

Psalm 46

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- [0 : 0 0] continue our series this summer in the Psalms about thirsting for God. Before I read Psalm 46 for us, let me pray.
- God, indeed we confess that our ears are often deaf and our eyes are often blind to the reality and the truth and the beauty of who you are and what you're saying to us in your word.
- So Lord, we pray that you would open up our eyes and our ears and our hearts to be able to truly hear and know what you're saying to us this morning through this psalm.
- Lord, we ask this for Christ's sake. 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.
- [1 : 1 1] There's 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 war cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear.
- He burns the chariots with fire. Be still. Be still. 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.
- [2 : 0 9] In 1939, the country of England had just entered what we now know as World War II.
- And soon the British public began to receive some troubling news. There were rumors circulating that their major cities, London, Birmingham, Manchester, etc. were being targeted for mass air raids.
- That the German air force was going to start bombing the hearts of their cities. And of course, in the face of such troubling news, public fear began to grow.
- So in response to this growing tide of public fear and terror, the British Ministry of Information began to commission inspirational posters to boost morale and keep the people resolute in the face of the oncoming war.
- One poster read this. Freedom is in peril. Defend it with all your might. Another read, your courage, your cheerfulness, your resolution will bring us victory.
- [3 : 1 4] But another one simply said, keep calm and carry on. Now the public never actually saw that one. It was printed and distributed.

And for some reason, it never actually made it onto the street. They were stored away in warehouses. And a lot of them were destroyed by the end of the war. But then 60 years later, an owner of a used bookstore was going through a pile of used books and found one of these posters.

Thought it was cool. Hung it up in his shop. And of course, as you know, people loved it. And it exploded in popularity. And now you can find the red and white, keep calm and carry on image on everything, right?

From key chains to coffee cups to aprons to iPhone cases. And of course, it's spun off sort of a hundred ironic spoofs and spin-offs. Keep calm and have a cupcake.

Keep calm and evade the police. Keep calm and buy shoes. Stay alive and avoid zombies.

[4 : 15] That's one of my favorites. But joking aside, in the face of real trouble or real distress, how do we actually do it?

How do we actually keep calm and carry on? Because, you know, after all, fear makes us do incredibly foolish things. When I was a kid, I had a pretty bad fear of the dark.

I think I had seen the movie Gremlins at too young of an age. You know, they advertised it as this movie about this cuddly little creature. And then the whole thing is about scary green monsters, right? And because I was afraid of the dark, what I would do is, you know, my parents always were telling us to turn off the lights before we came downstairs.

So I would turn off the lights and then run as fast as I could through my doorway, down the hall, down the stairs, and into the living room safe. I had made it through the darkness. Now, of course, that was a very foolish thing.

And that fear was making me do. And it's kind of funny now when I look back on it to sort of imagine me in my little self sort of scuttling through our upstairs, afraid of the dark. But, of course, fear gets more serious than that, doesn't it?

[5 : 24] Sometimes we can fear what other people might think or might say about us. And when we're put on the spot, we bend our convictions and give our agreement to things we wouldn't normally agree to or make decisions that we wouldn't normally make because we fear not having their approval.

We fear not being accepted. Or we can fear being alone relationally. And that fear can drive us perhaps to date people we wouldn't normally think wise to date or even to consider marrying someone that we probably shouldn't marry because we're in fear of being alone.

A fear-driven life can end up being a very foolish life. But it can also be a pretty paralyzing life. We're afraid of what might happen if we make the wrong decision or take the wrong next step.

And so we just end up doing nothing. It's like we stare at the chessboard for hours and hours, afraid that no matter what move we make, we'll still end up losing the game. And so we just sit in anxiety doing nothing, frozen, paralyzed.

So you see this fear-driven life isn't just a foolish life, isn't just a paralyzed life. In many measures, it's a wasted life. So even though it's become something of a joke, isn't there something desirable about the virtue embedded in those once forgotten posters?

