

God Our Refuge

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. Our sermon text this morning is Psalm 46. Let me encourage you to grab a Bible and go there with me. This is a psalm that Old and New Testament believers have turned to in times of trouble again and again. In fact, the first hymn that we sang this morning, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, was based on this very psalm. So let's turn to Psalm 46 together, and as we do that, let me pray, and then I'll read it for us.

Oh, Father, we've just sung an old hymn of the church, praise God from whom all blessings flow. Lord, we do praise you this morning, and we ask that you would send your Spirit to use your word in our hearts. Lord, help us above all to see you more clearly as a result of coming to your word. Open up our eyes to see your greatness, God, and your goodness, your faithfulness, your power, your mercy. Lord, in our own hearts, in our own eyes, we can't do this. We need you. But God, you are faithful, and you promise to do so.

So we pray with confidence, and we come to your word with expectation that you will do a work this morning. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Psalm 46. God is our 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. There is 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. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter. He utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.

Come behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear.

[2 : 3 1] He burns the chariots with fire. Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us.

The God of Jacob is our fortress. So, here we are. We're sitting in our living rooms, watching on our laptops or our phones.

Someone just texted me, showing me how they're watching on their TV screen. Well done in New London. Glad you guys are with us. Maybe you're by yourself. Maybe you're gathered with your immediate family or a few friends.

I'm standing here preaching basically to an empty sanctuary. What a week it has been, right? Schools have been canceled. Events have been indefinitely postponed.

And the news reports keep coming in about the spread of the virus. The last I checked the statistics, there had been over 132,000 confirmed cases and almost 5,000 deaths worldwide.

[3 : 3 8] And I'm sure those numbers are already out of date. What does God's word have to say to us at a moment like this?

How are we as a church to respond? What does being a follower of Jesus mean in these tumultuous times? Well, Psalm 46 was written for a context just like ours.

When the world seems to be turning upside down, when there's uncertainty and confusion, when we're not sure what the future holds, this psalm points us to God and speaks directly to our hearts. You see, the message of Psalm 46 is this. Because God is our refuge, we need not fear. The first stanza, the first part of the psalm, tells us that because God is our refuge, we need not fear even when nature comes apart.

Look again at verses 2 and 3. Listen to the natural chaos that's described there. 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, waters foaming, mountains trembling.

[4 : 56] It's a picture of natural upheaval, of chaos. A picture where no place is safe. As we follow the news reports, as we watch the maps showing us where the virus spreads day by day, perhaps we can share some of that unsettled feeling spoken of here in Psalm 46.

That the earth seems to be giving way. That is, that there are fewer and fewer places that are safe, that are secure. We can start to feel vulnerable on the outside and weak on the inside.

And fear starts to creep in. What if I get sick? What if my children get sick? What if my parents or my grandparents get sick?

Now, maybe you're not experiencing this sort of fear at this moment. That's a good thing. However, this is still a message we need to hear.

I read a quote recently that said, We do theology in the light so that we can stand on it in the dark. We do theology in the light so we can stand on it in the dark.

[6 : 08] If you're not afraid at just this moment, well then this is the right time to consider the real reasons why you shouldn't be terrified. Because sooner or later, hard times will come.

The earth may at one point feel like it's giving away. The mountain of all that's certain in our lives may feel like it's being thrown into the sea. We do theology in the light so we can stand on it in the dark.

So why shouldn't the church be afraid? Why should we be able to face these tumultuous times with wisdom, courage, and love? Not because of anything in us.

You know, it's easy not to be afraid when I'm feeling secure and strong. But what about when I'm feeling vulnerable and weak? Can I be unafraid even then? And this is what Psalm 46 tells us.

When we are vulnerable, we still have a shelter against every storm. When we are weak, we still have a power that cannot fail.

[7 : 16] Because God is our refuge and strength. And note the second half of verse 2.

What does the psalmist say there? God is not just a present help in times of trouble, but a very present help. Ever present is how some translations put it.

When trouble comes, God is very present. Ready to be found. Sufficient for the need.

Very present. The phrase can even mean well-proved. One who has shown himself faithful, reliable, again and again. Brothers and sisters, have you found God to be very present?

To be well-proved in times of trouble. For many of us, the pandemic that we're facing today is unprecedented in our lifetime.

[8 : 16] But you know, this isn't the first time that the church has faced such a crisis. In the second century, the church lived through a 15-year epidemic that claimed anywhere from a third to a quarter of the Roman Empire.

In the middle of the third century, another epidemic struck, hitting the rural areas as hard as the cities. In the 14th and the 16th centuries, plagues ravaged Europe.

