flash! Yesterday, we had an earthquake here in southern California where we live! I first heard a rumbling noise and then felt the movement of the earth. We have earthquakes here all too frequently. They are always unsettling events, I assure you! As I write this I am

glad that God is big enough to shake the earth and yet preserve His children! The next time trouble comes your way, remember, He “is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

Stanza #2 – COMFORT IN THE MIDST OF CRISIS

- 4 There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.
- 5 God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn.
- 6 The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted.
- 7 The Lord of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

The crisis to which Psalm 46 alludes was no small thing. The Psalm was written in view of a previous attack by an enemy of Israel upon the city of Jerusalem. The author realized that the strength and safety of the city in times of trouble was not in her earthly fortifications and fighting forces. Jehovah Himself was her hope and help and, when He is trusted, that knowledge is a source of comfort.

A. *The Crisis That Rages* – v. 6, “The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted.”

There was great turbulence among the nations when God intervened on behalf of His people Israel. Throughout the history of the nation to the present time there have been powers that desired to destroy the chosen people of God. You do not have to be a Jew to incur the wrath of the evil one or of evil people. Christians in every age have been opposed as well as Israel. Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

B. *The Comfort That is Recorded* – vs. 4,5, 7

- 4 There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.
- 5 God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn.
- 7 The Lord of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

Notice the forms that comfort takes in the above verses:

1. There is Comfort in the River which gladdens – v. 4, “There is a river whose streams shall make glad...”

There is no literal river in Jerusalem. The river to which the psalmist refers is the river of God’s unending provision of grace that flows to us for every need. Within the personal “Jerusalem” of every believer is also that river. Jesus said, “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive” (John 7:37, 38). Paul said that one of the evidences of the presence of the river of the Spirit is “joy”, in Galatians 5:22. Shallow streams make the most noise while deep rivers make little sound.

2. There is Comfort in the Rescuer Who is present – v. 5 & 7a

“God is in the midst ... she shall not be moved; God shall help... The Lord of hosts is with us...”

God is always “in the midst” of His people. He is the:

Omniscient One – “God is in the midst...” therefore, He knows us individually and corporately; He knows us and He knows our enemies; He knows how and where to safeguard us until the threats subside for He is the All- Knowing God.

Omnipotent One – “she shall not be moved; God shall help...” He is able to preserve and deliver from any and all problems and problem persons.

Omnipresent One – He is with His people in all exigencies of life and will never leave nor forsake them for “The Lord of hosts is with us.”

3. There is Comfort in the Refuge Who safeguards us - v. 7b, “The God of Jacob is our refuge.”

In a world full of fears, wars and a thousand uncertainties, the Christian can draw special courage and comfort from this Psalm. Though all else be shaken, God is our unshakable, unchangeable refuge, in whom we hide until the trouble is past.

Our Refuge is a Person, not a place. This truth applies to all of God’s children. Whatever personal catastrophe you face, a major health problem, the death of a loved one, the loss of your job, emotional problems, relational conflicts, or whatever - God is bigger than your problems.

From the convulsions of nature (vv. 1-3) to the threats of nations (vv. 4-7), God is an ever present help and the source of safety for his people. Whether the floods of the waters in v. 3 or the forces of nations in v. 6, God is in control! Whether mountains fall into the sea as in vs. 2-3 or the kingdoms of earth fail as in v. 6, God is involved in all situations and scenarios, “the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. v. 7

To look around us is to be distressed; to look within ourselves is to be depressed, but to look up to God is to be blessed for there is safety in our sovereign Savior, the Rock of Ages!

Stanza #3 – CONFIDENCE IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT

- 8 Come, behold the works of the Lord, Who has made desolations in the earth.
- 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the 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 refuge. Selah.

The psalm writer extends an invitation to all who are threatened by the course of world events or by disturbances in each one’s individual world. He says, “Come, behold the works of the Lord, Who has made desolations in the earth.” He is saying, “Take a look at what God has done in the past – ‘Who has made desolations in the earth’ – remember what He did at the

Red Sea when Pharaoh's army drowned; review the record of 'the works of the Lord' from the beginning and be confident that He can deliver us now."

A. The Ongoing Conflict – v. 8, 9

"Come, behold the works of the Lord, Who has made desolations in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire."

God is not an absentee Landlord Who is elsewhere in the universe; He is not a Bystander watching His people struggle; He is not a Commander watching His troops get slaughtered. He is on the field of battle wreaking desolations upon His enemies, breaking bows and spears and burning chariots!

Paul reminded the Christians who were in a very threatening environment in Rome, that, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:37). Notice the words, "in all these things." How can we be a conqueror if we are not in a battle? We can only conquer if we are in the midst of conflict! And how do we conquer? Through Him who loves us! He is in the battle with us – in fact, "Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God's" (2 Chronicles 20:15).

B. The Outstanding Counsel – v.10, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"

The key verse in Psalm 46 is verse 10. Therefore, let us contemplate in order to comprehend what is said. What are we to do when the situation overwhelms all human resources? When the enemy comes in like a flood? The psalmist said, "Be still, and know...." There are two principles here: the principle of *contemplation* – "Be still", and the principle of *comprehension* – "and know."

