

Be Still!

Psalm 46

Be Still. Don't panic. During Super Bowl XXXIX, Ameriquest featured two ads about jumping to conclusions. In the first, a convenience store shopper is talking business on his cell phone. He says to someone on the other end, "You're getting robbed." Two clerks hear him and attack him with pepper spray, drop him with a baseball bat and zap him with a cattle prod. In the second ad, a man is cooking a romantic dinner. He chops vegetables as tomato sauce simmers on the stove. A white cat knocks the sauce to the floor and then falls into the mess. Just as the man picks up his tomato-splattered cat, his wife opens the door to see him holding a cat drenched in red with one hand and a large knife in the other. The scene appears horrific. So many cats, so few recipes.

Things are not always as bad as they appear. That is the message of Psalm 46, a text I have read many times at funerals and gravesides, because it exudes the comfort that comes from knowing that God is near. It is nicknamed "Luther's Psalm." At one point as Martin Luther pressed for reforms in the church, opposition was so severe that his life was in danger. Psalm 46 reminded him of God's abiding presence and it inspired his great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.

No one can nail down the specific historical backdrop that inspired Psalm 46, but nineteenth century Old Testament scholar George Rawlinson identifies the psalm closely with a miraculous rescue of Jerusalem in the days of King Hezekiah. I cannot say that this event is absolutely the story behind Psalm 46, but it certainly illustrates the attributes of God described in the psalm.

After the death of King Solomon, the nation of Israel was divided. A northern kingdom retained the name, Israel, with the capital residing in the city of Samaria. The capital of the southern kingdom of Judah was Jerusalem. Both nations abandoned God, but Israel declined more rapidly. In 721 BC, Assyria captured Samaria and the northern kingdom ceased to exist. Twenty years later, King Sennacherib of Assyria was knocking at the gates of Jerusalem, wanting to extort wealth from the city. Sennacherib sent threats to King Hezekiah, reminding him of how no other gods over any other nations had been able to slow down the Assyrian war machine.

Of course, there is no God like JEHOVAH, and Hezekiah was confronted with the choice of panicking, negotiating this unholy alliance, fighting with inadequate resources, or being still and letting God be God. Hezekiah was a man of faith. The official record of his reign says:

⁵Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. ⁶He held fast to the LORD and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses. – 2 Kings 18:5, 6

Whether or not the story of Hezekiah is behind Psalm 46, the story unfolds in such a way as to prove the promises of the psalm. Note in the musical notation that introduces the song the words: "According to *alamoth*." *Alamoth* means that the song is to be performed by the high voices in the choir, the tenors and sopranos, for they sound the most clarion and brilliant tones. "God is our refuge and our strength ..." This message needs to be heralded with penetrating clarity.

I. God, Our Refuge (1-3)

¹God is our refuge and strength,

an ever-present help in trouble.

²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way

and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,

³though its waters roar and foam

and the mountains quake with their surging. *Selah*

A. God Is Both “*WITH*” His People and “*FOR*” His People

The children of Israel had a claim on God that no other nation had. God was not a refuge and strength for Israel because some poet speculated as much but because God had covenanted Himself to Israel. Verse 1 is literally translated “God is refuge *for* us and strength *for* us ...” In verses 7 & 11, the phrase “... the God of Jacob is our fortress” can be rendered “a fortress *for* us.” Perhaps that seems like a minute distinction, but it is more reminiscent of Paul’s words to the church age, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

Verses 7 & 11 also assert that “The LORD Almighty is *with* us.” Verse 1 says that He is “ever-present.” This means “at hand” or “easy to find.” Believers do not always sense God’s presence, but that is typically because they have drifted and not because He hides Himself. We protect little pockets of rebellion, not acknowledging that this robs us of the deepest possible intimacy with God. The remedy is not complex in theory but it devastates our pride. We must draw near to Him. We must seek Him with all our heart. This does not mean that we are to simply think sweet things about God or sentimentalize about Him. It means that we must repent of the sin barriers we ourselves maintain. Still, as crushing to self as that is, God unambiguously promises to respond. God knew that His covenant people would turn away from Him and worship idols. Still, He said:

... “But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.” – Deuteronomy 4:29

B. This World Often Seems in Turmoil

Through the centuries, cataclysmic events have signaled the judgment of God. At least, this was so until our modern era of political correctness that recoils at the notion of a God of judgment. In the past, earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, epidemics and the like reminded perceptive people of the wrath of God being poured out on a sinful and broken creation. We do not have the God-like perspective to attribute every specific disaster to some specific judgment of God against some specific misbehavior by some specific person or persons. However, by the same token, we do not have the God-like perspective to simply dismiss the notion that God still judges this world.

