

Our Refuge and Strength

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[0 : 00] Lord, as we wrap up one year, we just thank you for your faithfulness that you've made manifest to us this past year. And as we look to a new year, Lord, we ask that you would become even more precious in our eyes and in our hearts.

We want to know you more. And so, Lord, we ask that you speak to us through your word today. Lord, I'm asking that you would, by the power of your Holy Spirit, speak through me to all of us. Lord, I need your help. Lord, I'm not adequate on my own to speak the words you would have me speak from your word. So I'm asking you for your help. Lord, for our good, for the glory of your name, Lord, speak through me today.

Lord, we look to you in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated. If you'd like to follow along, we have Bibles here at the front. You can grab and borrow for today or take home if you need a copy of the Bible.

Please turn with me to Psalm 46. As you do so, I want to tell you about Tuesday, January 12, 2010. I received a phone call from Diane Scharf, many of you know from this congregation, a good friend of mine.

[1 : 10] She called and asked how my sister Sarah was doing. And I assured her she was doing really well. She had just had a good holiday with us at the Christmas season. And she said, no, something about an earthquake in Haiti.

And I assured her that I didn't know what she was talking about, but if I heard anything, I'd let her know and thanked her for calling and hung up the phone. Then I went over to the internet and Googled Haiti earthquake.

And to my horror, I saw the first images of that earthquake many of us will remember following along in the news. Well, for the next few hours, few agonizing hours, my family kept going to her Facebook and checking online to see if there's anything that would let us know that my sister Sarah was okay.

Eventually, we found out that she was alive and she was okay. But okay is a relative term. For all, like my sister, and all in Haiti, the time of the earthquake was absolutely horrifying.

For those who lived like my sister, they all had friends or family who had perished as the country crumbled. My sister had gone down to teach school at a mission base.

[2 : 11] And when she'd gone down months before, Haiti was already in a state of tragedy as the country is so poor and so broken. So when the earthquake came and the few foundations they did have crumbled, it was just absolutely horrifying.

I remember clicking refresh every few minutes to see if there's any news updates and the death toll numbers were just skyrocketing. It was horrifying. And although my sister was okay, it was really traumatizing for her and for everyone who lived through that time.

It was so painful. And I didn't fully realize how it affected me until the next New Year because New Year's is a really precious time in my family. We often get together, friends come over and we play ice hockey on the outdoor rink and we watch some family-friendly films.

We have a beautiful time of worship and prayer dedicating the New Year to the Lord. And 2010 was especially a year that I was looking forward to. I was really confident about a number of things that were going to come.

And so the fact that the earthquake came on January 12th just after this New Year that was supposed to be so precious to me had got underway and just out of nowhere, bam! This earthquake shook everything.

[3 : 15] And although it was so far away in Haiti, it was so close at home that it affected my sister. And so as the next New Year was coming up, I found myself looking forward to the future with this

fear.

When is the next book going to fall on our heads? And I share the story not because I necessarily think you care about my New Year's experiences, but because I think it's very common for all of us who, if you've lived a few minutes on this earth, then you've probably experienced the reality of pain and suffering that can be part of the human condition.

And so it can be a very normal human feeling to look to the future with a sense of dread. What's in store? And so, as George asked me to pray, to preach today and I was praying for the church and what God would have for us in the New Year, God really put on my heart to go through a passage that would show us a biblical way to view the future, a biblical way to see the New Year.

And so, as we turn to Psalm 46, and I won't read it all because Nora had just read it in her powerful, powerful scripture reading voice. Let's look at it.

The mountains are often seen as the things that do not move, those things in our lives that we can count on in every situation, whereas the sea and the oceans are seen as those things that are in flux and changing and it's the great unknown.

[4 : 34] And in the passage that Nora just read, Psalm 46, we see the mountains giving way and falling to the heart of the sea. It's those things that should be firm, it should not move, are just crumbling and those things that are in flux and changing are just swelling up.

