

Refuge, Strength, Fortress, Peace

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening everyone, everyone who's in the building here, everyone who's watching in or has dialed in. And I think you'll probably have gathered from what I've said that my theme tonight is Psalm 46. And I had to think a little bit about whether this is the right thing to choose to talk about tonight, because on one hand it does seem like a psalm, which is a very fitting message for the times in which we're living at the minute. And that's for all sorts of reasons, some obvious, some less so. But on the other hand, I didn't want to get on the bandwagon, so to speak, of all the many difficulties this world is facing at this point in time. And the other point in my thought was, in the grand scheme of things, I've had it much easier than most during the last year. And I was a bit nervous about starting talking to people who had it much worse than me about the lessons that are in this psalm.

But regardless, it did feel that it was relevant and prudent to do it. And it has been a hard year. We have felt it hard in this congregation. We have lost some very dear people from this congregation. And we still have a responsibility to care for their families on an ongoing basis.

It's been disruptive to church life. And it's created an uncertainty about what the future will be in terms of what church is, what does it look like, what is worship going to be like in the future. And if we look in the wider world, 3.1 million deaths and growing day by day. And it's the cause of many other issues, other health issues, which are exacerbated by isolation, shielding, and which have an effect on the most vulnerable in a disproportionate way. And maybe because of what I do for a living, the thing that I see more than any other is the cost of this last year. And it's a cost that will have to be paid for. And it will take years and years to do it. And at a more human level, at an individual level, we know people who are worried about their job. They're worried about what tomorrow will bring. They don't know how they're going to make ends meet and so on.

And amongst all of this, this is a psalm that gives us great hope. It gives us encouragement that even in the darkest and most difficult of times, we have a God who is all-powerful, who is in control, who is ordering everything that is going on and will not let us down.

But one of the things that the psalm also does, maybe by implication, is that it points to what people do wrong. It alludes to the mistakes that people make in times like this. And before I get into the psalm, I want to spend a little bit of time looking at that. Because in many ways, I find this the most discouraging thing of all, because it seems that over the last year, the world has learned very little. Because the faith of the world seems to be in all the wrong things.

[3 : 42] There's still a faith in money or possessions at a time when we need everybody to contribute and muck in. I was talking to a friend the other day about his plan to stop working at 55. And he's got it all worked out. He lives in London inside the M25. He's going to sell his house that he's had for 30 years.

He also inherited his mother's house. He's going to move north. He's going to buy a bigger house. And with all the money he's going to let over, he's going to buy several more. And he's going to spend his very long and happy retirement, he says, just chilling and doing what he wants to do. But no thought, no thought of his soul, or really no thought, to be honest, of anyone else. Maybe others have an emphasis on special abilities, survivalists, sports people, highly skilled individuals, and that's what they have their faith in. Maybe it's a reliance on worldly pleasures to get you through from one day to the next, to fill the void of hundred of everyday life. Maybe it's a reliance or a faith on family or a social circle or a business community that will give you status and security. Maybe it's the colour for your flag. It's very prudent. It's very high on the agenda right now. Well, I'm from Northern Ireland. I know more about this than most. And I understand both the importance of your national identity, but having been through it all my life, I can obviously understand as well the inevitable futility and disappointment that comes with a national allegiance, whatever that may be.

And just to finish this section, I've just started reading Jessica, one of Catherine McKenzie's books. And it's about the biblical idea of beauty.

And the first chapter of that, in a very simple and very child-friendly way, talks about how focused people are on their looks and how this impacts everything about their life.

[6:01] It impacts their self-confidence. It impacts their ability to earn a living. And she points out in a very simple way how there's so many compromises and most of the not good come with that. And when you look at all of these things, they seem to have one thing in common, is that at best, people are putting their confidence in things that are temporary. They will ultimately fail because they are all underpinned by a sinful human nature. Your looks will fade as you get older. If your confidence is in your wealth, it's finite. Someday, it may run out. It may be taken away. Maybe it'll be whittled away over shorter or longer terms. And in the final analysis, when you leave this world, you will not be able to take it with you. And it won't mean anything to where you go next.

