

## A Mighty Fortress is Our God

### Psalm 46

Pastor/Elder Phil Layton, GCBC August 15, 2021

This morning I had planned to do a final message from the book of James, on how to not leave James unchanged (thinking how we need to change in our speech, our anger, and being doers of the Word and not hearers only). I felt led to move that out a week with all that's been happening in recent weeks and days. Last Sunday night I spoke at IBC on Ps 46 and I felt God's blessing and leading and the encouraging of fellow leaders to bring us that message today. It's been taught here before, it's a familiar psalm, but I pray it will speak to us in freshness and impact us like never before with what's been going on in our lives. I've read this recently at a hospital bedside and when loved ones have lost lives. Last week I talked about strength we need and how we need to ask for help and prayer in troubled times. Ps 46 shows us Who the God is we pray to when in anxious, fearful, and unstable times.

Ps 46 (ESV) <sup>1</sup> *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. <sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, <sup>3</sup> though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah*

<sup>4</sup> *There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. <sup>5</sup> God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. <sup>6</sup> The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. <sup>7</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah*

<sup>8</sup> *Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. <sup>9</sup> He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. <sup>10</sup> "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" <sup>11</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah*

**\*PRAY\***

### I. God is Our Immovable Refuge

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. <sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved*

...

God is our immovable refuge, even if the mountains move, He's unmoved. One translation says "when mountains crumble into the sea" (NET). A song says if things "tumble and fall, or the mountain should crumble to the sea ... I won't be afraid, no I won't be afraid ..." In a greater way, if I know God is with me, I don't need to fear. NASB: "though the earth be changed..."

There's much **changed in the world** in this last year that tempts us to fear:

- **Concerns for health**, all measures can't keep from sickness or from risk
- Concerns for **mental health** in lockdowns, spiritual health of Christians
- Conservative **views under attack**, not by conversation, by cancellation

- **Communist-Marxist views** are infiltrating education now on all levels
- **Choice** has been taken away from much of our free society, you don't get to make educated choices as to risks you take, or get to vote on it or debate it, many choices are now made for you by unelected officials
- Choice on **personal health decisions** is taken away ironically by many who are pro-choice for what a woman does to an unborn baby in her, they don't want to give her a choice for what she puts into her own body
- **Convictions** put jobs on the line for frontline healthcare workers now forced to set aside conscience or concerns for health, comply or goodbye
- **Christian worship** in N. America has landed good men in prison in 2021
- **Censorship** (2021 president, Amazon book on transgender movement, Twitter lock on Focus on Family, YouTube sermon clips, SGC here?)
- **Common sense** and **critical thinking** give way, and we're in real trouble!

**But God is our help in trouble.** The sky's not falling, but even if mountains were falling, we have an unfailing refuge. Even if the earth be changed, and it is, we have an unchanging God. If you think about the future or finances or family and you fear, Psalm 46 is for you to say *therefore we will not fear*.

If you feel you don't have the strength at times to face the world and all that seems to be giving way in it, v. 1 says God is our strength. When all around our soul gives way, He is our immovable refuge that stays, our solid rock.

When you feel like you're in-between a rock and a hard place, this Psalm shows us God is the Rock to turn to in any hard place. Which way do you go? Go to the Rock of Ages. Cling to God as your Refuge that gives you strength and help in times of trouble. Run to His shelter in a time of storm.

v. 3 talks about waves that roar and foam and swell and the land trembles.

We can tremble as we see how polarized and politicized everything is, and the turmoil and trouble in the world and in our own hearts. We see people rage in protests and roar at each other in disagreements and debates where they're almost foaming at the mouth. Like waves at sea, a lot swirls on the media and on social media, waves of information and often misinformation.

It's harder and harder for people to trust or be sure about what people tell us – but Ps 46 tells us truths we can be sure about in the God we can trust. He's immovable and immutable, unchanging, the same yesterday, today, forever.

The language of waves in v. 3 is also used of waves of emotion. **SEE PS 42.**

TALK ABOUT THOSE WHO'VE LOST LOVED ONES LAST 2 WEEKS

Apply to images of 46:1-3, God our refuge, strength, help in trouble

When things threaten to undo us, we can sing with Luther 'we will not fear, for God has willed, His truth to triumph through us.' That doesn't mean our body won't be killed, but God's truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever. His Word is above all earthly power,

powers of government, the world, the flesh and the devil – we don't tremble for him, we trust the God of Jacob.

