

God with us

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. If we haven't met, my name is Christian, and I'm a student minister here at HTD. Welcome to Church Online, and welcome to lockdown number six.

If I'm not mistaken, I think the book of Revelation has seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, and seven lockdowns. So just watch out, folks. The end is coming. And I know it's disheartening to do church in lockdown again.

And it may be even more disheartening to realize that today, instead of Andrew or Vijay, you have this amateur speaking to you. So I just wanted to reassure everyone before we begin that this sermon has been vetted by Andrew Price, which means you can be comforted by the fact that no matter how poor my delivery is today, at least it's not heretical.

At least we can be thankful for these small mercies. 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 going to the grocery store, masking up, having to sanitize, which was what felt like every five seconds, wondering if that boy who just sneezed in aisle nine had COVID.

[1 : 18] We didn't really know about COVID that much, and we didn't know whether it's hit Melbourne at that time. And on top of this, my wife was pregnant with our first baby.

And as a GP, she was regularly in close contact with people who had coughs, who had flus. And I was always worried for her getting infected and whether that would impact the baby as well.

So to an extent, COVID, at least temporarily, took away our sense of safety and security. And if it's not COVID, then maybe other things that would be troubling you right now.

Like, will this lockdown saga ever end? How will this impact our mental health, the mental health of my family and loved ones? Or there may be other fears and uncertainties that you have about today and tomorrow.

Now, 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.

[2 : 29] Let's read Psalm 46, verses 1 to 3. God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear.

Though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.

Now, the psalmist begins in verse 1 with an affirmation that God is our refuge, strength, and 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 and present with us when troubles come. And we'll actually see this in verses 4 to 5 later. But it also conveys a sense of 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, then, is the summary of the whole psalm.

[3 : 36] 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.

Even when the very things that we normally trust and put our security in get swallowed up in chaos. 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 whether you've had a personal experience where God was an ever-present help in extreme situations.

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

And I really wanted to impress her. So I took her to Donovan's, which is on St. Kilda Beach, because she loved seafood. And she ordered this seafood pasta dish that contained a massive array of shellfish.

[4 : 50] There was prawn, there was Morton Bay bugs, there were mussels. And we had a lovely dinner together. But as I was driving her home, suddenly she started coughing.

She told me her throat was very scratchy, which was strange. A few minutes later, her lips got swollen. And then her throat became hoarse.

She realized she was having an anaphylactic reaction, which was surprising to us, because she was never allergic to seafood. We didn't have an EpiPen or anything. So we needed to rush to the hospital immediately.

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. I was looking at Google Maps, and it looked like there was another 15 minutes to the nearest hospital.

And then the worst happened. She struggled to breathe. I don't remember if I prayed as I drove, but I'd like to think I did. I wasn't sure if we could make it in time, and I knew only God could help us.

[6 : 00] And then, as we were going down one road, Grace nudged my elbow. Lo and behold, there was an ambulance on the side of the road. They were helping another person.

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

Now, that night felt like an episode from a Korean drama to me. I felt really disillusioned and scared, but then I also felt that I realized that night that I really loved her.

But 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 do know that our kind and loving Father directed our path that night. What stories do you have of God being your help?

[7 : 06] Hopefully, today you can reflect on them 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 break of day. So verses 4 to 5 here depict God as being a refuge because he dwells with his people.

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 it's a metaphor.

A cool tip about reading Hebrew poetry, which you can use when you read the Psalms or Proverbs, is that the second line of a verse is often a reiteration of the first one.

[8 : 14] So it repeats the same idea with a different phrase. 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 a metaphor for life and provision that runs from God's holy place, the temple, through Jerusalem. So verse 4 is talking about how God dwelling with his people in his temple is the source of their provision and life.

And verse 5 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 like how a city back then was safest when the king was within it because the king came with an army. So the people in the city wouldn't need to send a messenger to go far off away if an enemy comes to attack it.

And the same was true for Jerusalem. God was within the city. They need only to come to him to ask for help.

[9 : 25] And in the Old Testament, there's actually a story where this happened. In Isaiah 36 to 37, which you can read 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, 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?

What about us? There is no more temple. How then is God with us Christians today? Well, we actually have an even greater privilege than Old Testament Israel.

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

[10 : 39] In fact, the spirit is 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.

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.

Check out verse 6. Nations are in uproar. Kingdoms fall. He lifts his voice. The earth melts. Now in verse 6, the psalmists contrast 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.

[11 : 55] God's word is powerful to do this because it is his word that created the universe. Isaiah says, As sure as the rain comes down from the sky to water the earth and does not return until it's watered the earth, so will God's word go forth and will not return until it has accomplished his will.