Of course, all of these cataclysmic occurrences can also be metaphors for other kinds of upheaval in the world: wars, revolution, terrorism as well as any other violent commotion or simply disturbing development upon the world stage. There are things in this world that shake me to my core that have nothing to do with traditional expressions of violence. Abortion is one example. I was also profoundly saddened by the death of Terry Schiavo and what that says about the direction of our culture and the value that it places on life. Even many in the church, whose hearts burn with affection for Jesus, are so embroiled in the thinking of the world and are so unaccustomed to thinking “Christianly” that the wickedness of such events is lost on them.

The personal tragedies we endure are not out of bounds as we attempt to apply this psalm. People we love die. People we love imperil themselves by their own foolish choices. Disease may ravage our body. Poverty or financial hardship may test our faith. Families are ruined by divorce or infidelity. We may be penalized, ridiculed or persecuted simply because we are Christians. The spirit of this psalm expresses a courage not spawned through mere human resolve, but by the faithfulness of God. Come what may, there is no reason to fear or mistrust God.

II. God, Our Refresher (4-7)

⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.

⁵God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.

⁶Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.

⁷The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

A. The “River of God” Motif Appears throughout Scripture

In contrast to the roaring, foaming waters of verse 3, a tranquil river now appears with tributaries that refresh the city of God. No rivers run through Jerusalem. This river is a symbol of the blessedness of God’s presence. The image draws the reader’s mind to Eden where a single river with four streams nourished the Garden. This river represents the calming, steadying presence of God among His people even in a world that is turned upside down. The city of God was once Jerusalem, but now, it is the church of Jesus Christ. In Revelation 22, the river of God is once more featured as a symbol of God’s presence that gladdens the church, the people of God.

¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. – Revelation 22:1, 2

B. No Matter the Uproar around Us, God’s Blessings Are Greater

“Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts.” The psalmist returns ever so briefly to the tumultuous condition of the world only to immediately remind us of the power of God’s word over all things. God spoke creation into existence. What in all of creation can possibly pose any threat to His sovereign might that He cannot shatter it in one breath? This was the posture that Hezekiah embraced and by which he encouraged his nation as Sennacherib breathed his puny threats and mocked the adequacy of JEHOVAH to protect His covenant people.

... ⁷“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him. ⁸With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God to help us and to fight our battles.” And the people gained confidence from what Hezekiah the king of Judah said. – 2 Chronicles 32:7, 8

Jesus is the Incarnate Word of God, the ultimate self-expression of God made known in human flesh. He proved this when by a single word of command He healed diseases, caused the lame to walk, made the blind to see, commanded the demons of hell and even calmed a raging storm. Verses 7 & 11 announce that the “LORD Almighty” is with His people. This name is JEHOVAH Sabaoth, which is also rendered “LORD of Hosts.” This name means that God wields dominion over the angels, the nations, the elements as well as any other power in heaven or on earth.

Interestingly, in the church age, it is Christ who is depicted "seated in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (Ephesians 1:21). The Savior of our souls Who secured the forgiveness of our sins is at one and the same time the great LORD of Hosts with power to protect us from any tumultuous ordeal this world or Satan Himself can send our way. Luther emphasized this in that great ancient hymn that sprung from the assurances of this psalm.

*Did we in our own strength confide, Our strivings would be losing.
Were not the right Man on our side, A Man of God's own choosing.
Doth ask Who that may be, Christ Jesus, it is He.
* Lord Sabaoth His Name, From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.*

* LORD Almighty, JEHOVAH Sabaoth, LORD of Hosts

III. God, Our Rescuer (8, 9)

⁸ Come and see the works of the LORD,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
⁹ He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear,
he burns the shields with fire.