As you look at the heading of this Psalm in your Bible, it's clear that this Psalm had a special role in the singing of OT saints as well. It says this was a song for the choir – the writer is preaching to the choir! It's also saying to God's people, friends, come, let's sing of God who's with us! And this is for all believers in the Lord of hosts to preach to ourselves He's with us.

REFUGE – or stronghold. Old word for defensive walls or towers built along city walls to keep safe it. Those walls might fail but God is our bulwark never failing. He's a mighty fortress like a castle or the sense can be a high safe place that would keep you safe in the midst of any flood. In the Psalms He's our impenetrable defense and our indestructible Rock. Our high ground, our strong tower. He's solid. He's stable. He's certain.

v. 1 adds STRENGTH = power, especially in God's protecting, preserving

Ps 61 (NKJV) <sup>2</sup> *From the end of the earth I will cry to You, When my heart is overwhelmed; **Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.*** <sup>3</sup> *For You have been a **shelter [same as 46:1]** for me, **A strong tower from the enemy.***

62:6 ***He only is my rock** and my salvation; **He is my defense**; I shall not be moved. <sup>7</sup> In God is my salvation and my glory; **The rock of my strength**, And my **refuge [same as 46:1]**, is in God. <sup>8</sup> **Trust in Him at all times**, you people; Pour out your heart before Him; God is a **refuge [same]** for us.*

Ps 46:1 says God is “very present” = near, literally “very findable” = “can be found when needed” (and counted on). One footnote has “an abundantly available help” and another adds “who is always found in times of trouble”

HELP IN TROUBLE – note help through His Word in Psalm 119: *Let my soul live that it may praise You, And **let Your ordinances help me.*** (NASB)

Back in Psalm 46, verse 2 gives an application of knowing this:

<sup>2</sup> ***Therefore we will not fear**, Even though the earth be removed ...*

It's interesting that the start of Ps 46 says the **sons of Korah** were to sing this song, because Korah himself was most famous for his sin of rebellion in Numbers 16 where God actual did remove the earth beneath him:

<sup>31</sup> *As he finished speaking all these words, the ground that was under them split open;*

<sup>32</sup> *and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men who belonged to Korah with their possessions... <sup>34</sup> All Israel who were around them fled at their outcry...*

That was the ancestry of these sons of Korah, but they trusted in God and so didn't fear their forefathers fate. Those who receive the Lord's grace rather than the Lord's wrath make the best singers. So in Ps 46:2b they sing they won't fear even if mountains move into the sea, waters roar, or earthquakes.

No tsunami or sickness can wipe out our sovereign God's plans. No roaring or raging in creation bothers our Creator. No earthquake shakes His purpose

For me the summer of 1993 was a difficult summer. A friend wrote me a letter that summer that comforted me with Psalm 46:1-3, and I'll never forget it ... and those words I came to appreciate in greater depth that next January when at TMC I experienced the Northridge earthquake that I instantly feared was my death when it first hit. When the land moves, when mountains quake, when the earth beneath you gives way, there's nothing else to do but to cry out to the Lord to be your refuge and strength. That's true physically and literally and spiritually. God is our immovable refuge.

On the 10 year anniversary of September 11, our president read Psalm 46 in its entirety. That week "Psalm 46" was trending #1 on major internet search engines. On that anniversary of 9/11 I was travelling back from Congo after burying my son Mark Joseph who died there and I leaned on these truths in that time. Lisa Beamer's husband Todd died in the 2001 Pennsylvania crash –he heroically helped take out terrorists who wanted to take out the White House (his last words "Let's Roll" is a book by that title with her testimony)

When sorrow like sea billows rolled, she had to learn how to say be still my soul and know that God is God, like Ps 46 says. Ps 46:2 talks about when all gives way, and v. 3 talks about waves (that can include waves of emotions).

Here's what **Lisa Beamer** said looking back to 9/11 and **her husband's death** "My faith wasn't rooted in governments, religion, tall buildings, or frail people. Instead, my faith and my security were in God... If we believe wholeheartedly, each moment, that our destiny rests in the hands of Jesus Christ – the one with ultimate love and ultimate power – [she says that truth of Ps 46] hanging on to it glimpses of it keeps everything in perspective."<sup>1</sup>

**Elisabeth Elliot's husband Jim Elliot** was killed by a savage tribe in Ecuador as he tried to reach them with the gospel. For her Ps 46:2-3 she experienced, in her words "everything that has seemed most dependable has given way. Mountains are falling, earth is reeling. In such a time it is a profound comfort to know that although all things seem to be shaken, one thing is not: God is not shaken." She added that the thing that is most needful is to do what the psalmist does later, to "be still" and know that God is God... it comforts us and infuses strength into our faltering spirits to rest on that truth ...*be still, and know that I am God...*<sup>2</sup> And He will be exalted and is with us