And yet we see the psalmist saying in Psalm 46 that though that may be the case and though that may be in the future, we don't need to fear. God is a refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. One of the beautiful things that first springs up from this passage is that the Bible is very real about the reality of suffering and pain in our lives.

The Bible doesn't pretend about it, it's real about the reality of pain and suffering in our lives. Now this is really special and unique because there's a lot of philosophies and spiritualities on this planet that try to deal with pain and suffering by ignoring them.

There's a lot of Eastern philosophies and spiritualities such as Buddhism where the way that you deal with the reality of pain and suffering with earthquakes in our lives, it's just a matter of separating yourself from it, just meditating and it's all in your mind and you're going to connect somehow with something that's more real than a pain.

[5 : 53] The Bible doesn't say that the pain isn't real, the Bible treats pain as real. And it's not only the Eastern philosophies that you might encounter a way of looking at life that tries to separate itself from pain.

I've done a number of initiatives and work in fighting human trafficking and sexual abuse. One of the first, the great hindrances to people finding healing is that when a child or someone of any age really comes to their family, their parents, their teachers and tells them that they're getting sexually abused, it's a very normal response for people to say, oh, it's just a game or to downplay it in some way that we don't want to deal with reality of pain and suffering.

It's too painful, especially if the abuser is someone close to home. It's too painful to think that that might be the case and so people try to act as if it's not really happening. And the tragedy of that is that you're not going to find healing unless if you deal with the real situation, if you deal with the pain.

And we see in Psalm 46 that the psalmist does not beat around the bush, it speaks that though there may be times where the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, we don't need to fear. So just as the Bible is real about pain and suffering, the Bible is real about our refuge.

A refuge is a place you go for shelter and protection when there is some type of enemy or difficulty, danger coming. So for example, if you are in the Midwest and a tornado is coming to your house and you run to the cellar, that cellar, your cellar, becomes your refuge.

[7 : 18] Or if there's an earthquake and it's not as big as the one in Haiti, you can run to the doorposts of your house, the door frames, and there you'll find refuge as everything shakes but the doorposts should remain intact. Or at the time that these ancient words in Psalm 46 were written, it was very normal for farmers.

A lot of the people like us, the commoners, would have farms outside a walled city or near a castle and if the enemy soldiers were coming, all of us farmers would run into this walled city, this fortress,

and that would be a refuge and it would protect us.

Similarly, if you yourself was a soldier and you went off to a battle and you got injured, you'd come back to a place of refuge, of protection, to find healing, to find healing. And so the scriptures tell us that just as pain and suffering might be in store for us and in some ways it is in store for all of us in different ways, we can find refuge in God.

Now another beautiful thing in this passage is it doesn't speak about God being a refuge, it's just God being a refuge or God being the refuge but God being our refuge. God is our refuge.

Just a few months ago I was speaking, a workshop, I was asked to speak on human trafficking and the gospel and so it was a two hour talk and so I shared for the first little bit about the reality of human trafficking and sexual abuse in Canada and we looked a bit at ways that people can get involved bringing rescue and restoration and then for the most part of the two hours we just looked at different testimonies of individuals who found healing and rescue and restoration in God as people who were so crushed by the abuse were able to be just restored and come alive once again through the power of the gospel.

[8 : 50] I promised not to talk for two hours today but it was a long two hour talk at the time and afterward a girl came up to me a teenager came up to me and she said do you really believe that God can bring me healing?

