

Our Strength and Refuge

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[0 : 00] Friends, I want to start this sermon today by reading to you an article, part of an article. The article was written by Andrew Bolt. It was published in the Sydney Morning Herald on Sunday the 30th of November 2000, so a reasonable amount of time ago.

The title was The Baddeley Secret That Many Don't Want You to Hear About, and it reads like this. Last Sunday, 19-year-old Aaron Baddeley grabbed his Australian Open trophy, leaned into the microphone and tried to tell us the secret of his astonishing success.

But only the Herald Sun and one other city newspaper in Australia felt free to quote the words the next day. Oddly, the same thing happened when the young golfer won the Open the year before. Then too he made a speech thanking the person he owed it to. The man he later said made him feel calm, cool, relaxed and focused on what I do. And always upbeat.

Then too, only two city newspapers, by my count, published his words the next morning. Although Australia seemed keen to know all about this remarkable young man.

[1 : 11] Isn't that strange? You see, if Baddeley had said, for instance, that he owed it all to his mum, or his childhood coach, you would expect our newspapers, who would, you know, the natural expectation is that all newspapers would report those words.

So why the reluctance to publish the first words Baddeley used in Sunday's victory speech? I thank my Lord and Saviour for being with me. Or to mention last year, he said, I want to thank my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

I'm not a Christian myself, says the author, but I've noticed Baddeley struggling to persuade journalists that his faith in Christ is crucial to his success. He helped me so much, he said after his first Open.

And his mother agrees. It's wonderful he can gain so much strength from his belief. But it seems journalists feel angry hearing this. A Sydney Morning Herald journalist exploded with an expletive, which I'll avoid, but he said, just once, I mean, could a newly appointed sports hero thank Satan, the Prince of Darkness?

Another Sydney Morning Herald writer, Peter Fitzsimmons, snarled, piety is one thing, pointing to God on your shoulder at the time of your greatest triumph, quite another. And this week, a senior writer in The Australian even hinted that Baddeley was un-Australian, damning his tribute to Christ as rather American, really, and pointing out he spent the first three years of his life in America and probably blaming that on it.

[2 : 46] Anyway, in 20 years as a journalist, I've noticed how many colleagues tend to switch off or smirk when talk turns to Christ. I suspect many of us feel that we spare interviewees' embarrassment by not reporting their faith.

The result of this quiet censorship is that the Christian God gets plenty of bad press and almost no good press.

If a rapist tells the judge he's found God, we report that all right. Love that mix of sanctimony and sin. But if a Christian praises God for his business success, well, that's a bit off, really, isn't it? It's a pity the Christian God is given so little credit because there is no doubt he is moving in serious ways. So there we go. The article is really, I think, very interesting and it hasn't changed much in some ways.

But it demonstrates that the world that we live in is a world that is often set against God and God's people. In the case we've just read, the world sets itself against God's people simply by just ignoring them and ignoring their faith and ignoring what they say about God.

[3 : 59] In other words, they set themselves against God by simply regarding God as an irrelevancy. In this case, the world is not aggressively against our faith.

However, there are times when the world is aggressively against our faith and against our God. There are places, for example, in the world today where Christians are killed and maimed and tortured because of their beliefs.

But even in our relatively civilised world, there are times when the world is actively and aggressively against us because we are God's people. And the incidents in the article that I read to you were written 16 years ago.

And you would yourself know that in these last years, that has escalated. In those 16 years, it is getting harder and harder and more difficult and more aggressively anti-Christian sentiment is arising in our country.

Since then, God and Christian faith has had even more flack. Our world makes fun of our beliefs. Sometimes the people of this world belittle or oppose our morals or our standards.

[5 : 02] Sometimes they actively try and drag us away from our Christian convictions. And the end result is that we find that Christian people are being dragged away from their faith.

They are overcome with the difficulty of being Christian in a godless world. And they drop out of faith or they drop out of commitment or they drop in commitment or they cave in morally. Or they simply just drift away from conviction in Christ, from a firm conviction in Christ.

So what should we do? How should we respond to all of this? How should we respond to a world that is against us and against our beliefs and against our God? What should we think and what should we do?

