

God with us

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[0:00] I know it's disheartening to do church in lockdown again, and it may be even more disheartening to realize today that instead of Andrew or Vijay, you have this amateur speaking.

So I just wanted to reassure everyone just at the beginning that this sermon has indeed been vetted by Andrew Price, which means you can be comforted that no matter how poor my delivery is today, at least it's not heretical.

We have to be thankful for the small mercies today. Now, when was the last time you felt safe? I believe for most of us, our sense of security was shaken at the start of the pandemic last year. I remember when all this started, being nervous just going to the grocery store, always having to mask up, sanitize my hands every five seconds, wondering whether that boy that sneezed in aisle nine had COVID.

Little was known about COVID, and we didn't really know the extent that it's hit Melbourne. On top of this, my wife was actually pregnant with our first child. And as a GP, she was regularly in close contact with people who had coughs and flus, who were sick.

[1:10] So I was always worried that my wife would be infected and whether that would impact the baby. To an extent, at least temporarily, COVID took away our sense of safety and security.

And if not COVID, there's probably something else that troubles you right now. Like whether this lockdown saga will ever end. How this will impact my mental health or the mental health of my family and loved ones.

Or there may be other fears and uncertainties you have about today or tomorrow. If this is the case, then God's word to us today comes as a great blessing and comfort.

Hopefully through it, we regain our sense of security and safety, not by looking at our circumstances, but by looking at our God. Let's read Psalm 46 verses 1 to 3.

The psalmist begins in verse 1 with an affirmation that God is our refuge.

[2:30] An ever-present help in trouble. Now the word ever-present in the Hebrew can actually convey two things. Firstly, it can convey God being near to us, being present with us when troubles come.

And we'll actually see more of this in verses 4 to 5. But it also conveys a sense of being a proven help. God has proven himself time and time again.

And we'll see more of this in verses 8 to 9. So verse 1 here is actually the summary of the whole psalm. And the main application is in verse 2.

Therefore, we will not fear. Even in extreme situations. Even when the earth gives way.

And the mountains, a symbol of stability and fortitude, fall into the sea. Which is a symbol of chaos. So even when the very things we normally trust and put our security in get swallowed up by chaos.

[3:34] Or even in verse 3. When there are massive waves like a tsunami or mountains tremble with earthquakes. God is our refuge even then. I wonder if you've had personal experiences where God has actually been an ever-present help in extreme situations.

For me, it was actually a time on Valentine's Day a few years back. I was dating Grace at that time and who is now my wife. It was our first Valentine's Day.

So I actually wanted to impress her. She loves seafood. So I took her to Donovan's at St. Kilda Beach. And she ordered this seafood pasta dish that had so many different shellfish.

It had prawn, Morton Bay bugs, mussels. And we had a lovely Valentine dinner. But as I was driving her home, she started coughing.

She told me her throat was getting scratchy. Which is strange. And a few minutes later, her lips were getting swollen. Then her throat became hoarse.

[4 : 42] She realized she was having an anaphylactic reaction. Which was very surprising to us because she was never allergic to seafood. We didn't have an EpiPen or anything.

We needed to rush to the hospital immediately. And she told me she might only have five minutes if her throat swells up and she can't breathe. So I was panicking as I was driving.

Looking at Google Maps. And it said it was another 15 minutes to the nearest hospital. And then the worst happened. She struggled to breathe. Now I don't remember if I prayed at that time.

But I'd like to think I did. I could only hope to God that we could make it in time. I didn't know how in the world we would be able to help her during that time.

Now then, suddenly, as we were going down one road, Grace nudged my elbow. There was actually an ambulance on the side of the road. They were trying to help another person.

[5 : 44] So we immediately stopped in front of the ambulance, talked to the paramedics, and they gave her the adrenaline shot she needed to breathe again. She was then taken to the hospital for monitoring and discharged the morning after.

Now I still think about that night as a night where God intervened and helped us in our time of need. Had the ambulance not been there, I don't know what would have happened. But I knew that our kind and loving Father directed our path that night.

Now what stories do you have of God being your help? Hopefully you can reflect on them today and remember how he has been your refuge. Now while reflecting on our own personal experiences is a good starting point to seeing God as our help and refuge, the psalmist actually gives us more solid reasons to do so.

Let's read verses 4 to 5. 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 will not fall. God will help her at a break of day. So verses 4 to 5 here depict God as being a refuge because he dwells with his people.