Maybe it's a confidence in a special skill. But this, by its very nature, will be limited. And I was thinking about this. One of the most capable and intelligent people that I know, he used to sit in the dark because he was too intimidated by the very simple task of changing a light bulb in his house. I also like to watch a program, *New Lives in the Wild*. I'm sure many of you watch it. But one of the things that seems to come out of just about every episode is that everyone in it, they've walked away from something and they now have a lifestyle that maybe is so much better than what they had before. But in none of those cases is their life perfect. And more often than not, it's full of many contradictions and compromises. And the one compromise is that so many of them seem to be lonely. Even our confidence in our social circle, our church, or our family may fail or may pass away someday. We are all, after all, sinful human beings. And we will make mistakes.

We will let people down. And in some cases, we may find ourselves in circumstances where we just can't be helped. Even by the most loving and devoted of family or friends. Or dare I say it, it's been very prevalent in my family in the last couple of years. For my older relatives, their circle of friends and close confidence seems to reduce year on year. And when you put all this together, it does sound quite depressing. It does sound quite negative. But the wonderful thing about this Psalm 46 is that for a Christian, that is not the case. Psalm 46 is one of those Psalms that brings comfort, it brings encouragement, it brings support and confidence to Christians both now and down through the ages.

And if I look back, Spurgeon calls it the Psalm of Holy Confidence. Luther, and we'll sing his very famous hymn at the end, is very closely associated with this Psalm. Because during Reformation times, when he took his stand, when he took great comfort in this Psalm, because when he was persecuted and all the personal difficulties that that brought. And most of you who know me know my fascination for modern American politics. But even Barack Obama referred to the Psalm in the Tucson Memorial speech on the 10th anniversary of the September 11th attacks. The Psalm itself, if you look at it, it's broken into three sections. Verses 1 to 3, verses 4 to 7, and verses 8 to 11. And it kind of pivots on verse 8, where we have a transition from the troubles that we can face, the comfort and confidence that we can have, to what the future will be. And it will be a good one for us, for those that believe. But right at the end, and I'll come to this later, there's an almost chilling warning for those that don't.

So let's take the first three verses, where it refers to God's refuge and strength. And look at verse 1. God is a refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. If you look at verse 7 again, the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress. And that verse is again repeated in verse 11. Now I have laboured the point a little bit and quite deliberately on the things that we do put our trust and confidence in, and the limitations and the ultimate failure of all those things.

[10:50] But this Psalm is telling us something different. This Psalm is talking about the character and nature of God. And this is so different. He gives us refuge, a refuge that we can go to where there's no limitations, there's no weak points, a refuge where we will never be compromised.

Because that is our God, that's what he does. He gives us a safe place to go to, a stronghold where we know that we'll be secure. A refuge that when we're in it, we know that we won't have to look over our shoulder and worry about what tomorrow we're being or what life has for us. Because unlike all the other things that we put our confidence in, God is our refuge and he will not let us down. And it's a refuge as well that will, that will withstand anything the world can throw at us at this time. Because what the Psalmist is not saying is that you don't have to worry. Everything in life will be fine. He's definitely not saying that.

Because if you look at verse 2 and 3, the Psalmist is very clear that things may come our way which will shake us to our very foundation. The events described in 2 and 3 are not immaterial or insignificant.

They are what one of the commentators call a reversal of creation. And what it's trying to capture is the idea of dangers that are real, that threaten our daily existence. It is like being in a really tight place for which there seems no way out. It is being in a situation where you don't know.

You don't know how you're going to get through the day and what tomorrow will bring. Well, what we are told here is that you do not need to worry because our God is with us. He will not let you down.