[6 : 54] Keep calm and carry on. And even though we've got it on our mugs and our keychains, how on earth do we get it into our hearts?

What will really give us the resilience that we need in the face of trouble and uncertainty not to be paralyzed and not to be fools? Psalm 46 opens with a picture really of just utter chaos in verses 2 and 3.

The earth giving way, the mountains being moved, or literally being shaken into the heart of the sea. Now get the imagery here. From the perspective of an ancient Israelite, mountains were just about the most stable and solid and dependable things you could imagine.

That's where you built your cities on top of a mountain. And that's where you fled for safety when the invading armies came. A mountain. But the sea, you see, was utterly chaotic and unpredictable and dangerous.

Israelites weren't really seagoing people. The sea, you see, is a terrifying thought. It's a picture of everything stable and secure being swallowed by chaos and uncertainty.

[8 : 10] I've lived in New Haven for eight years. And every morning when I get up, East Rock is still there down my street. It hasn't moved.

But my guess is that if I woke up one morning and East Rock had been shaken into the heart of Long Island Sound, people might not be totally freaking out like Alien Invasion movie freaking out, but they would probably still be freaking out, right?

And that's what the psalmist is capturing here. A picture of the utter undoing of all that we expect to be predictable and secure and stable, of the world turned upside down.

Now look, you don't need me to tell you that we live in a time when things that once seemed stable and solid and dependable are being shaken. Does anyone work for just one company anymore their whole life and expect that company's pension to see them through their retirement?

That mountain got shaken into the heart of the sea a long time ago, right? Or what about the idea that the community you grew up in would be the same one where your parents grew up and where your kids and maybe even your grandkids would grow up too?

[9 : 26] Hasn't the transience of the 21st century shaken that mountain into the heart of the sea? Or think on a bigger scale, what about the idea that the West, and particularly the U.S., would always be the world's economic leader?

Isn't that mountain starting to shake? Or what about the idea that everyone around us would basically share the same moral framework and we just disagree on some of the peripheral issues?

That too has been shaken, hasn't it? And the question is, how is the church going to respond?

Are Christians going to be driven by fear? Are the culture shifts and the culture wars and debates that are going on in our society, is the changing face of global economic and political power, is all of this going to throw us into a state of fear-driven foolishness and paralysis?

Or, will we remember, will we remember, and live, and experience, what Psalm 46 is all about?

[10 : 45] You see, Psalm 46 was written to give us a fresh experience of God's presence, and a fresh vision of God's future. And in so doing, to give the church the resilience, and the confidence it needs to live out its mission in the face of change and cultural upheaval, and even in the midst of utter chaos.

Now, Psalm 46 is often called a Zion Psalm, because it's a psalm about the city of God, which in the Old Testament, you know, was Jerusalem. And Jerusalem was sometimes referred to as Zion because it was built on top of a mountain that was called Zion.

Very creative, right? So these Zion Psalms are psalms about Jerusalem, the Old Testament city of God. But you see, Jerusalem was always representative of the people of God.

God's city was always a way of speaking about God's people. And isn't it fascinating that when Jesus comes and calls his disciples and begins teaching them, he says, you're a city on a hill.

Now look, for a first century Jew, the city on a hill was Jerusalem. You went up to it for every festival, it was the city. Par excellence.

[12 : 02] But Jesus is telling his disciples, you're the city on a hill. The city of God has always been about the people of God, and Jesus says, it's you, my disciples.

And what does he say there is our calling and our mission? He says, you're the light of the world and you're the salt of the earth. That's a pervasive metaphor, isn't it? It goes out and it gets involved and it brings change and darkness is dispelled by the light and fresh savor comes by the salt.

Jesus is saying, go, be an alternate city, be a new kind of city in the midst of this city, in the midst of the world. Go be salt and light and show the world how to live.

And in light of all that, we today need Psalm 46. Because if our hearts are driven by fear at the change and chaos and uncertainty that we find happening around us, we will never live as salt and light.