I could have responded and said well for sure did you not just hear the past two hours? Weren't you listening? You could have taken notes? The whole thing was about God being the healer God being a refuge but she had heard that God was a refuge and she had heard that God was the refuge she had heard that God was their refuge she needed to know could God be my refuge?

and so I want us to pause for a moment today and let that sink in that God is not just our refuge he's not just the refuge he is our refuge and all that that means it's so important because if God is our refuge it means that we can stop trying to be our own refuge we can stop trying to be our own refuge this is so important for so many different parts of life I'm told I don't have any experience of this myself but I'm told that one of the great challenges of marriage is that when communication breaks down and one of the ways that communication breaks down is when someone is not able to be vulnerable with the other person and I know for sure this is true in friendships that if you're trying to protect yourself from being vulnerable in any type of friendship you're not going to be able to really communicate you're not going to be able to have the real intimacy that friendship is made for and as long as you're not trusting God to be your refuge you're going to be your own refuge you're going to try to protect yourself you're not going to allow people to truly know you

Jesus addresses this in Luke chapter 9 where he says that if anyone would seek to save his life he'll lose it but whoever will lose his life for Jesus' sake will find it as long as we're trying to be our own refuge it's going to affect the way that we spend our money we're always going to be looking out for number one as long as we're trying to be our own refuge we're not going to be able to communicate with people in a healthy way as long as we're trying to be our own refuge we're not going to live the beautiful dangerous risky God glorifying life that he made us for because we're going to be trying to always be looking out for ourselves but Jesus says there's a lot at stake in making God your refuge because if you don't do it you're going to lose your life Jim Elliot a martyr just in the past century said he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose we are no fool if we make God our refuge because he is the only refuge that can really protect us that can give us any true reason for confidence when we look at the reality of the human condition and see the reality of suffering and pain that awaits us if we make God our refuge it's not going to make those things not happen but it's going to give us every reason for confidence that we can go into the future trusting God not to make the earthquakes not happen but to sustain us and keep us in himself through it all

God is our refuge now there's so much to God being a refuge I was quite tempted to just keep it at that and just continue to mind the depths of God being a refuge and all that's at stake and all that we have to gain through learning of God as a refuge as I prayed about that I think God reminded me of the first time I played laser tag the first time I played laser tag was just a few years ago and I had the gun in my hand I had the vest on and they were counting us down we were about to head out I'm standing there I'm just like I want to win I was committed to winning and so the doors open and I run in and I found a little place to hide and I just stayed there and everyone was running and laser tagging each other and no one was laser tagging me I was safe and I was confident that I had this the game ended and I went out with everyone to see on the little TV screen that I'd won and I

looked I think my name was probably Aragorn or something and I looked up and I looked at the first few names and no Aragorn I looked down I finally looked at the bottom there was my name [12:35] Aragorn what? I never got hit basically and the reason that I lost is that laser tag is a lot like life laser tag is a lot like the call that we were made for as human beings by God which is that we're not only called to have a refuge we're actually called to go out we're called to fight we're called to go tag and what's interesting as I was praying about this I thought okay maybe there's more to just being a refuge than the psalm than just the refuge part the psalm is not just a one stanza song it was written as a song written as a three stanza song so whereas the first stanza of the song speaks about the mountains may fall and the oceans may rise but God will be a refuge then the second speaks to what the next little bit of the first line says that God is a refuge and strength that God is not only a refuge for us but he's our strength and if refuge is something that is an external protection to us strength is this inner dynamic force within us that enables and empowers and equips us to live the life he's called us to live see in the second stanza it speaks first of a city and it speaks of a river it says there's a river whose streams make glad the city of God the holy habitation of the most high

God is in the midst of her she shall not be moved God will help her when morning dawns and then it turns our attention to wars the nations rage the kingdoms totter he utters his voice as God utters his voice the earth melts and it continues into the next stanza speaking of wars and how God brings peace now the first thing to note about the city is that if it's speaking about the city of God we think Jerusalem but unlike most of the cities at the time the big cities the important cities that had rivers going through them Jerusalem as far as I understand at that time at least and I think still today does not have a river going through it but this river is a river whose streams make glad the city of our God and the scriptures elsewhere speak of the river of streams of living water coming from God and how God it's this image of bringing the nutrients we need for life it makes analogies to us being like a tree by the streams of water and how God enables us to bear the fruit and live the life he's called us to there's a strengthening that we receive from God as a river so either speaking of Jerusalem at the time and how God is in the midst of bringing life not as an actual

