

Summer in the Psalms

Psalm 46
ABC 7/11/21

The year is 701 BC. The king of Assyria is Sennacherib & he brings terror to the Mediterranean world. He's led his army on a ruthless march & is now heading south toward Egypt but Judah is in his way. Judah is ruled by Hezekiah, a godly king who relies on Yahweh. Here's how he's described:

He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel; so that after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him. For he clung to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses. & the LORD was with him; wherever he went he prospered (2 Kgs 18:5-7)

The Jews know Sennacherib is marching toward them. Confrontation is coming & doom will soon follow. Assyrian troops surround Jerusalem & their voices can be heard mocking & threatening the city. *We've heard about the God you serve, they taunt. We're here to find out how special He is.*

Why don't you send Him out to defend you? Sennacherib speaks to the people of Jerusalem & says,

'Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you from my hand; nor let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD, saying, "The LORD will surely deliver us, & this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria." Do not listen to Hezekiah, for thus says the king of Assyria, "Make your peace with me & come out to me" (2 Kgs 18:29-31).

Sennacherib targets Hezekiah's belief that God should be trusted & obeyed. Hezekiah has the prophet Isaiah & he listens to him & is encouraged by his words. Isaiah tells him,

Relax. God says everything's under control. You're doing the right thing in ignoring the challenges of Sennacherib. Don't worry about him. He's blasphemed the name of God & will be dealt with. He'll hear rumors that turn him towards home, & there he'll die by his own sword. See what your God is doing. Know that He's still in control (2 Kgs 19:1-7).

A few days later, Hezekiah gets a letter from Sennacherib. It's not diplomatic but filled with threats & details about how the people of Judah will be destroyed. Hezekiah takes it & carries it into the temple, lays it out before God & says, *Read this, Lord, & deliver us (2 Kgs 19:14-19)*. He prays & concludes, **Now, O LORD our God, I pray, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, O LORD, are God (19)**. Hezekiah realizes the issue is that the sovereignty

of God has been challenged. So he brings it to God & leaves it with Him. He walks back to his palace & waits. It's all he can do; wait, pray, & have faith. He knows the attack will soon come. What happens? The angel of the Lord comes by night & kills 185,000 Assyrians. When morning comes & light breaks across the landscape, Judah's soldiers can't believe what's before them:

Acres of Assyrian soldiers, no longer ridiculing, menacing, or threatening. It's a landscape of death. Scripture says, **Behold, all of them were dead** (2 Kgs 19:35). God took up Sennacherib's challenge & slaughtered them. It's a glorious day & a superb psalm is written to commemorate it, Ps 46, possibly written by Hezekiah himself, which is our text this morning as we continue our *Summer in the Psalms* series. This psalm relates to anyone who is in a time of stress or trouble, meaning it relates to us all. It tells us when difficulties come, God is sufficient to get us through. No problem, whether emotional, physical, or spiritual, is too big for our God. If we'll learn to take refuge in Him & lean on Him alone for strength, then we can face the most extreme crises with confidence, because God is with us & He is sufficient. That doesn't mean God insulates us from problems; He doesn't. The question is, when trouble comes, do you want to face it with God as your refuge & strength or do you want to look for help elsewhere? Ps 46 shows that when trouble strikes, God is sufficient to get you through. This psalm divides into 3 sections, each punctuated by the word, *Selah*, meaning to pause & ponder. Each stanza is built around a concept that will strengthen & reassure us in difficult days. 1

1. God's Shelter The central image here is the picture of a hiding place. The word for **refuge** suggests a shelter, a quiet place to go for protection. God's people can always find **refuge** in Him. It's not that He provides refuge; it's not even that He gives us refuge; it's that He Himself is the One whom we shelter in. We take refuge in Him. This idea is found throughout the OT. Dt 33 says, **The eternal God is a dwelling place, & underneath are the everlasting arms** (27). Ps 18:2 tells us, **The LORD is my rock & my fortress & my deliverer, My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; My shield & the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.** Ps 91:2 states, **I will say to the LORD, "My refuge & my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!"** We know all this but we often forget it & turn elsewhere for help. We rely on our own resources & strength. But the answer isn't found there. The answer is that the Lord **is our refuge.**