[7 : 04] In verse 4, the city of God is likely a reference to Jerusalem. It speaks of a river. Now not a literal river that ran through Jerusalem, but this is likely a metaphor.

Now one of the cool tips about reading Hebrew poetry, which you can apply when you read Psalms or Proverbs, is the second line of a verse is often a reiteration of the first line.

So it repeats the same idea with a different phrase. So here the city of God is the place where the Most High dwells, which is in the temple in Jerusalem. So this means the river is actually a metaphor of life and provision that runs from God's holy place, the temple, to Jerusalem.

So verse 4 here is talking about how God dwelling with his people is their source of provision and life. And in verse 5, it talks about God's presence being in Jerusalem.

And because of that, Jerusalem is fortified and safe because God will always be there to help her. It's actually like how a city back then was actually safest when the king was in it because the king came with his army.

[8 : 22] The people in the city wouldn't need to send a messenger to a king who is far away if an enemy ever comes to attack it. And the same was true for Jerusalem. God was within the city, so they needed only to come to him to ask for help.

Now in the Old Testament, there's actually a story where this happened. In Isaiah 36 to 37, which you can read fully in your own time, Jerusalem was actually surrounded by the armies of Assyria. And as they were surrounded, Jerusalem's king, Hezekiah, went into the house of God with sackcloth and prayed for deliverance.

The Lord, being within the city, answered, and his angel struck down the Assyrian forces. Israel did not need to lift a finger.

God was her help, and she did not fall. Now this may have been true for Old Testament Israel, but what about Christians today?

[9 : 26] There is no more temple. How then is God with us as Christians today? Well, we actually have a greater privilege than Old Testament Israel.

For Jesus has replaced the temple and sends his spirit so that he is with us always. No longer just in Jerusalem. He is with every believer, no matter where they are.

In fact, the spirit is actually called living water in John 7, for he gives us spiritual life and provision.

And later in John 14, the spirit is also called helper, our ever-present help in times of trouble.

So we are not to be afraid because God is with us by his spirit to help us and strengthen us to stand firm as Christians through times of trouble.

So the first reason we need not fear is because God is with us. And the second reason is because God is powerful. He rules with his word.

[10:33] Check out verse 6. Nations are in uproar. Kingdoms fall. He lifts his voice. The earth melts.

In verse 6, the psalmist contrasts the nations roaring with God raising his voice to make them stop. The nations here refer to Israel's neighbors who are constantly threatening them.

So no matter how great those nations were, God need only speak to eliminate the threat. God's word is powerful because his word is what created the universe.

Isaiah says, As sure as the rain comes down from the sky and does not return until it's watered the earth, so will God's word go forth and will not return until it accomplishes his will.

So of course God can defend Israel merely by speaking. And if that was the case back then, how is it for Christians now?

[11:37] Well, we have even more confidence in God's word because God's word became flesh. Jesus is the word of God who has been given all authority to rule.

He is Lord. And through his word of the gospel, he will continue to build his church despite the nations raging against it. God is still ruling powerfully by his word today.

And this power is why he is called the Almighty. Now the previous two ideas, God being with us and powerfully ruling by his word, actually come together in the refrain.

Let's read verse 7. The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. You see the link? God the Almighty is with us.

But this refrain actually adds a third idea. That of covenant promise. In the Old Testament, when you read the word Lord with all capitals, this is actually God's covenant name to Israel, Yahweh.

[12:49] And the name Jacob here reminds us of God's covenant with Jacob in Genesis 28. It's a man who God promised numerous descendants who became the nation of Israel.

And God also promised to be with him wherever he goes. So by using these covenant names of Lord and God of Jacob, the psalmist is saying God has promised to always be with us.

For he is our God and we are his people. So this is the summary of the psalm so far. God is our refuge and ever-present help in trouble.

He is with us by his spirit. He rules by his word. And he has promised to stay with us as our God through his covenant. Therefore, we need not fear.

Now I know the question that may be lingering in your minds. What about the times we felt that God was not our refuge? What about the times where we felt that God did not help?

[13:56] It's difficult to see how God can be a refuge when he allows us to suffer, isn't it? When he allows these trials and tribulations. The psalmist helps us with this by pointing us to God's work in the past and his work in the future.

Firstly, the peace God won in the past. Verses 8 to 9. Come and see what the Lord has done. The desolations he has brought on the earth.

He makes war cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the shields with fire. In verses 8 to 9, the psalmist encourages us to come and see God's work in the past.