A. God Destroyed the Army of Assyria

In the narrative of Hezekiah of Judah and Sennacherib of Assyria, God intervened mightily:

³⁵That night the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning - there were all the dead bodies! ³⁶So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there. - 2 Kings 19:35, 36

Can you imagine the sight of that Assyrian camp after Sennacherib withdrew to Nineveh? If, in fact, this story is the origin of the psalm, verses 8 & 9 would be a lyrical invitation to behold the work of God in behalf of His people. The countryside would have been littered with broken bows and shattered spears. It was a horrible desolation, but a holy one as well. God had the final word against the arrogant Assyrians that had once mocked His power to protect his people, and God will always have the last word in regard to the evil that stands opposed to the people of God.

B. Jesus Christ Has Since Destroyed Every Weapon of Darkness

I want to invite you now to behold another battlefield in the aftermath of another great heavenly victory. It is at one and the same time, both horrible and holy. It begins on a hill outside of Jerusalem where a Man hangs on a cross. This is not just any man. He is the chosen Warrior of God facing every human sin and every satanic force that keeps this creation and the children of God from praising their Maker. Concentrated on this one Man is the guilt and weight and stain of every sin ever committed and of every vile thing that has ever existed in defiance of God.

Darkness has covered the land as if God cannot bear to look upon this One Who has become the sin of the whole world. It is a horrible image, for by all appearances, it is unjust. An innocent Man has died as though He were the worst criminal that ever lived. His loved ones bury Him. He spoke of Resurrection, but how could they believe that? They seal the tomb and walk away."

But, the horror gives way to the beauty of holiness as the stone that once sealed the tomb has been rolled away. The dead Warrior is now the Living Redeemer of the race. What desolations, what remnants of warfare are left to behold on the landscape. Sin- defeated! Temptation – defeated! Fear – defeated! Worry – defeated! Death itself – defeated! Everything that keeps us from walking in God’s light and from voicing praise with our every breath has been defeated. “It is finished.”

IV. Be Still, and Know that I Am God! (10, 11)

¹⁰ “Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.”

¹¹ The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

A. This Gentle Encouragement Is, in Fact, a Command

“Be still.” We are accustomed to thinking of this as something God gently whispers as He pats our troubled little heads, but it is more forceful than that. It means, “Cease!” “Desist!” “Stop what you’re doing!” “Quit trusting what you’re trusting!” “Stop relying on your own clever solutions and the strength of your hand!” “Stop worrying!” “Stop plotting!” “Stop panicking!” “Stop obsessing!” “Know that I am God! ACKNOWLEDGE that I alone am God and that you are not, and that I am able to win this battle when you are not!” “I am the LORD Almighty! I am the LORD of Hosts. I am JEHOVAH Sabaoth, and I must win the battle!”

B. God Is Not Exalted in Our Faithlessness and Fear

God has proven time and again that He is more than equal to the greatest obstacles His people have ever faced. Ultimately, in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, every enemy of our soul has been defeated. The Bible promises “that if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). The implication ought to be that if you can believe that criteria for eternal salvation (His bodily resurrection), what in this world can possibly hold enough sway over you to spook you in the least?

On March 10, 1974, Lt. Hiroo Onada became the last World War II Japanese soldier to surrender. He had been left on an island in the Philippines in 1944 with the command to “carry on.” Three other soldiers were left with him. One surrendered in 1950. The other two were killed in skirmishes with local police. Onada lived off the land and raided the gardens of local citizens. A half million dollars were spent trying to convince him to surrender. Only upon receiving a command from a former superior officer did he surrender his rusty sword. Like Onada, many Christians battle fear in their own strength even though victory has already been secured.

What is the Christian remedy for fear? We need to heed not the advice, but the command: “Be still, and know that I am God.” If we are still, God says that He will be exalted “among the nations” and “in the earth.” God cannot be exalted (at least in our lives) if we are fearful and fretting, for we are declaring to our fellow-believers as well as to the world around us that God cannot be trusted. Be still! You can do so because you love Him or you can do so because you revere Him. But, if God is to be exalted in your circumstance, one way or the other, be still!