Still, my soul, be still, And do not fear Though **winds of change may rage tomorrow.**  
 God is at your side; No longer dread The **fires of unexpected sorrow.**  
 God, You are my God, And I will trust in You and not be shaken.  
 Lord of peace, renew A steadfast spirit within me To rest in You alone.<sup>3</sup>

In 1750 an earthquake shook London. John Wesley was preaching in Hyde Park then and made effective use of these verses (his brother Charles put it in song). Charles *Spurgeon* preached a great sermon on these verses called “Earthquake, but not heart quake.”<sup>4</sup> God is our Immovable Refuge, amen?

## II. God Gives Inexhaustible Resources

<sup>4</sup> *There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.*

RIVER - in ancient times was a source of great gladness and life, and stability to a city. “River” also often a symbol of peace (“peace like a river”). In this context it’s contrasted to the prior verses of raging oceans, roaring waves, troubled waters, tumbling swells and breakers. But God’s sheep can lie down in safety because the Lord is their Shepherd; His still quiet waters restore their souls. God is the source and sustainer of this. The hymn says His perfect peace is like a river glorious and over all victorious.

STREAMS—in psalms often represents fruitfulness, fulness, and blessing.

CITY OF GOD—Jerusalem, place where tabernacle, and holy place was.

Some suggest v. 4 ‘may allude to the **tunnel that King Hezekiah built** to guarantee a continuous water supply for Jerusalem in times of war (2 Chr. 32:30). The tunnel carried water from the Gihon spring outside the city to a cistern inside the walls. So when invading armies besieged Jerusalem, the unstoppable stream of water made the whole city glad. Likewise, God makes His people glad through His continuous presence. His protection flows like a river out of His lasting commitment to those who honor Him.’<sup>5</sup>

Jerusalem sits on top of a hard rocky place where rivers can’t pass through, but by God’s providence He gave just outside the eastern wall a high natural spring, seemingly inexhaustible. The spiritual point? <sup>5</sup> *God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn.*

Ultimately it was God in the midst of Jerusalem that was their true safety and security. God is the inexhaustible river for His people and the ultimate source of life, stability and gladness. He keeps it coming like a river running and He will to the end. Isa 66 takes the image from Ps 46 into the future: *Be joyful with Jerusalem and rejoice for her...**Be exceedingly glad with her** ... Behold, I extend peace to her **like a river**, And the glory of the nations **like an overflowing stream** ...you will see this, and **your heart will be glad...***<sup>6</sup>

**Peace like a river even if sorrows like sea billows roll**

Notice in Ps 46 the instability of v. 2-3 is contrasted with the *stability* of the place of God in v. 5. Unlike the mountains that are moved in v. 2, God's city will not be moved in v. 5. In v. 6 the nations "rage" (same Heb. word as the oceans raging in v. 3). Whether threatened by kingdoms or calamities, nations or nature; fear not! The promised "ever-present help" from v. 1 is practically experienced at the end of v. 5: *God shall help her at break of day*

In v. 6 it's His voice, His word above all earthly powers or raging nations. His sovereign word makes kingdoms totter, and we're seeing countries do v. 6 before our eyes, but that same sovereign word can melt hearts or the earth to renew it in the end. And His sustaining sufficient Word helps at the break of day if we read of His mercies new every morning. Ps 46:7 says this Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob (Israel) is our refuge. LORD of hosts in the NIV is translated *Lord Almighty*, Hebrew *Yahweh Sabaoth* (a warrior emphasis). Lord Sabaoth His name from age to age the same, and He must win the battle. A mighty fortress is our God, amen? v. 7 says **He is with us**.

### III. God Lives as Our Invincible Ruler

<sup>8</sup> *Come, behold the works of the LORD, Who has made desolations in the earth.* <sup>9</sup> *He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire ...*

God is sovereign, bringing desolations on the earth and bringing them to an end. Nothing is outside His sovereign hand, the hearts of kings of governors eare in His hand to turn whatever way He pleases. The Lord is at work in the world shutting down or opening up in judgment or mercy (I think it's best to see both). Proud nations that rage He can bring low but there's also mercy in what makes us slow and be still and know that He is God and we are not.