And in the early 20th century, the Spanish flu took millions of lives. The church has lived through tumultuous times before. And in those tumultuous times, God has shown himself very present in times of trouble.

God, as Psalm 46 tells us, and as church history shows us, is with us in our sorrows, in our fears, in our suffering.

But the ultimate display of God being with us in our trouble is seen above all in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is called Emmanuel, God with us.

[9 : 22] At the center of the Bible is the message that God became a human being. He entered into our fallen world that we might never be alone, that we might never be forsaken, that we might never be truly afraid.

Even if the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the sea, God in Christ is with us. He gave up heaven's glory. He took up our infirmities and our sickness and our sin to bring us back to the Father to ensure us that he would never leave us or forsake us.

And so because God is with us, the psalmist says, we need not be afraid. How much more can we say that today as New Testament believers, knowing what we know of God and Jesus Christ?

And so rather than being afraid, we have a call to love. If God is very present to us in our time of trouble, how can we be very present to one another in Christ's name?

Even when it's not wise to be physically near to one another, we can still be relationally near. A phone call, a text, an email, letting someone know that you're thinking of them, praying with them, just talking with them.

[10:41] We don't have to go through all of this alone. We can be with one another. Now, of course, we should all be following the healthy guidelines for mitigating the spread of the virus.

Even Martin Luther, who encouraged Christians not to flee the plague, recommended that people still fumigate their homes. To refuse to take such healthy measures, Luther said, isn't trusting God, it's tempting God.

And so we should love our neighbors by following the safe guidelines that are being recommended. But we should also be actively seeking out how to use all the lawful means we have to connect with one another, to encourage one another, to serve and be generous with one another.

They'll know we are Christians by our love, Jesus said. This is the time when the church must not be afraid, but heed the call of proactive love.

Let's go on and look at the second stanza of this psalm. Verses 4 through 7 tell us that because God is our refuge, we need not fear, even when society is in upheaval.

[11:58] If the first stanza is about nature going crazy, the second stanza is about how we cannot be afraid when the nations are in upheaval. Verse 6 says, The nation's rage, the kingdom's totter.

The picture is one of political and economic turmoil. And you know, if we're honest, many of us aren't primarily afraid of the virus itself. We're afraid of the impact it will have on other areas of our life.

Our jobs will suffer. Our workplaces will shut down. Our savings will dwindle. What will happen if we can't go to work for a week or two or three or four?

What will happen if the stock market continues to fall? The nation's rage. The kingdom's totter. But listen to verses 4 and 5.

Verse 4, For there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. In the Old Testament, the city of God was Jerusalem, the earthly capital of the kingdom of Israel.

[13:10] But the city of God was also a metaphor for the people of God, God's church in the Old Testament and in the New. Now, there was no actual river in the ancient city of Jerusalem.

So the reference here to a river must be symbolic. In contrast to the raging waters of verse 3, here we're told there is a river with streams that will sustain the people of God.

What is this river? Look at verse 5. God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns.

God. God is the river whose streams make glad the city of God. Even when the kingdom's totter. Even when the nations rage. You see what the psalmist is saying here is that God isn't just with his people.

God resides within his people. In our very midst. God is the river whose streams make the city of Jerusalem. And on the day of Pentecost, when the ascended Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to live in the midst of his church, this promise was fulfilled in a way the psalmist could have never dreamed.

[14:29] God, not just with us, but within us by his Holy Spirit, giving us joy, gladness, refreshment, like an aqueduct bringing fresh water to a besieged city.

Jesus said that one day living waters would well up from within us. Jesus said that one day living waters would well up from within us. Talking about the Holy Spirit. And this means even in times of trial, even in times of loss, we cannot lose the most important thing.

Even if the water runs dry, we have a river whose streams make us glad. Even in times of sorrow, we have a joy that cannot be taken away. That is our communion with God as the people of God.

The Holy Spirit assuring us of the forgiveness of sins, of our adoption as sons and daughters of God, of our hope of eternal life, that we are heirs of the new creation.

Assuring us that even sorrow and loss will be used for our good to make us more like the image of Jesus our Lord. The application then to us is this.

[15:50] Rather than being afraid, we are being called here to saving faith. God is in the midst of his city. God is in his church.

Are you? Are you a part of this city, this people of God, where the river of God's presence doesn't run dry? And how do we enter into this people?

How do we get into this city? The Bible is very clear. The only way into the people of God is through Jesus, the son of God.

Because only in Jesus is the holiness of God and the mercy of God fully satisfied. God is the Lord of hosts, verse 7 says.

That is, he is the God of countless hosts, of armies, of all that is seen and unseen, sun, moon, and stars, angels, and archangels. God is the holy, sovereign creator, and ruler of all.