There are times when the best course of action is inaction! At the Red Sea, with Pharaoh's army pursuing, Moses said to the Israelites: "stand still" - "And Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever. The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace" (Exodus 14:13-14).

When Ruth was anxious about her relationship with Boaz, Naomi told her to "sit still" - "Sit still, my daughter... for the man will not rest until he has concluded the matter this day." (Ruth 3:18)

1. The Speaker of this Statement.

Who is it that would dare to command that we "be still"? Who has the audacity to impose upon free moral agents such a restriction? It is God Himself saying, "Be still, and know that I am God..."

"Faith gives the soul a view of the Great God. It teaches the soul to set his almightiness against sin's magnitude, and his infinitude against sin's multitude. The reason why the presumptuous sinner fears so little, and the despairing soul so much, is for want of knowing God as great; therefore, to cure them both, the serious consideration of God, under this

notion, is propounded: Be still, and know that I am God; as if he had said, Know, O ye wicked, that I am God, who can avenge myself when I please upon you, and cease to provoke me by your sins to your own confusion; and again, know, ye trembling souls, that I am God; and therefore able to pardon the greatest sins, and cease to dishonor me by your unbelieving thoughts of me." - William Gurnall.

After the psalm writer describes the turmoil that the people are experiencing, God Himself seems to break through and interrupt the writer saying, "...know that I am God..."

2. The Setting of this Statement.

The writer has painted a pen-picture of chaotic activities that cause anxiety. He writes of "trouble", v. 1; "fear", v. 2; roaring waters and shaking mountains, v. 3; raging nations, desolations and wars, vs. 6, 8 and 9. And then come the words, "Be still", v.10.

"The word seems to be used as meaning that there was to be no anxiety; that there was to be a calm, confiding, trustful state of mind in view of the displays of the divine presence and power. The mind was to be calm, in view of the fact that God had interposed, and had shown that he was able to defend his people when surrounded by dangers." (Albert Barnes)

"We must be still as to actions and outward behavior, so as not to oppose God in his dispensations; and as to the inward frame of our hearts, cultivating a calm and quiet submission of soul to the sovereign pleasure of God, whatever it may be. We may observe the ground of this duty, namely, the divinity of God. His being God is a sufficient reason why we should be still before him, in no wise murmuring, or objecting, or opposing, but calmly and humbly submitting to him.....the bare consideration that God is God may well be sufficient to still all objections and oppositions against the divine sovereign dispensations." (Jonathan Edwards)

"Here God tells the nations to stir no more against His people. He is the only true God; their gods are but dumb and impotent idols. God will make Himself glorious by His great and wonderful works." (John Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the Whole Bible)

3. The Sense of this Statement.

When God says, "Be still", is He saying simply, "Be silent, be quiet?" Is He advocating quietude and solitude? Stillness, in the sense of noiselessness? Or, is He saying, "Be immovable, be stationary"? In answering the above questions let us think through some basic biblical interpretation principles.

To isolate a text from its biblical setting and make it say what we want it to say is to do injustice to the Holy Scriptures. Many people quote the first part of verse 10, "Be still and know that I am God," to endorse a form of meditation that involves techniques on "quieting" the mind and being silent, of creating a scenario conducive to meditation. Is this what this verse is talking about? No! It is not endorsing a mystical meditative state. What then is meant by the words, "Be still, and know that I am God"?

The Hebrew word used here, comes from the word "*rapha*" which means "to let go; to let

hang down; to be relaxed, slackened, especially the hands.” It is employed in the sense of not making an effort; not putting forth exertion; and expresses the idea of leaving matters with God, to surrender to God and of being without anxiety about the issue. We surrender because we know that God is in control of the situation. We “give up” in order to be “lifted up” by God. We “let go” in order to “let God.”

The New American Standard Bible renders verse ten as follows: "Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." Young's Literal Translation renders it, "Desist, and know that I [am] God, I am exalted among nations, I am exalted in the earth." The Moffat translation is: "Be still, and know that I am God. 'Let go, desist'; cease from your own labors. "Give in" (Moffatt).

Charles H. Spurgeon comments on verse 10 as follows: "Hold off your hands, you enemies! Sit down and wait in patience, you believers! Acknowledge that Jehovah is God, you who feel the terrors of his wrath! Adore him, and him only, you who partake in the protection of his grace." (The Treasury of David)

“Be still.” Psalm 46:10 is a caution against murmuring and complaining against God exercising the prerogatives of His power and providence. So then, our contemplation should lead us to comprehend that God does not have to give an account of His activities to anyone. He alone is the perfection of holiness and therefore all that He does is righteous. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, warning them about talking back accusatively to God as follows: “Who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?” (Romans 9:20, 21)

Verse 10 is a reprimand to those who are "striving" against God. They are to stop striving and realize His power, for their efforts against God are futile. The message of the verse for us is, that we should be in awe of God as the Sovereign Ruler and when we find ourselves in humanly indefensible situations, do not blame God but relax and trust Him! The stops of a good man are ordered by God as well as his steps. If your finger is on the panic button and exhaustion has you gasping for an air, slow down and be still! There is power in stillness.