On Oct 31, 1517, the 1st shots of a spiritual war took place when an obscure monk named Martin Luther nailed a document to the door of the University of Wittenberg. It contained 95 points for debate. The idea at the center of his thinking was that salvation is by faith & not by works. What

hymn was most central to this religious reformation? We know it as, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, a song Luther wrote based on Ps 46. This hymn became a source of strength & inspiration for Christians ever since. A mighty **refuge** is our God, for our time, for Luther's time, & for any time. The psalm continues & tells us our God is a **very present help in trouble**. **Trouble** literally means *distress, cramped quarters, a constricted feeling*.¹ It's being stuck between a rock & a hard place with no room to maneuver. The words **very present** carry the idea that God is easy to find. He's as real & as much there with you as He could possibly be. Friends often run when trouble comes but God isn't like that. He moves in closer. When we're in tight places, He draws us tighter. Difficulties force us into the waiting arms of God. When we realize He's in control, we're immediately comforted. We tend to read trying times as the final word of reality. But behind them & under them & around them & over them is a greater reality: As we turn to God as our refuge our faith is moved to believe the true reality that transcends our circumstances. All our troubles pale in comparison to the size of the living God & His power to address those things & care for us in the midst of them. The psalmist knew that no matter how bad it looked to him, his God is greater. He is in control of nature & history & kings & kingdoms & He's in control of all your circumstances. We, as His people, always need to remember that. When we really come to know Him, we will not fear. **2-3**

We speak of *terra firma*, but it isn't. This is a picture of the challenges that are facing the people of God in this world. It's a depiction of a catastrophic event in which the whole world is unmade, Gen 1 reversed. Sometimes life is like that. The foundations of our world is shaken & chaos seems to have control.² By showing us this, the psalmist is reminding us of God's power to protect us against everything. In other words, God can be trusted when the whole world goes crazy. Whatever catastrophe you're currently in (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 & He's readily available to help if you'll take refuge in Him & trust in His strength. Even if the mountains are hurled into the bottom of the ocean, even if the whole natural order is turned upside

¹ Donald Williams & Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Psalms 1-72*, vol. 13, The Preacher's Commentary Series, 356

² James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42-106: An Expository Commentary*, p 389

down, we don't need to fear because God cannot be shaken. When your world is turned upside down, run to God & nothing can shake you. God is our refuge & strength in times of trouble. He is the One who is strong when we are weak. We need someone infinitely stronger than us if the world is being moved out from under our feet. We have that Someone in God Himself. His strength is made perfect in our weakness as we trust in Him (2 Cor 12:9). &, God's protection & strength are immediately available the instant we turn to Him. While He may delay delivering us to show us our need for Him or for reasons we can't understand, we can always have immediate comfort & calm when we flee to God for refuge & strength. God is our shelter. He's also...

2. God's Salvation (4-7) In ancient times, the sentries of a city would bring news of approaching invaders & everyone would seek safety inside the city walls. The greatest fear in such a situation wasn't catapults, rocks, or flaming arrows. The people most feared being cut off from food & water. In advance of the arrival of the Assyrians, Hezekiah had time to prepare. In the Kidron Valley outside of Jerusalem was the Gihon spring. It provided the water supply for Jerusalem. Hezekiah knew it must be protected, so he redirected the spring through a conduit that was 1,777 feet long, hewn of solid rock. He brought the water into a reservoir inside the city. Then he covered up all signs of the spring so Sennacherib would have no idea where the water supply was. There's a suggestion of this in **vs 4-6**.

Here the Psalmist again reminds us of God's power to protect us against everything, & he does it by showing us 2 things at the same time that seem contradictory. 1st, there is this picture in vss 4 & 5 of a serene city, **the city of God**; but in vs 6, this city is under siege. The armies of the enemies of God are surrounding it, & yet the Psalmist has given us a picture of God's power to protect & save by showing how serene the city is even when she's surrounded by her enemies. When we're surrounded by our enemies, we're still secure in God our **refuge**. The city is going to hold & not be moved. Why? The Psalmist goes right back to this meditation on who God is & what He does. The city is not going to be moved, 1st, because **God is in the midst of her**. 2nd, **God will help her**. &, 3rd, God will help her soon, **when morning dawns**. For all these reasons, the city will be saved. God spoke the world into being. There was nothing & by His word there was everything. By the same

power He speaks the enemies of His people into oblivion. Notice the connection between vs 2–3 & vs 6. **Though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar & foam...** The words for **slip** & **roar** are the same Hebrew words used in vs 6, **The nations made an uproar** (roar) & **the kingdoms tottered** (slip). The point of using these same words is to show that whether the threat to us is from nature (1–3) or from political upheaval & wars (vs 6), whether our world is shaking from nature or from the nations, God is our refuge & salvation. The 2nd stanza ends with the chorus of vs 7.