We'll be tempted to do foolish things and not loving things as the church. And we'll be tempted to be paralyzed and do nothing instead of going out and dispelling the darkness with the gospel and bringing the taste of life to those who've lost it.

[13 : 30] Another way of putting it is that Jesus calls us to love and to serve. And you can't love what you're afraid of. So to deliver us from our fear, God gives us a song to sing.

And it goes like this. We will not fear even though the earth gives way and the mountains crash into the sea. Why?

Because God is our refuge and strength, our very present help in trouble. The Lord of hosts, of armies, is with us.

The God of Jacob is our fortress. So let me ask you, friends, if God is your fortress, why are you afraid?

Of course, we can often acknowledge this truth with our heads, but still there are fears in our hearts, aren't there? So the rest of the psalm really addresses some of our lingering fears head on.

[14 : 41] And it does this by showing us what it means to have God as our fortress. Verses 4-7 point to the present and it shows us that God dwells in our midst.

And then verses 8-11 point to the future and they show us that God will be exalted in all the earth. And to the extent that we live in light of the fact that God dwells within and God will rule without, our hearts will be driven less and less by fear and more and more by the confidence that God is indeed our refuge and our strength.

So let's consider first what the psalmist says about God dwelling in our midst. I think there are at least two specific fears that are being addressed in this second stanza of the psalm. First, doesn't it address our fear of being joyless?

As we face trouble and hardship, isn't it true that one of our most basic fears is the fear that we'll lose the things that bring us joy, the things that make us glad, whether it be possessions or relationships or whatever it may be, privilege, honor, prestige.

Verse 3 talks about the waters of the sea roaring and foaming and causing mountains to tremble. It's a chaotic picture. And then the psalmist takes us into the city of God. And what's going on there in the city of God?

[15 : 59] And what's going on there while the world is being turned upside down and we're losing the things we thought we could count on? Something totally different. Instead of a raging sea, we're told there's a river whose streams make glad the city of God.

And what is that river? The holy habitation of the Most High. It's a powerful picture, isn't it? It's as if to say the joy of the people of God is not finally dependent on the state of affairs in the world.

Because you see, in plenty or in want or in peace or in war or in favor or in persecution, God is still dwelling in the midst of his people.

The river still flows. Of course, this isn't to say that we're indifferent to these things or that we don't care. But it is to say that they don't terrify us.

Because they won't and they can't cut off the wellspring of our deepest satisfaction. Jesus said in John 7 that if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

[17 : 18] And whoever believes in me as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. In the Old Testament, God's habitation was at the temple in Jerusalem.

But now you see that Christ has come. God by his spirit takes up residence in every believer and in every local church that this river flows within us.

And if that's the case, friends, then you need never fear being deprived of your source of joy. Because it dwells in your midst.

Have you considered that all the things that give us genuine gladness have been created by him? They were his idea and he made them. And even the very gladness that they bring to our hearts are a mere echo and reflection of the infinite gladness that exists in God's own being.

And that creator and source of all gladness dwells in our midst. You know, to fear losing joy if somehow the world were to change is like to fear losing a mere photograph of a feast when the table is set before us and he's saying come and dine with me.

[18 : 46] You see, you need not fear being joyless, Christian. God is the river of delights and his spring never runs dry and his presence never pulls back.

Even if the earth gives way, he will satisfy your soul just as he does now and even more so. So God's dwelling within addresses our fear of being joyless.

But it also addresses another fear too. It addresses our fear of being helpless. When verse 6 says the kingdoms totter, it's using the same verb that's translated as moved in verses 2 and in verse 5.

So you see the psalm is setting up this comparison. The mountains are being moved and the kingdoms are being moved. But what about the city of God? As everything is falling down around it, is it going to be moved?

Is it going to be shaken? Surely if they're going down, the church is going to follow, right? And yet, just the opposite we're told. God is in the midst of her.

[19 : 47] She will not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns. To fear that the church will be shaken or helpless is to forget the one who dwells in your midst.