[16:56] He is the Lord of hosts. But God is also the God of Jacob, verse 7 says. Jacob, the patriarch, whose twelve sons became the twelve tribes of Israel.

Jacob, the trickster, who wrestled with God. In calling God, the God of Jacob, the psalmist is reminding us that God is a God who is merciful.

A God who chooses imperfect people. A God who makes his covenant, his binding promise with the undeserving and the lowly. And so, verse 7 tells us that God is both holy and sovereign, but also merciful and kind.

But can God be both at the same time? Holy and merciful? This is one of the great questions that runs throughout the whole Old Testament.

How will God be both holy and merciful toward his fallen, sinful creation? And that question finds its resolution in one place.

[18:09] The cross of Jesus Christ. At the cross, the holiness of God against sin and the mercy of God for sinners are both expressed in perfect measure.

Jesus, fully God and fully human, takes the penalty our sins deserve. You see, in God's utter holiness at the cross, the penalty for sin is paid. But in God's utter mercy at the cross, the penalty for sin is paid by God in our place.

Through the cross, our sins can be forgiven and we can enter the city of God as the children of God. God's utter holiness. And so, are you a part of this city, this people?

Have you placed your trust in Christ alone as your Savior? What's offered to us in Christ is a river whose streams never run dry, a river of grace, a river of mercy, a river of God's own spirit.

A pastor in Italy recently wrote an article called Eight Things the Coronavirus Should Teach Us. The first thing he mentioned was that it should teach us our frailty.

[19:25] As human beings, we are weak and frail and the days that we have on this earth are limited. And so much of our time is spent in pursuits that don't last.

So here we are at a moment where we are being prompted to consider what really matters.

Where do we stand spiritually? Rather than living in fear, Psalm 46 calls us to saving faith, to enter the city of God through the Son of God that we might enjoy the eternal river of the Spirit of God.

And if you haven't yet, now is the time to enter in. But there's one last stanza of Psalm 46. We've seen that God is our refuge and that means that we don't need to live in fear of natural calamities and we don't need to live in fear of societal upheaval.

Now verses 8 through 11 show us that we don't need to live in fear of future uncertainty. Verse 8 invites us to behold the works of the Lord.

[20:44] Desolations they're called. But what are these desolations? And then in verse 9 we are shown a battlefield. But the battle is over.

The bow is broken. The spear is shattered. The chariots are burned. God has won the great victory and the call goes out be still and know that I am God.

God exalted among the nations. God exalted in the earth. What the psalmist is showing us here with this gripping imagery is that we know how the story ultimately ends.

God will defeat the foes of sin and death and evil that have corrupted his good world. The warfare of this fallen world will one day cease and God will be all in all.

And that means no matter what the uncertainty the future may hold because we know how the story will end we need not be afraid.

[21:59] As Paul says in Romans 8 creation will one day be set free from its bondage to corruption. God's glory will cover the earth like the waters cover the sea. God will judge his world he will judge sin and death and make all things new and that day will be so good that Paul can say I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

And if we know as Christians that we can stand confident before God in the judgment if we know that we can stand confident before God when he comes because of the finished work of Christ if that is our confidence then we will be able to stand confidently no matter what the near future might hold.

We need not fear sickness pain poverty even death because none of these things can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And throughout history this is what has always made the church stand apart in times of crisis. our hope in Christ that sickness and death is not the last word that what God has in store for his children is resurrection life.

This is always given the church wisdom and courage in the face of fear whether in the second century or in the 16th century or today in the 21st century. And that means we are called not just to love not just to faith but finally to testify to our hope.

[23 : 44] to tell others that we have a hope that reaches beyond the grave beyond death and ends in newness of life. What gives us that hope?

Nothing about ourselves everything about Jesus Jesus who said I am the resurrection and the life and then who died and rose again to prove that his words were true.

in the days and weeks to come brothers and sisters may God give us the wisdom and the courage to bear witness to this great hope that we have in Jesus to our family to our neighbors to our co-workers may we pray for opportunities to speak about this hope with confidence and with love and may our neighbors see in us a living example of what Psalm 46 is all about that because God is our refuge we need not fear because God is our refuge we can live with love and faith and hope even in the midst of tumultuous times and through it all may God be exalted as verse 10 says may God be exalted through his church among all nations exalted in all the earth may God's name be known as good and great let's pray together oh God we pray that you would continue to grant your church not just here in

New Haven not just here in the United States but all across this world that you have made would you continue to grant your church a deep sense of confidence and faith in the midst of tumultuous times Lord help us to be a people of faith and hope and love father father we ask all this in the strong name of Jesus and in the power of your Holy Spirit amen and love and love for and how they can for so