God is with us & is our **stronghold**. God is the **God of Jacob**. Jacob was the 3rd of the Jewish patriarchs & the least outstanding of them. He was a schemer & it took him a lifetime to learn to trust God. More when we see this repeated in vs 11. Finally, we see...

3. God's Sovereignty (8-11) The psalmist invites us, **8-9**.

We must review His works down through the centuries. See how He's delivered His people time after time, both in the Scripture & in church history. The God of Jacob, Moses, David, Hezekiah, Peter, & Paul; the God of Luther, Calvin, Edwards, & Spurgeon, is your God. Behold His works & you'll submit to Him as your Ruler & refuge when you face a crisis. In other words, the God of today is the God of yesterday. If we want to know what to expect from Him we need to review His past record in human history & in our own history. The same God who sustained you in the past, who brought you through every previous crisis, is the God who stands with you now. That's why God's salvation during the crisis of Sennacherib was so precious to God's people, it created a milestone for them. The dramatic destruction of the enemy became a memory monument that wouldn't be forgotten. God's people could always look back & say, *Remember how the angel of the Lord slew the Assyrians? Surely He's among us now & will protect us.* We must do the same & remember, or pre-remember, what the battlefield is going to look like when God is done. When vs 9 says, **He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth**, it's not presenting God as a peace negotiator but as a Conqueror. This peace isn't to be compared with treaties or negotiated agreements. It's a peace imposed by the strength of the Conqueror. In times of trouble, God's advice to us isn't abstract but true & concrete. He offers not empty philosophies, but sound battle plans. He reminds us that our

minds are a powerful element in our spiritual health. We must have our thoughts fixed on God & who He is & all He has done, is doing, & will do for us.

These vss have the same function as the book of Rev in that it gives us the end before it happens to remind us of the certainty of the victory that's coming. God wins! It's a picture to stoke your hope because of the certain future that's coming. In Ps 46 this is a picture of the aftermath of God's judgment 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. Look at **vs 10**.

This isn't like God's word through Moses to the children of Israel at the Red Sea, *Stand still & watch what God is going to do for you* (Ex 14:13-14). Instead, this is God speaking to His enemies, *Silence! I will reign*. This is God's announcement of His rule & judgment against them. *Knock it off!* He says, *Acknowledge who I am*. **Cease striving & know that I am God** isn't advice to us to lead a contemplative life, however important that may be. It means, *Lay down your arms. Surrender & acknowledge that I am the one & only victorious God*. The time to do this is now, while a peace can be yours through the work of Jesus on the cross. If you won't surrender now, you'll do so one day but it will be for judgment rather than blessing. This is because God is God, & in the end it will be His power & holiness that are exalted. No one can hope to resist Him.³ Whatever the specifics of our troubles, they all unite in this truth: God **will be exalted among the nations & in the earth**. Aren't you glad to know that?

The psalm concludes with the refrain we saw in vs 7. **11**

For the 2nd time, the psalmist says, **The Lord of hosts is with us**. We have a tendency to let our eyes skim over such phrases. But they're crucial to the meaning of this psalm. **The Lord of hosts is with us**. Who is the **Lord of hosts**? In the Hebrew it is **the Lord of Sabaoth**: the Lord of the angels, the Lord of the armies of heaven. Why is this worth consideration? Think about the story of Hezekiah & Sennacherib. The angel of the Lord, one angel, was dispatched from heaven to defend the city of Jerusalem. That angel destroyed 185,000 Assyrians. It only took one angel. But we have the

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42–106: An Expository Commentary*, p 392

Lord of all the angels with us. Keep that in mind the next time your foundations shake. Would you rather have an angel OR the **Lord of hosts** as your **refuge & stronghold**? He is the One who created & rules the angels. This mighty God lives with us. The psalmist calls Him **the God of Jacob**. Why not refer to Him as the God of Abraham, the great man of faith? Or why not at least refer to Him as the God of Israel, the name given to Jacob after he strived with God & was renamed? Jacob means *supplanter* or *deceiver*. Why refer to **the God of Jacob** as **our stronghold**? This points to God's sovereign grace. God chose conniving Jacob over nice guy Esau so everyone could see He saves us on the basis of His choice, not because of our good works (Rom 9:11). One of today's errors is to try to build people's self-esteem by telling them, *Christ died for you because you were worthy*. Not so! He died for you while you were an unworthy sinner (Rom 5:8). But the good news is, if He chose you apart from your worthiness, He will keep you & enable you to persevere unto the day of Christ because He is **the God of Jacob**. His help in a time of trouble isn't conditioned on your worthiness but on His grace. When you're insufficient (which is always), depend on **the Lord of hosts & the God of Jacob** as your **stronghold**. If you know Christ as your Savior, then you have His life within you. Lean into Him. Depend on Him as your refuge; draw on Him as your resource, & defer to Him as your Ruler.