H₂O water but by the power of his Holy Spirit or it's looking forward to the future time in the new Jerusalem where God will be as a river to us either way for me at least I'm honest I'm just an intern at this church I don't actually know all that it's talking about the city of God but what I do know with confidence is that it's true that God is the one who brings us that life that just like water brings trees life so God is a river to us and it's in contrast to the swelling of the oceans but God is a river to us that brings life and then as it turns our attention to the wars on earth and the reality of the pain and suffering and the fighting and the human condition we see that God is bringing peace but God brings peace not in this passive way of just some type of passive thing but rather you see God's going out and he burns the chariots and he speaks and he's this act of moving forward and see the reason for human suffering the reason that there's wars and all those things is because at the dawn of time human beings we turned away from God and we still do this today every time we see war all these things just pain and suffering we're seeing human beings turn us turn away from God saying we're not going to honor you as king we're going to do our own thing and that's why there's all this suffering but since the dawn of time

God promised to bring us a rescue and God has been working his grand scheme through Jesus of bringing rescue and restoration to the universe as he reconciles humanity to himself through Jesus Christ and if we're followers of God if we're children of God then we're joining him in that rescue mission and so my heart for us as we head into a new year is that we would evermore embrace this call of God that we don't only look to God as a refuge but we look to him as one who gives the strength to go out and to live the adventure the life that he's called us to live reoccurring in the psalm is the words the Lord of hosts is with us it means the God of armies is with us so the word host means armies God's call is to join him in his army as he brings peace and reconciliation to the universe later on in the service we're going to be having communion and so often communion for us is simply about the refuge that God provides as we eat the bread and drink the wine we remember that Jesus in his own body bore the punishment that we deserve all of us the ultimate earthquake the ultimate calamity of the human condition is the just punishment we should receive from God but as we remember in communion

Jesus bore that punishment for us he took it upon himself and so as we eat the bread and drink the wine we remember Jesus bearing the punishment that we deserve so that we don't have to face

that punishment and for a lot of us that's where it ends but Leviticus 17 speaks about the life being in the blood and as we drink the wine today and in the future let us remember not only is Jesus the ultimate refuge for us but as we drink the wine let us remember that Jesus gives us his own strength his own blood his own life let us remember not only the death of Jesus but the resurrection and how he's called to share in that resurrection life and to go and live and sharing in that resurrection life from Jesus does not mean that we're going to be not mean we're going to avoid earthquakes in life but again it means we can share in the refuge that is God and the strength that he gives us now as I thought about how to make this practical I thought well we can look at prayer and how prayer is one of the ways that we go to God to find refuge in him I know everyone who is God's child in this room has testimonies of that time that your back is up against the wall but you went to God in prayer and he came through for you like 2 Chronicles 20 where King Jehoshaphat says Lord we do not know what to do but our eyes are on you and God comes through for him or we can look at worship we've all had those times where our soul is being crushed and yet we remind ourselves remind God of who he is like the psalmuses in Psalm 73 as his soul is being crushed and then he worships God he enters into his presence and he finds such a life and renewal in him or we can look at how the word helps us find strength and refuge in God think of Jesus in Luke 4 how he's getting so tempted and he's so weak and tired and hungry he's fasting and he quotes the scripture and he finds refuge and strength and he's able to overcome the temptation or King Josiah in 2 Kings 22 where he's living his life and also they come across the Torah and they come across the books of Moses right in the temple and it changes the course of the lives it strengthens them to live the holy life