He utters his voice and the earth melts, verse 6 says. He utters his voice and the earth melts. The one who created the universe with just a word and who can just as easily uncreate it with a word dwells in your midst.

And surely that means that the one in you is stronger than any mountain and more powerful than any kingdom.

You know, sometimes the way people speak, you would think that intellectual and social trends are powerful enough to cause the undoing of God's people, of God's church. Some of you probably saw the Pew research that came out a few months ago about something like 20% of people in America self-identifying and sort of no religious affiliation or identification, right?

The nuns, they're called. And it's even greater for people under 30. And some people read these statistics and they start freaking out and they think that we've lost it. So we quickly better sort of drum up the troops and hide together and clutch in because, oh no, we're losing the battle.

[21 : 13] But friends, don't you realize that when the church grew like wildfire in the first century, people believe all sorts of things. They identified as all sorts of radically different things.

It was incredibly pluralistic. And what happened? The church was like a tidal wave and it just swept through like wildfire. It was an opportunity for people to finally hear God's good news.

We sometimes hear these reports and we think, oh no, the church is going to be shaken. As if the health of God's church depended upon favorable cultural circumstances.

How silly when God dwells in our midst. Now again, it's not as if we're indifferent to such things. It's not as if we don't care.

It's not as if we don't labor and work hard to be salt and light. But again, they don't need to terrify us and we don't need to act out of fear. Because even if the night looks pretty dark and even if things start going from bad to worse, we're promised that God will help her when morning dawns.

[22 : 29] In the darkest moment before the dawn, God rises with healing in his wings. The phrase when morning dawns is actually kind of a strange and unique one in the Hebrew even though we've sort of translated it pretty simply.

And it actually kind of reminds us, it's sort of an echo of the Exodus account in Exodus 14. You remember as Pharaoh's armies were pursuing the Israelites into the Red Sea, we're told that when morning dawned, the waters covered them and God's people were saved.

And it's also reminiscent of the Assyrian invasion during King Hezekiah's reign. You can read about it in Isaiah 36 and 37, how the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem, but how the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 Assyrians in a single night.

And then we're told when the people rose up in the morning and looked out, they'd all fled. In both instances, when it seemed like the people of God were in trouble and without help, God's help came by the time morning dawned.

And of course, that reminds us of an even greater rescue, doesn't it? Of an even greater triumph that took place in the wee hours of the early pre-dawn.

[23 : 49] And this time, God's help wasn't against the mere armies of Pharaoh or the Assyrian Empire. It was against the ancient enemy of sin and death.

When Christ died on the cross to bear the penalty for our sin, we're told that on the third day, every single one of the gospel accounts, in the morning, early in the morning, before the sun came up, the women went and they found the tomb empty because God had raised him from the dead.

And he appeared to the women and he came to his disciples and he said, go spread the news that in my death and resurrection, the ultimate help has come and that a new day has dawned.

So even if the night grows blacker than ever before, we need not fear being abandoned or helpless or shaken.

We know that even sin and death can't overcome and can't shake those for whom Christ has died. Friends, if God is your fortress, why are you afraid?

[25 : 00] What have you to fear? So verses 4-7 assure us that God is our fortress, that he dwells in our midst and that means that we never fear being joyless or helpless.

But in verses 8-11 the scene changes again. You know, in 1-3 we're sort of looking at the raging sea and then the camera cuts to the city of God in this joy-producing stream but then in the last stanza it cuts again and this time the psalm takes us into the future and we're standing on a battlefield where a great victory has been won and the focus now is not on God's habitation in our midst but it's God's exaltation in all the earth.

And here God is not the sort of quiet, joy-giving river in the middle of a besieged city but he's a reigning king whose enemies have been vanquished. A sovereign Lord whose sheer glory breaks the bow and shatters the spear and burns the chariots with fire and makes all the wars cease.

And the world falls down before him in fear and praise. And you see friends that future above all else that is our greatest source of confidence.