When our hearts are troubled we should find comfort in the fact that the Lord of all creation is **with us**. He has the power & presence we need to face our troubles, whatever they are. Perhaps the most astounding fact of all astounding facts about our great God is that He is *immanu* meaning *with us*. That truth travels through time & becomes something even more amazing. *Immanu* gives birth to the word, *Immanuel, God with us*. That gives us confidence. Luther saw correctly that this psalm was Christ's psalm & its promises were Christ's promises for His people. *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, & He must win the battle*. When faced with the chaos of life, we find confidence in Christ's presence with us (Mt 28:20).

Many of Hannah Smith's writings came from the crucible of her terrible emotional pain from the loss of children, the infidelities of her husband, & the death of many of her close friends. One of her works is *Living Confidently in God's Love*. When she wrote it, she'd been experiencing heartache & had unanswered questions. She didn't know where to turn or whom to seek for counsel. It seemed to her, just as it seems to us, that no one had ever been on the path she was traveling. No one could understand what she was experiencing. Here are her words:

There happened to be staying near me just then for a few weeks a lady who was considered to be a deeply spiritual Christian, & to whom I had been told I should go for additional help to get through my trouble. So I summoned up my courage, & one afternoon I went to see her. I poured out my troubles before her, & I expected, of course, that she would take a deep interest in me & would be at great pains to do all she could to help me. She listened patiently, did not interrupt me, but when I finished my story, & I paused, expecting her to respond in sympathy & consideration, she simply said, *Yes, all you say may be very true, but then in spite of it all, there is God.*

I waited a few minutes for her to say something else. But nothing came, & my friend the teacher had the air of having said all that was necessary, & I knew she was done. But I continued, *You don't understand how very serious & perplexing my difficulties are.*

Oh, yes, I did, replied my friend. *But then, as I tell you, there is God.*

I could not induce her to make one other answer. It seemed to me most disappointing & unsatisfactory. I felt that my peculiar & really harrowing experiences could not be met by anything so simple & so mere as the statement, *Yes, but there is God.*

From wondering, I came gradually to believe that being my Creator & Redeemer, He must be enough. & at last, a conviction burst upon me that He really was enough. My eyes were opened to the fact of the absolute & utter all-sufficiency of almighty God.⁴

What does it mean that *God is enough*? It sounds like the language of self-righteousness, doesn't it? But in reality, those words are so much more than a religious cliché. God must be enough because if He isn't, where do we find ourselves? Where's our plan B? If the God of heaven & earth, who is mightier than all the world's armies, who can cause the earth to melt into the sea, who is *with us*, if that God isn't Lord of your crisis, you're in trouble. The fact is that God is sufficient. He is in control. He holds the the galaxies in His hands while knowing the exact number of hairs on your head. He's preserved His people time & again. Above all else, He loves you & chose to measure that love out not in words, but in blood. He loves you enough to give you the greatest gift conceivable, His own son dying for you. Would such a love allow you to suffer without a purpose?

⁴ Hannah Whitall Smith, *Living Confidently in God's Love*, pp 278–80

Would such a love neglect to have a wonderful ending lying in wait for you? God has never run away from you, so don't run from Him. Instead, run into His waiting arms of **refuge & strength**. He's eagerly waiting for you to do so. He is your **refuge**, your **strength**, & your **stronghold**. He is with you & always a **very present help** in times of trouble. If such a God is for us, who can be against us? If you know God as the Lord of hosts, you will depend on Him. Therefore, we have nothing to fear. When trouble hits, know that God is your shelter, your salvation, & He is sovereign, even over your crisis. He wants you to exalt Him by submitting to & sheltering in Him in the midst of your troubles. The chief end of man isn't to live a happy, trouble-free life. The chief end of man is to glorify God & enjoy Him forever. We glorify Him when we defer to Him as our **Lord of hosts** in times of trouble. We're simply called to trust & be faithful to Him. May God enable us in the midst of our own troubles to trust Him as our mighty fortress, refuge, strength, & help, even as the Psalmist did.