Those questions, I think, are helped by Psalm 46. They are the questions that Psalm 46 in many ways is designed to answer. So let's have a look at the Psalm together.

So open your Bibles. I think 563 or something like that. But anyway, is that correct? My memory's not as bad as I thought it was.

[6 : 04] Anyway, open your Bibles at Psalm 46. Now, remember that the Psalms are designed to be corporately sung. They were the ancient equivalent of our hymns, our songs, our choruses and so on.

And we can see some... Well, you actually can't see this because our translators haven't done us any favours. But in the original, there's a little word that comes after verse 3, verse 7 and verse 11. And it is a little word called Selah, which is a sort of little musical interlude, I suspect. Okay? And that divides the Psalm into three sections. Section 1 is verses 1 to 3.

Section 2 is verses 4 to 7. And section 3 is verses 8 to 11. So let's look at each of those sections piece by piece. First, verses 1 to 3. Look at the words again. Now, I think these verses are speaking about the end of the world.

They indicate that at the end of time, there'll be a time when the world will perish and change its shape. The nation of Israel knows this. And they acknowledge it in this song.

[7 : 17] That is, there'll be an end. And together they say, even though the last days should come in great turmoil, even though those huge and everlasting mountains should sink into the sea, even though the whole of creation should sort of rise up to swallow us up, still we will not fear.

For God is our refuge and strength. Now, the question that I have in this section is this. How is it that the nation of Israel can be so confident? What is it that not even the collapse of the world can frighten?

Why is it that not even the collapse of the world can frighten Israel? Now, I think the answer is simple for an Israelite. The Israelite answers that the God they worship is the Lord of creation. So even the upheaval of creation, even the end of creation will not stop him.

He is the one who rules over creation and controls it. And if this God is for his people, then not even the collapse of all creation will harm them. However, in my mind, this raises yet another question.

The question is this. How can Israel know that the Lord of creation is for her? See, how can Israel know that the Lord of creation is for her? Now, that is, how can the people of God know that the God of all the earth will actually protect them when the end of the earth comes?

[8 : 36] Well, what I'm going to do at the moment is pose the question. I think the answer comes a bit later in the psalm, so hang on in there and we'll get there in a moment. But let's move to section 2. Verses 4 to 7. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.

God is within her. She shall not fail. God will help her at break of day. Nations are in uproar. Kingdoms fall. He lifts his voice. The earth melts. The Lord Almighty is with us.

The God of Jacob is our fortress. Now, the first thing I want you to notice is that this section shows a marked change in mood, doesn't it? So, verses 4 and 5 is a replacement of the tumult of verses 1 and 3.

And instead of the tumult in creation, you get this picture of a peaceful river flowing quietly through a city. Wild waves of the sea are replaced by the calm and refreshing waters of the stream in the mountains.

Then in verse 6, we return to the tumult and chaos that was present back in verses 1 to 3. But this time, it's not the shaking of the nations that is going on. No, this time, it's the raging of the nations against the city of Jerusalem.

[9 : 47] That is, the centre capital city of Israel. But these verses also make clear that although the nations roar, all that God has to do is speak and all the earth and the nations will melt before him.

But this verse also makes clear that although the nations roar, sorry, that all God has to do is lift his voice and the earth will melt. By the way, there's a telltale sign which of all versions, the NIV is one of the only ones to capture.

It says that the earth will fall. It says that the nations will fall but it says something will not fall. Do you see it there? It's the city of God will not fall for God is in her midst.

Anyway, verses 1 to 3 show us that the Lord of creation shows us, sorry, it shows us the Lord of creation. These verses show us the Lord of history. So Lord of creation verses 1 to 3, Lord of history verses 4 to 7.

God is a God, you see, who controls all history. And this God is with his people to help her. So in section 1, Israel seemed confident that God was with her.

[10 : 58] In this section, Israel is confident that the Lord is in control of all historical situations to help her. Look at verse 7. It rings with confidence, doesn't it?

The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. But I think that for me just raises the question we asked earlier. That is, how does Israel know this? How can these people know that God will indeed protect them even against the marauding nations?

And here's where verses 4 and 5 come to our aid. Have a look at it. But before we do, I want you to remember some Israelite history. You see, when Israel was rescued out of Egypt, they knew that God was with them by some concrete means.