That is what will dispel our present fears. You see it's not just that God is with us here and now but it's that he will be exalted among the nations and he will be exalted in the earth.

[26 : 37] The greatest source of our confidence is that the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray your kingdom come your will be done on earth as it is in heaven will one day be answered in all of its fullness.

The reality is is that no matter how uncertain the present may seem we know how the story ends. If you were here on Easter Pastor Greg used an illustration from the movie Argo and Beth and I hadn't seen Argo so we thought we had better go see that so we're keeping up with sort of you know what our fellow ministers are talking about.

So we rented Argo and we watched it you know how the story ends they get out safely right? I will tell you that watching that movie I was incredibly anxious like the whole time as the sort of crowds came rushing towards the embassy as they were driving the bus through the mob as they were stuck in the bazaar taking pictures as they were in the airport getting questioned and grilled as the phone call was being made to the office and they were stuck because they were shooting the scene have you seen the movie?

We're anxious what's going to happen? And yet Beth and I kept looking at each other and saying we know how this story ends. Friends you know how the story ends.

Why are you afraid? In the midst of the trouble and the chaos we need to be reminded we need to be reminded that the war is not going to last forever and that the outcome is secure that every nation will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[28 : 18] that the crucified Messiah is the risen king of all creation. But you know we also need to be reminded on that day when he comes and he breaks the bow and he splits the spear on that day there's only going to be one refuge that will withstand his holy presence.

You see friends that day will be the ultimate shaking of the mountains when the ocean of God's glory comes surging and roaring down.

You see that's always the direction of the future in the Bible it's God coming down and when those waves come down and his glory covers the earth like the waters cover the sea what will your refuge be?

Even a fortress made of good deeds will be like mere sand and dust before the weight of his presence.

Where will our refuge be? Friends the only refuge is in Christ. only those who have fled to Christ as their refuge will stand before the sovereign Lord without fear for only the righteousness of Christ is sufficient to make us acceptable to God and to be able to behold his coming ocean of glory as something that brings joy and not destruction.

[30 : 06] So friend this morning if you're depending on some other shelter if you fled to some lesser refuge then by all means forsake it and flee to the one who died and rose again for your sins so that you can stand without fear when he comes.

And if you have taken refuge in him when the fear still creeps in then hear the Lord saying to your heart just like he said to the winds and the waves on that boat with his fearful disciples be still be still and know that I am God.

Friends the one that controls the winds and the waves and is sovereign over the nations is saying to his church be still and if he speaks that to your heart you know that there's nothing to fear.

So even if the earth gives way instead of our hearts being driven by the fear of earthly kingdoms collapsing we can have hearts that are driven by the confidence that God dwells within and he'll rule without that he's our refuge and our strength no matter what may come and because we know how this story ends we can have the resilience and the boldness to go about our calling in the world to be salt and light to be the city on the hill.

Friends if God is your fortress what are you afraid of? Be still and know that he is God. Let's pray. Lord this morning we confess that there are many things that cause us to tremble.

[32 : 01] Lord there are many circumstances in our own lives personally there are many things that we see in the world around us both here and both around the world Lord that give us cause for concern.

Lord and we confess that sometimes fear grips our hearts but we thank you this morning that you have come and you are our true refuge and strength that there is nothing we need fear because you are a very present help in trouble.

Lord Jesus we praise you that you have come and you have taken our sin and you have borne it away on the cross and you have risen again in triumph. Lord and you have taken us unto yourself and you have given us this mission to go into the world not with fear but with faithful resilience to bring the hope and life that is you to the nations.

Lord we pray for your church this morning that it would not be trembling and terrified when the earth gives way but Lord that your church would be resilient and be who you've called us to be.

Lord we ask this in Christ's name Amen. We're going to end by singing a song called Behold Our God and the bridge of this song says he will reign forever.

[33 : 30] That's the sort of hope that's held out for us the confidence that's held out for us at the end of Psalm 46.