Even man's greatest invisible enemy Satan has no power outside God's permission and decree. Lo! His doom is sure: One little word shall fell him ...that word above all earthly powers (**His voice** in v. 6; **His victory** in v. 9).

v. 10: *Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!* Remember v. 9 is about weapons of warfare. The warrior Lord of hosts who makes war cease commands 'cease striving'

- or "surrender, give up, lay down your arms and lay down"
- "bow before God as God, you're not, stop trying to take His place"
- or "drop your weapons and know God is your security and victory"
- or as Jonathan Edwards applied it, "*be still as to words; not speaking against...or complaining...We must be still as to actions and outward behavior, so as not to oppose God...; and as to the inward frame of our hearts, cultivating a calm and quiet submission of soul to the sovereign pleasure of God [in our world], whatever it be.*"<sup>7</sup>
- or as one writer explains, it's "the sense of "cease and desist," like a parent separating two struggling children or a teacher breaking up a fight in the

schoolyard. It does not mean to be quiet or calm *as much as it means to stop what you have been doing and be still.*<sup>8</sup>

**John Piper:** ‘we never become still enough to let the great realities hit us. We are always on the move. Always in a hurry. Or when we do stop, we flip on the radio or the TV and let somebody else’s hurry fill our minds ... What that text says is that the life-revolutionizing impact of God’s supremacy in the world and his inevitable triumph over the nations, and the coming of his glorious kingdom of righteousness and peace—the impact of this awesome reality doesn’t hit us and hold us and shape us unless we become still, and quiet before God. GOD hits home in the stillness. If you want your life to be significant, you’ve got to stop running, and stop scurrying about, and turn off the TV and the radio, and get alone, and be quiet, and let the mammoth realities of human lostness and eternal judgment and never-ending joy and God’s universal triumph take hold of you and change your life.’<sup>9</sup>

God has sovereignly given us these times, let’s **obey v. 10** in a greater way. Let’s listen for His still small voice in His Word and share it with others and as we do, we’ll experience more of **v. 11**, the Lord with us in a greater way.

**Lisa Beamer:** Little things show me that He is with me: a Scripture with just the words I need to hear, a call from a friend when I feel lonely, help with a task that I can’t do alone, or a hug and ‘I love you’ from one of my children. God’s love is truly sufficient to meet any need that I have." [she adds] "The picture of the church as the hands and feet of Christ, with each person having a special gift, has been well portrayed to me these last months. In the beginning, it was immediate and practical help I needed – meals, child care, managing phone calls, and mail. Now that we’re out of the crisis mode it is rebuilding help I need – counseling, encouragement, prayer."<sup>10</sup>

I can take it a step further and change this last point to ‘Jesus lives as our Invincible Ruler.’ Everything here in v. 8-11 the Bible later applies to Jesus.

In v. 11 the LORD of hosts was a title used in Isaiah’s prophecies of Jesus. And when v. 11 says God is with us, that becomes His name in Isaiah and Matthew, Immanuel, “God with us.” But even in the psalms, this language of refuge in v. 11 is used of God’s Son. Ps 2 is very parallel, as nations rage and the Lord breaks them and utters His voice and warns of wrath to come in the end, God the Father announces His begotten Son, and tells the world ‘Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry and you perish... blessed are all who take refuge in Him’<sup>11</sup> (OT explanation on John 3:16).

## **GOSPEL**

“Be still, my soul—God undertakes to guide the future as He has the past; my hope, my confidence let nothing shake...Be still, my soul—the waves and winds still know His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.”

That takes us back to v. 3, the roaring waters are ruled by a voice stronger than many waters (that’s what Revelation says Jesus and it says mountains will tremble before Him and be cast in the sea one day). In the NT, Jesus is our strength, our very present

help in trouble, who tell believers not to fear. He will make wars cease, literally putting an end to all weapons in the end.

Jesus commanded the stormy sea “Peace, be still!” and He commands our stormy hearts to be still and know He is God. Who is this man, they said of Jesus, that even the wind and seas obey Him?! Who are we, if we do not obey Him?! All creation knows its place, do we, before our Creator? Part of the “*I AM*” statement in v. 10 has the implied “*and you are not.*” Be still...

The only way you can have the comfort of v. 11 is if you have made Jesus your refuge and strength, by trusting in Him alone as your help and hope for salvation. If Jesus is not your Lord, give up, cease striving in your own works to gain salvation and know that Christ alone is the only way to God, surrender to Him as your Commander, lay down your arms, lay down your life and come before Him humbly as a lowly servant seeking His mercy.