Do you remember what it was? There was a pillar of fire that preceded them. They knew God was with them. They also knew that he was with them for another reason.

The Ark of the Covenant was there in the very centre of their marching nation. There in the centre was the Ark of the Covenant. And the Ark of the Covenant signified to them that God was in covenant relationship with them.

[12 : 05] Bound to them in covenant obligation. He would protect them. He was their God. They were his people. He would protect them. He would keep them. Now when Israel finally entered the Promised Land, do you know what they did with that Ark of the Covenant?

First of all, they put it in little shrines all around the place. But then, when David became king, David brought it up into his city and put it in the middle of his city and then got his son, well, he tried to do it, but got his son to build a temple for it.

And so, when Israelites wanted some assurance that God was with them, they would look toward Jerusalem because in Jerusalem stood the temple and in the temple stood the Ark of the Covenant and that symbolized the presence of God.

And they knew God would protect them. He would keep them safe. That's what I think verses 4 and 5 are about. There's this city and in it is a symbol of the presence of God.

He is with the city. He is with his people. The Lord of creation, the Lord of history are present and on their side. Of course, let me tell you, the great risk is you can treat that. The great risk that you have with that is that you can treat God with contempt and not follow him rightly as Israel did later on in their history.

[13 : 17] So God took the temple and the city away from them. But anyway, that's not where we are at the moment. Look at verses 8 to 11. The psalmist says, Come and see what the Lord has done, the desolations he's brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the shields with fire. He says, Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations.

I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Now, I think these verses return to thinking about the end of time and they give us this vision, this vision of the end and a call issued by God for the nations to come and see what he has done.

God calls them to come and see three things. Can you see it there? How he has stilled the earth and the nations. How he has brought peace in the midst of a troubled world and how he will give the world peace by his word and his action.

In this section, you see, the nations are called to recognize that it is God against whom they are striving and that he will be exalted in the earth whether they like it or not. They are therefore to cease striving.

[14 : 29] They are to be still. Can you hear that? So I don't think this is about, you know, us personally being still so much but the nations. Stop, God is saying. Be still. Know that I am God. I will be exalted among you.

But not only they are to recognize this new fact about God and that fact is that not only is he the God, the Lord of all creation, not only is he the Lord of all history, he is the Lord of all things that will happen in these last days.

He is the Lord of the last things and Israel is to know this and rejoice in it. The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Now let me say that although the psalm doesn't use the word faith or belief, this is a magnificent expression of faith, isn't it?

It demonstrates that a people of God can face the present and the future despite impending catastrophe. Why? Because their true security is in God and God alone.

Not in themselves, not in the nations, not in the physical existence of the earth itself, no, in God himself. She knows that God is with her and that therefore nothing can be against her.

[15 : 43] Now what are the implications of this psalm for us? How does it apply to us? Can we Christians have this same sort of confidence? Can we have this same sort of security?

Well let's see what the New Testament has to say. And I'm going to read you some passages from the New Testament. I'll tell you what they are. You can look them up if you like but maybe best just to let me read them to you.

First one is Mark 4 35 to 41. It's a great passage. It's a well-known story. I'll read it to you. That day when evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, let's go over to the other side.

Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along just as he was in the boat. And there were other boats with him. And a furious squall came up and the waves broke around the boat so that it was nearly swamped.

And Jesus was in the stern asleep on a cushion and the disciples woke him and they said to him, Teacher, don't you care if we drown? And he got up and he rebuked the wind and the waves, Quiet!

[16 : 45] Be still! And the wind died down and it was completely calm. And he said to his disciples, Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?

And they were terrified and asked each other, Who is this that even the wind and the waves obey him? Now, the story's clear, isn't it? Jesus is Lord of creation just like his Father.

He governs and controls all created forces. He starts them when he likes, he stops them when he likes. He is the Lord of all creation, just like his Father.

Let's now go to Acts chapter 4 verses 23 to 31. I'll give you the background. Peter and John have been in prison for preaching about Jesus and they've finally been released and this is what happens.

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. And when they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God and they said, Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in it.

[17 : 56] That is, you're the God of all creation. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David. Why do the nations rage and the people's plot in vain?

The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one. Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed.