Particularly with Israel. How he's won peace for them. And we have many examples of God doing this in the Old Testament. Recently, we went through the sermon series of Exodus.

Where we saw God fighting for Israel. Against Egypt. There were plagues. And that famous scene in the Red Sea. Where Egypt's warriors were consumed by the sea.

[15:07] Without Israel lifting a finger. And we also have that example in Isaiah earlier. Of God defending Israel against Assyria.

But it's not just Israel who has those stories. We also have our own personal stories. Where we've faced a crisis or trouble. A battle of sorts.

And God has won peace for us. Like my story about grace at the beginning. Is there a time you can look back on to see God working for you?

When it's hard to see God's help in a present crisis. It's good to look back at God's work for you in the past. And if your present trials and challenges are so intense and great.

That it makes it so difficult for you to remember God's work for you in the past. Then I invite you to look back even further. Beyond your life. Look back to the cross.

[16:07] Where God won the greatest battle. And brought the greatest peace. For on the cross. Jesus suffered and died to atone for our sins.

And he rose again. He won the war for us. Against sin. Against death. And against the devil. So now we have peace with God and life eternal.

And this means our present trials and suffering. The ones that we face today. Can only ever be temporary.

And we know and are assured that it's temporary. Because God tells us the glorious future that awaits us. Verse 10. He says. Be still and know that I am God.

I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. Now there's some ambiguity here about who God is speaking to.

[17:11] Some people think God is actually addressing the rebellious nations and people. Telling them to stop their violence and to stop their oppression. Remember verse 6 where he says God lifts his voice and the nations melt.

Well basically they think this is what God is saying to the nations. But others think God is addressing his people. He's telling them to stop taking matters into their own hands when they face opposition.

Because God will fight for them. It's like that chapter in Exodus 14 where God tells Israel he will fight for them against Egypt. They need only be still.

Now regardless of who God is speaking to. The conclusion is the same. There will be a day when every knee will bow.

And every tongue confess. That Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. He will be exalted among all the nations.

[18:11] And this should be great comfort to us. Some of us may be anxious about growing anti-Christian sentiment that we read online or in the media.

Threats of lawsuits or jail for calling out certain sins or refusing to celebrate in them. Or mandating certain teaching to our children that is opposed to God's word.

With what seems to be an increasing opposition. And it seems like the majority of people are opposed to our faith and values. We may indeed wonder whether we are in fact on the wrong side of history.

As some people proclaim. Now through this verse God assures us that we are not. The God who is sovereign over history.

The one who declares the end from the beginning assures us that we are not. God assures us that he will be exalted over the earth. And that means we will be vindicated for following him.

[19:17] This is the God who is with us. Verse 11. The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.

The psalmist ends with the refrain. Affirming God's covenant and promise to us. The God who through his son Jesus Christ won the great victory against Satan, sin and death on the cross. And the God who will ultimately exalt himself over all the earth. Is the God who is in covenant with us. Now as I mentioned at the start.

The application of this sermon today. Is not to fear in times of trouble. However. If you are not a Christian. And you are listening to this sermon today.

This application is actually not for you. You actually have great reason to fear. God is not your fortress. But rather because of your sin and rebellion.

[20:19] He is your foe. God can only be one or the other. Either your fortress or your foe. But there is good news today.

He calls you today to stop your rebellion against him. And trust in his son Jesus Christ. Who died to atone for your sins. So that he may be your refuge in God's coming wrath.

So repent and believe in him today. It would be our greatest joy. If together with us. You could also call him your refuge and strength.

And ever present help in trouble. And if you are a Christian today. Then you are called not to fear. Because God is with us by his spirit.

He rules our world by his word Jesus Christ. He has worked for our good in the past. Chiefly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

[21:21] And he will be exalted in the future. If this God is for us. Who can be against us? We need not fear.

For as the New Testament reading today says. Neither death nor life. Neither angels nor demons. Neither the present nor the future. Nor any powers. Neither height nor depth. Nor anything else in all creation. Will be able to separate us. From the love of God. That is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let's pray. Father in heaven. We thank you Lord. For your kindness to us. We thank you for your presence in us. By your Holy Spirit. We thank you that you rule the world. Through your son Jesus Christ. We thank you for the peace you've won for us. Through his life, death and resurrection. And we thank you that you will be exalted in the future.

[22 : 21] And we need not worry. But only be still. Let us remember today. In the midst of our trials and troubles. That you are God above all things.

And let us have peace. And not fear. In the name of Lord Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.