Illust. It used to be said that in the British Navy, whenever there was a sudden explosion or disaster, it was the buglers duty to play what was called “The Still,” and when the sailors and Marines heard it, each man was to stop perfectly quiet for a moment to collect his senses. In this way he could be better prepared for intelligent action in the emergency. Psalm 46:10 is God sounding “The Still.”

“In a world that’s falling apart all around us, it’s easy to become frantic and lose touch with God.... It’s essential that we be in touch with him and responsive to him. If God has a will for this world and we want to be in on it, we must be still long enough to find out what it is.” (Eugene H. Peterson) A verse that I have quoted to myself often is Isaiah 30:15, “In returning and rest shall you be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.”

4. The Substance of this Statement.

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”

This statement, in its entirety, says more to us than “Be still.” What is the reason why we should still ourselves in God’s presence? What is the purpose God has in mind when He commands us to “Be still”? What will be the profit, the outcome, of the cessation of activity and silence? What are we to comprehend as the result of contemplating the truth in verse 10?

There are two great truths mentioned in this verse, that can be learned by being still, and with which God wants us to come to grips. They are: (a) the truth of the Personhood of God, and (b) the truth of the Providence of God.

(a) **The Personhood of God** – “...know that I am God...”

There is knowledge to be gained by being still. What is the knowledge of which God speaks in the verse? It is to know Him. There are several ways that one can “know” God:

Some know Him theoretically. There are those who believe theoretically, that there is a Higher Power, a Creator, a Spirit Being somewhere in the universe. This is the very basic knowledge of God. But that is all that they know or believe about the existence of God. However, God is more than a theory.

Some know God relationally.

The fact that God speaks in verse 10 is a proof that He is a Person. Those who know God relationally not only know that He exists but that He is a Person with whom we can have a personal relationship. One of the reasons that Jesus came to the earth was to make the personality of God known. John wrote, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18, NIV).

Jesus came not only to reveal God to us but to make the way for us to come to God. John also wrote, “We know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true...” (1 John 5:20).

God is more than a theory—He is a Person Who can be known through His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30); “He that has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9); “No one comes to the Father but by me” (John 14:6); “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also” (John 8:19). To know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is to know God relationally.

Some know Him intimately.

Paul knew God theoretically and relationally, but he wanted to know Him intimately. After he had served God for many years he said, “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings...” (Philippians 3:10). He wanted to know God increasingly.

Peter counsels us to “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). If it were not possible to know God intimately Peter would not have encouraged believers to grow in their knowledge of Him. To have an intimate relationship with the eternal God is for our greatest good. Asaph, the psalm writer said, “It is good for me to draw

near to God” (Psalm 73:28). To draw near to God is possible and profitable! Daniel testifies that “the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits” (Daniel 11:32).

(b) **The Providence of God** – “...I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” Providence is “Divine oversight, guidance or care; God conceived as the power sustaining and guiding human destiny.” (Merriam-Webster) Providence means that God governs the universe that He created.

“If Creation was a unique exercise of divine energy causing the world to be, providence is a continued exercise of that same energy whereby the Creator, according to his own will, (a) keeps all creatures in being, (b) involves himself in all events, and (c) directs all things to their appointed end. The model is of purposive personal management with total "hands-on" control: God is completely in charge of his world. His hand may be hidden, but his rule is absolute.” (J. I. Packer - *Concise Theology*)

“There is probably no point at which the Christian doctrine of God comes more into conflict with contemporary worldviews than in the matter of God’s providence. Providence means that God has not abandoned the world that he created, but rather works within that creation to manage all things according to the "immutable counsel of His own will" (Westminster Confession of Faith, V, i).” (James Montgomery Boice in *The Sovereign God*)

To know God is to exalt Him—that is, to esteem Him, worship Him and obey Him. In Daniel chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar’s words of exaltation are models for us:

“I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven ... and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation ... He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, “What have You done?” ... Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down” (verses 34-37).

The closing verse of Isaac Watts hymn, Joy To The World, echoes the same truth:

“He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.”

C. The Uplifting Confirmation – v. 11, “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.”

In the case of Israel in the days of Sennacherib's Assyrian army, 2 Chronicles chapter 32 records the following: "Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there be more with us that with him: With him is an arm of flesh: but with us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles.' And the people rested themselves upon the words of Hezekiah king of Judah." (Verses 7, 8) Let us rest upon the truth of those words in our day.

CONCLUSION

In view of the above thoughts, it is no surprise that Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is based upon the 46th Psalm as is indicated in the hymn books adjacent to the name of the hymn writer. This song has been called "the greatest hymn of the greatest man of the greatest period of German history" and the "Battle Hymn of the Reformation." It was sung at the funeral of President Dwight Eisenhower at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, March 1969.

The first two stanzas of the hymn, which is one of my favorites, are:

*"A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.*

*Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle."*

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