He will be that source of inner strength that will get you through the very worst. And in old-fashioned King James language, he is our ever-present, ever-reliable refuge. He won't weaken against the greatest calamities the world can throw our way. And one of the reasons why I sung that hymn is that hymn, Horatio Spafford's hymn, It Is Well. Something brought it to my mind. It's a hymn I've known all my life, but it's something that came to my mind this week and indulged me a little because there's a post on the Ulster Rugby Facebook site. And it was done on the anniversary of the death of somebody called Nevin Spence. And if you're from my part of the world, you know exactly who this is. And he was a young Christian professional rugby player who died along with his father and brother in a tragic accident.

[13 : 51] I don't know the family, but there's a lot about his life that I could identify with. So when I'm reminded of this story, it really, really gets me. You know, I can identify with their faith.

It was a strong, devoted Christian family. They were a family that were committed to their work as farmers and also a love of rugby. But the background music in that post was this hymn.

And this would have been done with both the permission and I'm sure direction of the family that was left behind. Because what was left behind was a lady who lost her husband and two sons. Another lady who lost her husband, her father-in-law and brother-in-law and three ring children who lost their father, their grandfather and their uncle. And this was the hymn that was in the background of this video. Showed him as a young lad playing on pitches that I've played on myself. You know, I was able to tell where they were. Showed him playing on Ravenhill. I've played on Ravenhill as well.

And even in these horrible circumstances, that family could post that. Because they had confidence it was well with the soul of these three guys. But it was also well for them because of their faith and their confidence that even in these horrible circumstances, God has not let them down. He was safe and secure. He is safe and secure. Now if we look at the next stanza, verses four to seven, it's about an eternal and a happy kingdom. And to understand this section, I think it's helpful to look at the historical context. Slight problem with doing that is not, there doesn't seem to be any agreement on what historical situation that the psalmist was referring to, but it could be narrowed down to two. The one that we read where Sennacherib, king of Assyria, he invaded Judah and ultimately went up against Jerusalem. Hezekiah did the practical thing. He repaired the wall. He built another outside it. He cut off all the fresh springs so that the Assyrians couldn't get water. And Sennacherib and his army came and they taunted the people. They taunted God. And it was at this point that [16 : 31] Hezekiah and Isaiah, they prayed out and cried to God. And God sent his angel and cut off Sennacherib, cut off the army. And Sennacherib returned a defeated man, a man full of shame. And ultimately he was killed by his own family. The other option is, I didn't read it, but it's 2 Chronicles 20, where the Moabites, Ammonites and Amahunites, they got together to fight Judah. An army so big and practical that Judah could not withstand it. And Jehoshaphat, the king at the time, he cried to God for it to deliverance. And what happened is that God caused the enemy armies to fight each other and destroy themselves. And when the people went up to the watchtowers, all they could see was a land filled with dead bodies of their enemy. And they hadn't lifted a finger to cause that. And whatever incident the psalm refers to, the message is the same. People were secure because they trusted in God.

Yes, the people were secure physically because they were in Jerusalem. They had big walls, they had fresh water. But as I said, the real reason that they were secure and the real reason was because they realized their hopelessness, their total inability to do this themselves. And at that point, they realized that the only thing they could do, the only option they had was to cry to God for help.

And God, as this psalm says, delivered them. And the psalmist does look back, yes, to a situation. But the message here is much more than that. It's about looking forward as well. And it tells us about the nature and safety of God's people through history, both in the past, the present, and the future of all the years to come. And the earth that he drew, Jerusalem here referred, is a symbol of heaven.

And the journey in for all of you who believe. And if you look at all these instances, it just sows that our fate as believers. It's certain, even in the darkest of circumstances. Because God, all God has to do is speak and all his enemies will be defeated. But I think the other thing that Sam is doing is saying, look back in your own life and see how God has brought you through. And as I've said, my life's been fairly comfortable. Most have had it much harder than me. But I can look back at so many things. I finished uni in Belfast highly qualified, but just during the troubles. And in a situation that many of our younger people face now, that there's just no jobs to be had. And if that is your situation now, just hang in there. Because if you're a believer, it will be okay. It may take years, but it will come good. Because what God did for me, he closed doors. He closed all the doors in Belfast for me. No job, nothing. But he opened doors over here. And the doors that he opened were genuinely a job I really enjoy. But much more importantly for me, a lovely wife, two, sorry, two lovely children, Christian friends of my own age. And these are things that I never had at home. So if I look back, I can see that God did not let me down. And he will not let you down either. God will never be in your debt. And the final section, the final stanza is from verse 8 to the end. And I think it is often misunderstood, particularly verse 10, but I'll come to that in a minute. But it is telling us that God will be glorified. Glorified by those who believe in him, but also by those who don't. This is a certainty. In both these biblical examples, God overruled.