If you're in Christ, verse 10 is for you as well (and for me). Even if what seems the worst possible thing happens that shakes us to the core, we can trust our unshakable God's invincible ruling plan. In 1812 William Carey's pioneering mission printing works in Serampore, India, were burnt to the ground. At first he was dumbfounded. But [as he studied this verse] the following Sunday he preached on this text, Ps. 46:10. A newspaper man who had been present wrote: “In the blaze of this fire men saw the grandeur of the enterprise.” The facts were flashed out. The result was that the whole cost of the printing works was repaid in two months!<sup>12</sup>

Psalm 46 has had a long history in the Christian faith of many in history. In 1680, 3 days before he would be martyred, the Scottish Covenanter Richard Cameron had one more sermon to give and he chose to preach on this verse 3 days before he would be killed for his faith. Think of these life-changing words in that context: *Be still and know that I am God, I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!*<sup>13</sup> In World War I in an island in Scotland, young men going off to war gathered to sing Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and our strength, in straits a present aid;  
Therefore, although the earth remove, we will not be afraid...  
Be still and know that I am God: among the [nations] I  
Will be exalted; I on earth will be exalted high.  
Our God, who is the Lord of hosts, is still upon our side:  
The God of Jacob [as] our refuge for ever will abide ...<sup>14</sup>

You may know **Martin Luther's hymn** was based on Psalm 46, ‘**A Mighty Fortress is our God.**’ You may not know he wrote it after one of the worst plagues struck Europe in 1527, massive death tolls swept Europe (20-30%). He needed a bulwark never failing, a shelter amid the flood of mortal ills or illness prevailing. We need to behold when God has brought desolations on the earth, we need to be still and know He's God and take refuge in Him.



A historical writer paints the picture leading up to Europe's 1527 epidemic:

After ten demanding years of leading the Reformation, a dizzy spell overcame [Luther] in the middle of a sermon... forcing him to stop preaching. Luther feared for his life. On July 6, while eating dinner with friends, he felt an acute buzzing in his ear and lay down, again convinced he was at the end of his life. He partially regained his strength, but a debilitating discouragement set in as a result. In addition, heart problems and severe intestinal complications escalated the pangs of death. Of this ordeal, Luther wrote "... My entire body was in pain, and I still tremble [feeling] abandoned by Christ, I labored under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God."

What was worse, the dreaded black plague had entered Germany and spread... Although Katy was pregnant with their second child, Luther's house was transformed into a hospital where he watched many friends die. Then without warning Luther's one-year-old son Hans became desperately ill. With death surrounding him on every side, Luther was driven to seek refuge in God as never before. Psalm 46 became the strength of his soul.<sup>15</sup>

It was said in difficult times, Luther could be heard singing this hymn "to the lute every day, standing at the window and looking to heaven." When the stress and pressures of life would become too severe, Martin Luther would say to his friend, "Come, Philipp, let's sing the Forty-sixth Psalm."

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/lessons-from-lisa>

<sup>2</sup> James Boice, *Psalms*, Vol. 1, p. 389, 392.

<sup>3</sup> Getty Music, "Still, My Soul, Be Still."

<sup>4</sup> Charles Spurgeon, "Earthquake, but not Heartquake" (Psalms 46:1-3), *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Volume 33, Sermon # 1950, Year 1887. <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols31-33/vols31-33.htm>

<sup>5</sup> *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Ps 46:2-3). Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> NASB.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "*The Sole Consideration, that God is God, Sufficient to Still All Objections to His Sovereignty*" <http://www.biblebb.com/files/edwards/consideration.htm> (italics mine).

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Wilson, *Psalms*, NIV Application Commentary, p. 721; italics mine.

<sup>9</sup> John Piper, "God: Refuge for His People, Exalted Among the Nations"

[http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/1/778\\_God\\_Refuge\\_for\\_His\\_People\\_Exalted\\_Among\\_the\\_Nation/s/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/1/778_God_Refuge_for_His_People_Exalted_Among_the_Nation/s/)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/lessons-from-lisa>

<sup>11</sup> NASB.

<sup>12</sup> G. A. F. Knight (1982). *Psalms : Volume 1*. The Daily Study Bible series. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 222.

<sup>13</sup> John Ker, *The Psalms in History and Biography*, p. 80.

<sup>14</sup> *Believer's Bible Commentary* (Ps 46:1). Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Steve Lawson, *Psalms 1-75*, Holman OT Commentary, Vol. 11, p. 242-43.