Can you hear what's happening? Here are the nations, even your own nation, set against your purposes. They did what your power and your will had decided beforehand would happen.

They didn't do anything that you didn't know about. You couldn't control. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand and to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. And after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. In this story, the nations are raging against the people of God.

[19 : 00] Again, we see the people of God here in Acts 4 quietly confident as they were in Psalm 46. For again, you see, they know God is with them.

He's on their side. He's the Lord of all history just as in Psalm 46. He is for his people. Now, the last passage is Revelation 19 verse 11 to 16.

And again, I'll read it to you so it's a picture of, well, you'll see. It's a picture that gives us a glimpse into heaven. I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse whose rider is called Faithful and True.

With justice, he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He's dressed in a robe dipped in blood and his name is the Word of God.

The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses, dressed in fine linen, white and clean, coming out of his mouth with a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.

[20 : 08] He will rule them with an iron scepter and on his, he treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty and on his robe and on his thigh he has this name written, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

I wonder if you can see it again. You see, these verses are clear just as they were in Psalm 46. God is the Lord of the last things and he will act to bring his people safely and securely through all tumult at the end of time.

And throughout the book of Revelation he marks his people with a sign just to indicate that he will do this. He will do this for his new people the same as he promised his ancient people in Psalm 46. And so the end of Revelation is this magnificent picture of them gathered before the throne of God. But did you notice I've left one question still unanswered? In Psalm 46 the ancient people of God knew that God was with them because of the very visible symbol of the Ark of the Covenant and Jerusalem and the Temple.

They could point to it and say, we know God's with us. Of course they treated that security with contempt and as a result God had to remove the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple.

[21 : 22] Jerusalem is as always the centre of focus and dispute and conflict even now but how do we know therefore that God is with us as the Lord of creation the Lord of history the Lord of last things how do we know?

How do we know that God is with us to save us and protect us and care for us and bring us secure at the end of time? How do we know he's our refuge and strength a very present help in trouble? How can we be sure of God's care for us?

Well I want to answer by just teaching you some very rudimentary Hebrew. Okay the ancient word for with us the one that term that's used here within this psalm that ancient Hebrew term with us goes like this imanu okay imanu that word is used in Psalm 46 when we're told that the Lord of hosts is with us well this word for with us occurs somewhere in the New Testament I want you to return to our first second reading for today can you turn over to Matthew chapter 1 22 to 23 Matthew 1 22 to 23 contain a prophecy about the birth of Jesus and let's see what these verses have to say so all this took place we're told to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will name him imanu el el means God so God with us so the New Testament equivalent to the Ark of the Covenant and the city of Jerusalem and the temple is the person of Jesus Christ and he's never going to pass away he's seated at the right seated at the right hand of the Father there forever remember the last words of Matthew's gospel do you remember what Jesus says he says behold

I'm with you always even to the end of the age I am Emmanuel so when we believe in Jesus when we trust in him when we accept him as our means of salvation when we allow him to rule our lives then he is our security he is God's guarantee that he is with us to care for us to protect us to watch over us so I want to encourage you today in a world that looks increasingly fragile in a world that often assaults the people of God and may assault them even more viciously in the days to come in a world that often ignores God in a world that often tempts us away from true belief in God be

encouraged you see because although the world ridicules us although everything seems sometimes set against us although sometimes our life looks fragile and the world looks ready to fall in or fall upon us as it were although our future sometimes looks frail and the future of Christian faith looks frail

God will be exalted and God will be known as the almighty God even by the journalists of this world and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that his son Jesus Christ is Lord of all so we can be encouraged by this can't we sisters and brothers take courage rejoice God is with us Jesus the Lord of creation the Lord of history the Lord of the last things the Lord of everything the God of all the world is our stronghold our very present help in trouble so let's not fear or fall away let's trust in him and march on confident in him let's pray our father we thank you that you have appointed your son Jesus as the Lord of all creation the Lord of history the Lord of the last things the Lord of everything thank you that because of him we can know that you the God of all the world are our stronghold our very present help in trouble please help us gird ourselves and each other with these things help us not to fear or fall away but to trust in your son and march on confident in him we pray this in

[25 : 49] Jesus name Amen