[20 : 37] He brought wars to an end. He totally destroyed the enemy, despite their numbers, their fearsomeness, and the best tool of warfare that were available. And what this is, is a concept of an imposed peace, where the victor imposes peace on the people that they have defeated. And if you want a modern example, the end of the First World War, there's what's called the Treaty of Versailles. And what it did was it imposed a peace in Germany that was designed both to punish them for the role in the First World War, but also to try and make sure that they could never be in a position to wage war like that again. And this is the type of peace that has been talked about here. It's not the type of peace that we seem to think about now. We're warring parties, they head off to Switzerland, Iceland, or Finland, they get round a table, they talk things through, and a treaty comes out the other end that seems to treat them both. This is a treaty. This is an example where God has defeated his enemies and has imposed a peace on them and will impose a final peace in days to come. And when he does that, he commands people. This is not a request. He commands people to be still, because often when we think about this expression, be still, we think about what Phil was talking about this morning, where we go to a quiet place and we contemplate what a wonderful God we have and all he has done for us. And yes, that's good and right to do that. But this is not what has been talked about here. This is much stronger.

What this means is surrender and acknowledge God. You know, we all want to be in control of our own lives. We all like to manage our own affairs, make our own plans, be the boss. We all have that tendency.

But this is saying, stop, take your hands off the wheel. You must surrender and acknowledge God. And I think this is where the reference to the God of Jacob is so significant, because that's what Jacob was like. He was a schemer. He was somebody who liked to play God. He was a man who was hard to love, hard to trust. He was a man who did what he wanted to do. And God dealt with him. And he will deal with all of us in the same way. So this command to be still, it's about stop boasting, stop the self-promotion, stop taking credit for everything, stop being the boss, take a step back. And let's read verse 10.

Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. I will. I will. But there's two sides to this command to be still. For the believer to be still, it's, as I said, cut yourself out of the equation and see that God is in control, not you. He is the Lord of hosts. He is the God of Jacob. He is our refuge, our strength. He is the one who will help us through tough times. And if you do that, what the psalm tells us, he will make you glad.

He will keep you safe and ultimately bring you home, sorry, at the end of your days to heaven, and where you'll spend the rest of eternity, where nothing can harm you or hurt you ever again.

[24 : 03] But there is another side of this, and this is quite chilling, I think. And this is for those who do not believe. Because a day will come if this is you. A day will come when you will believe.

A day will come when you will be still and you will know that God is exalted among the nations and that God will be exalted on the earth. You will understand that and you will do it.

But it's different for you because it's like Sennacherib, the Moabites, the Mahonites, and the Ammonites. Because the day that you know that will be the day of judgment rather than a day of joy.

So I'm going to finish there. This is a wonderful psalm. It gives great hope in these troubled times. It gives great comfort and confidence that whatever is going on in your life, however tough it would be, that God will not let you down. He will bring you through it.

And you will come out the other side. And you'll come out of it better, I think, than what you came in. Now the last word, and this is going to go to Martin Luther in a minute, because you can't kind of preach a sermon on the psalm without singing his paraphrase of this psalm.

[25 : 30] But the last word from me is a quote. It's an American singer. And he, while I don't agree with much of his faith, I have to be honest, but he used to be a soloist for the Billy Graham crusade.

A guy called Wintley Phipps. And he said, It is in the quiet crucible of your personal private sufferings that your noblest dreams are born and God's greatest gifts are given.

Amen.