[19:24] God's called them to do and to do all that he's called them to do and be or we can talk about obedience I mean the whole book of Proverbs is basically filled with this message that if we fear God and seek to obey him there's such refuge and shelter and life in that there's such strength in that that if we actually seek to live the way God's called us to live according to his wisdom and his ways applying the word of God to our lives then we'll be just like Jesus said like the person who built their house on the rock that when the winds come and the rains come and the floods come we're going to be able to stay steadfast in the Lord there's such a life strength and refuge as we seek to obey God and so I thought if we had the time to delve into all those different ones but as I came back to this passage I saw that it doesn't at the beginning and throughout it say prayer is our refuge or worship is our refuge or even obedience as important as that is is our refuge no it says God is our refuge and strength and the reality that the psalm is pointing us to is so much more precious and intimate than simply looking at prayer and worship those things are important see prayer and worship and obedience the scriptures those are all facets of getting to know God look at verse 10 in the midst of it speaking about God being a refuge and strength and how God is bringing peace to the world as he crushes the bows and the chariots in verse 10 it says be still and know that I am God be still and know that I am God these ancient words are so fresh and so alive today because all of us live in a world where relativism is so dominant

I mean we all have friends who will be like I'm glad that you're a Christian Christianity works for you but I'm an agnostic because that works for you this works for me it's all good and the idea is that religion and spirituality and truth is just like a flavor we all have our preferences and whatever works for you works for you but what's undergirding this whole philosophy this way of life that even some Christians partake in is the idea that it's impossible to really know anything it's impossible to be certain of anything but what we see right here is a command to be still and to know God a few years ago I was on the Greyhound bus chatting with a guy my age it was a long bus ride so we had a long conversation all the way from Windsor to Ottawa and he was an agnostic and really a guy of the times today telling me how it's impossible to know anything and I interrupted him gently and said hey I actually know God exists I know God I said how can you be certain how can you know God and so I shared with him the rational logical reasons for why I believe in God I shared with him the argument from design how if you look at a clock or a watch or for the younger people who don't know a watch their cell phone if you look at a cell phone you'll see it intricately put together and you'll think for sure there's a designer someone who made this the universe is so much more intricate even our own bodies are so much more intricate than a watch or a cell phone clearly there's a designer he said sure I'm with you sure I'll agree with you it's logical to believe that there's a supreme being who created the universe how that works

I have no idea I said yeah we'd have no idea except if there was some reliable text that would speak to us about this something that actually knows he said sure but there's so many different holy books out there how can you know which one's real or I said well let's test them out we can talk about the claims of many different ones but if you find the one that's true that you can trust there you go he said well how would you ever find that well it was a long bus ride longer than we have time for today but we looked at so many different prophecies in the scripture all these prophecies of these words we know we're in long before Jesus ever came and then from what we know of history about Jesus we see that it's true the prophecies about where the Messiah was going to be born is where Jesus was born the description of how Jesus would live is how Jesus lived and about his death and his resurrection all these different things and I mean that would be a cool coincidence if it was one or a few prophecies but we're talking prophecy after prophecy after prophecy and not only are there prophecies in the scriptures about Jesus but there's other prophecies about Cyrus before the guy ever came before he was even born prophecies about Cyrus and how he would restore Jerusalem and then there was a king history tells us

Cyrus who restored Jerusalem so many prophecies in the Bible and eventually the Bible goes from simply being an interesting book to all of a sudden being something that it's logical and rational to trust in fact it would be a fool to ignore and he was kind of tracking with me for a lot of that and I said to him all of those would be reasons for why I would claim to know God exists but I'm going to go one step further I don't just know that God exists and that it's the God of the Bible I know him I said what do you mean well there's two kinds of knowing there's a type of knowing that is knowing about say for example you have children who were orphans and they hear that there's a great king a benevolent king who's going to adopt them they're so excited to meet their new father and kings make edicts kings make laws they do stuff so it shouldn't be too hard to find those edicts and laws so they start searching it out and sure enough they find edicts and laws made by this king and so they meet together weekly let's say Sundays they meet together they read these laws these edicts by the king and they're getting to know more about their king their father and then the father even writes letters to them they're so happy they got letters from them so they read these letters now they can spend as much time as they want reading those letters and looking at those laws but they'll never ever be able to claim that they know their father until their father comes and they're in his presence and they meet him and now they know their father