So of course God can defend Israel merely by speaking. But if that's the case for Israel, then how about Christians now?

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 these two ideas of one, God being with us, and two, God being powerfully ruling by his word, come together in the refrain.

[13 : 14] Verse 7, The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. You see the connection?

God the Almighty is with us. But the refrain actually adds a third idea. That of covenant promise.

You see the Lord here is in all capitals, and when you see the Lord in all capitals in the Old Testament, it's actually God's covenant name to Israel, Yahweh. And the name Jacob here reminds us of God's covenant with Jacob in Genesis 28, a man whom God promised numerous descendants who became the nation of Israel.

God also promised Jacob 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 times of trouble.

[14 : 26] He is with us by his spirit. He rules by his word. And he's 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 right now. What about the times we felt that God was not our refuge? What about the times where we felt that God did not help?

It's difficult to see how God can be a refuge when he allows us to suffer, isn't it? With all the trials and tribulations that we face, how can we see God as our refuge?

Now the psalmist helps us here by pointing us to God's work in the past and God's work in the future. Firstly, the peace God won in the past. See verses 8 to 9.

In verses 8 to 9 here, the psalmist encourages us to come and see God's work in the past, particularly with Israel, how he won peace for them.

[15 : 53] And we have many examples of God doing this in the Old Testament. Recently we went through the sermon series on Exodus and we saw God fighting for Israel against Egypt.

There were plagues and there was a famous Red Sea scene where Egypt's warriors were consumed by the sea without Israel lifting a finger. And we also have the example in Isaiah earlier where God helps Israel defend against Assyria.

But it's not just Israel who has these stories, is it? We also have personal stories where we face crisis or trouble, a battle of sorts.

And God won peace for us then, like my story about grace at the beginning. Is there a time where you can look back on to see God's work in your life?

You see, when it's hard to see God's help in the 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 so difficult that you are struggling to see God's faithfulness in your life in the past, then I suggest you look back even further, even before your life, to the cross where God won the greatest battle and brought the greatest peace.

[17 : 15] 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, death, and the devil.

So now we have eternal peace with God and eternal life. And now because Jesus has won all of that, that means the trials and suffering that we face today can only ever be temporary.

And we're assured that it's temporary because God tells us the glorious future that awaits. 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.

Some people think God is actually addressing the rebellious nations and people. He's telling them to stop their violence and oppression. If you remember verse 6, it's when the nations uproar, God lifts His voice.

[18 : 26] Some people think that this is actually what God is saying to the nations. Verse 10. But other people 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 in Exodus 14 when Egypt was pursuing Israel. God told Israel, God will fight for them. They need only to 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. And this should be great comfort to us. Some of us may be anxious about the growing anti-Christian sentiment that we read online or in the media.

The threats of lawsuits or possibly jail for calling out certain sins or refusing to participate in celebrating them. Or mandating certain teaching to our children that is opposed to God's word.

[19 : 47] As people seem increasingly opposed to our faith and values and it seems like the majority seems to be ganging up against us, we may wonder whether we are in fact on the wrong side of history as some people proclaim.

Well here in this verse, the God who is sovereign over history, the God who declares the end from the beginning, assures us we are not.

God assures us that he will be exalted over the earth. And that means we will ultimately be vindicated for following him. 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's 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.

[21 : 02] Now as I mentioned at the start, the application of this sermon today is to not fear in times of trouble.

However, if you are not a Christian and you are listening to this sermon today, this is not the application for you. In fact, if you are not a Christian, you have great reason to fear.

God is not your fortress. Rather, because of your sin and rebellion, he is your foe. God can only be one or the other.

He is either your fortress or your foe. However, 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 and rebellion so that he may be your refuge in the coming wrath of God.

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.

[22 : 16] Now, if you are a Christian, then today you are called not to fear. And we're called not to fear because God is with us by his Spirit.

God rules our world by his Word, Jesus Christ. He has worked for our good in the past, in our own lives, but chiefly through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

And he will be exalted in the future. If this God is for us, then who can be against us?

We need not fear, for as our New Testament reading today says, neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, nor 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.

Father in Heaven, thank you, Lord, for being our refuge and strength, our ever-present help in times of trouble. Thank you for dwelling with us by your Spirit.

[23 : 34] Thank you for ruling the world by your Word. And thank you for your covenant, ensuring that you will always be with us, promising to be our God as we are your people.

Father, we thank you for the many graces and mercies you've worked in our lives, and we thank you for the ultimate work that is in Jesus Christ, the atonement for sin that we have received by his blood.

And we thank you for the promise that you will be exalted in the end, and we will be vindicated for following you. May your name be glorified.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.