I said so often as Christians we settle for knowing about God and that's my one concern with just talking about prayer and worship and reading the scriptures and even obedience is that for a lot of us we can know a lot about God and go through these things that are so important for living the life we were called to live and an obedient life to God but all those things are only getting at knowing God George a few weeks ago spoke from Revelation 3 about Jesus who says he stands at the door and knocks and how by God's grace by his power we can open up our heart and receive him how we can actually get to know him there's such comfort in Psalm 46 about God being a refuge and strength such promise of confidence in him and the life we can live but that's only true if God is actually your refuge and God is only your refuge if you actually know him and he knows you not just that you know about God not just that you speak the liturgy each week but that you actually know him the words be still and know that I am God are not an invitation they're a command they're not an invitation they're an ultimatum the scriptures say right here be still and know that I am God [26:06] I will be exalted among the nations I will be exalted in the earth we see this this feature of the psalm not just at the end but throughout the whole thing it keeps speaking about the presence of God it says repeatedly the Lord of hosts is with us the Lord of hosts isn't just alive he's with us it says about God being in the midst of the city it's getting at the fact that God is not only that great king that benevolent king but he's our king and he longs to adopt us as our own if we'll just open the door of our hearts to him God will be exalted among the nations one of the ways that we not one of the ways the way that we're able to allow Jesus into our hearts is when we turn from our own ways and we turn to him and say not only are you the God of the universe not only are you the king of the universe not only are you exalted in the universe but Lord be my God be my king you are the one with whom my life

I will worship and obey you be exalted now these words about God being exalted or really anything being exalted can really scare any of us who've ever been abused because if you've been abused or bullied it's where someone's being exalted who shouldn't be it's where the more powerful is taken from the weaker and that's wrong it's evil but when Jesus is exalted when God is exalted it's the

rightful benevolent king the one who should be exalted the one who should be above being above obeyed and exalted and so there is truly such comfort as we look at the fact that God promises that he will be exalted and I want to invite you today if you haven't ever truly given your life to God if you've never said that if you've never asked him for forgiveness for your sins if you've never actually looked to him and said enough of me trying to be my own refuge enough of me trying to live the good life I can't live but Lord I'm going to look to you that you would be my refuge from the judgment that I'm due and that you would also be my strength to live the life you've called me to live and as often as we follow as often as we come back to him and we say

God Father forgive me for my sins we keep looking back to God for he is the savior and not only is he the savior but he longs to be our savior my prayer for us as a church leading into this Sunday as we go into the new year is that we can look to God with confidence to be a refuge that if you are like me someone who you've experienced pain and suffering and so you're kind of fearing the future that you can let go of those fears and you can look to God as your refuge you can go into 2014 with confidence that no matter what earthquakes no matter what death no matter what pain might be in store for others or for yourself that you can know that God will be your refuge that we can go into a new year knowing that no matter the frailty we have that God will be our strength that God will be your strength to be the dad or the mom the husband or the wife or the person that he made you to be that you can actually put to death those sinful habits that have riddled our lives and we can look to God for the strength we need to advance the kingdom of God to bring his peace and his shalom to this earth but more than anything my prayer is that that you and I can go into the new year confident that God is not only God who wants to be known about but he wants to be known he wants to know us we find refuge and strength in God as we get to know him as we look to him would you stand with me as we pray heavenly father thank you that these words written so many years ago are trustworthy and true lord we thank you that you have not only invited us but commanded us to know you and lord we say we want to know you we thank you for your faithfulness we thank you that you made it possible that despite our frailty and defilements that we can be reconciled to you and become your children lord we thank you that you are our refuge and our strength and lord we look to you that as we enter a new year you would help us entrust that to you entrust our future to you and stop trying to save our own lives but instead seek to lose our life for your sake that we would live the full adventure of the life that you've called us to live confident in your goodness and your steadfast love lord we look to you in Jesus' name amen amen and as well as we talk to you of the world who have come up and be the depositions so you can have them ■ proclaimed it they have years they rotate their come up here let me here