

Meditating on Psalm 46

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Last week we talked about the importance of Scripture. The week before that, we talked about Philippians 2 and how Christ emptied himself and gave himself over to death and was subsequently exalted by God. We also considered the implications of Christ's example in our relationships with each other. I trust you were able to spend some time meditating on that passage of Scripture and that it has given you a new found love for Jesus and a newfound desire to serve others as he served us. This week I want to jump back to the Old Testament and look at Psalm 46. So I want to begin by reading verses one through three, which is the first of three segments found in this Psalm.

Refuge & Strength (vv 1-3)

1God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 2Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, 3though his waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah

In verse one, the psalmist first describes God as a refuge. Literally, this word describes a place of protection from danger. So, Psalm 104:18 says, "The high mountains belong to the wild goats; the crags are a refuge for the rock badgers." Metaphorically, then, God provides protection for his people, whether that is physical, emotional, financial, or geo-political. This calls to mind what we talked about a few weeks ago in Psalm 23. God our shepherd protects his people with rod and staff. God our gracious host offers his people protection by inviting them into his presence and preparing a table before them. The refuge of God's people is not her fortified cities or her armies, but is God himself.

Verse one also then describes God as the strength

of his people. It's not unusual for strength and refuge to be used together. So Psalm 28:8 says, "The LORD is the strength of his people, a fortress of salvation for his anointed one." Jeremiah 16:19 begins, "O LORD, my strength and my fortress, my refuge in time of distress..." Not only is God a safe place of protection, He is the strength of his people. He is the one who enables them to do what they would be unable to do without him. God's power did in God's people what their weakness made impossible without him.

Finally, verse one also describes God as a very present help in trouble. In other words, God can be found in times of trouble. The history of Israel is replete with examples of how God was present in his people's times of trouble, even when they brought the trouble on themselves. Read the Book of Judges. Time and again the people sinned and experienced the consequences of their sin. And time and again God listened to their prayers for help and was a very present help when they called upon him. Psalm 145:18 says, "The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." Deuteronomy 4:7 asks, "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us when we call upon him?" God is close to his people in their time of trouble. TS: Verses two and three then unpack the results of what has been affirmed in verse one.

The first result of God's protection, strength, and presence is that the psalmist will not fear even though creation itself seems to come apart at the seams and looks like it might return to its pre-creation chaos. Verses two through three probably describe the literal earthquakes that have plagued this part of the world for millennia. But those earthquakes also symbolize what, from a human perspective, is fixed and firm and unchanging. The author seems to envision an earthquake that unhinges the earth and stirs up the ocean and in so doing, would cause terror in the hearts of people who are accustomed to their steadiness. Yet in the midst of this, the psalmist will not fear because God is his refuge, strength, and help.

These verses provide low-hanging fruit in terms of meditation. God is still the refuge, strength, and help in our times of trouble. There are times when

our world still shakes, when what we thought was immovable begins to tremble and we're tempted to give in to fear. When that happens, can I suggest that Psalm 46:1-3 is a great place to turn? Let's turn to verses four through six.

The City of God (vv 4-7)

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

The physical chaos of verses one through three give way to the geopolitical chaos of verses four through seven. Verse four describes the stream that delights the city of God, which is most famous because it was the habitation of God himself. Of course, a watered city would be a fruitful and flourishing city, one that yields its fruit in season, whose leaves do not wither. So Psalm 36:8 says that mankind, both high and low, "feast on the abundance of God's house; God gives them drink from his river of delights."

However, the strength of the city is not related to its water or even fortifications, but the fact that God is in her midst. In Deuteronomy 23:14, Moses tells the people, "the LORD your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you." In numerous passages God is described as the one who is in the midst of his people, which is the source of their protection, provision, and help, here described as "coming in the morning."

Verse six clarifies the danger facing God's people and God's city. The nations are raging and the kingdoms tottering. Like the situation described in Psalm 2, God's people are imperiled by their enemies, who at almost every point in their history were stronger than they were. Their enemies would roar, just like the waters of the sea in verse three, and the result was kingdoms tottering on the edge of destruction.

But just when it seemed like God's people would be destroyed, God raises his voice and the earth melts. God's voice is as powerful to destroy the earth as it was to create it. And while his voice melts the earth, it gives victory to his people. Likewise, Joel 3:16 says, "The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel."

Verse seven affirms the presence of the Lord of Hosts with his people, which changes everything. In Numbers 14, Joshua and Caleb are pleading with the people not to be afraid to take the land of God's promise. They said, "do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them." God's presence not only sustained the people when the physical world seemed to be coming apart, but also when the nations were threatening.

Verses four through seven again provide hope for God's people when they are under siege. They remind us that God's presence is the deciding factor in any engagement. God alone is the decisive advantage. All the raging in the world, and all of its resulting chaos, is undone in a moment when God raises his voice and speaks. TS: Verses eight through 11 bring this Psalm to a close.

Be Still (vv 8-11)

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

Verses eight through eleven is an invitation to view the desolation God has brought against the rebellious powers of the earth. This is a vision of the final end of things. The ultimate end is peace, but the means to that end is war. God does not

bring victory through multilateral negotiations or sophisticated diplomacy, but by disarming the enemy and destroying those who stand in open rebellion against Him and his purposes. The invitation to view these desolations is likely offered both to the enemy and to God's people.

That process is described in other places as well. In Psalm 2, God hears the kings of the earth say, "Let us break their chains...and throw off their fetters." In response, it says, "The one enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath..." 1Peter 3:12-13 describes it this way: "12On that day, he will set the heavens on fire, and the elements will melt away in the flames. 13But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness."

Verses ten through eleven again seem fitting both to the enemies of God and to the people of God. God commands his enemies to be silent and know that he will be exalted among the nations, not them. The earth belongs to God, not to even the greatest of the kingdoms of men—not to Egypt, not to Assyria, not to Babylonia, not to Greece, not to Rome, not to anyone.

Verse eleven is a reminder to God's people that their strength and protection does not come from themselves or from anyone else, but from God alone. God is the one who makes wars to cease. He is the one who disarms their enemies. He is the one who destroys the implements of war. He is the one who makes it impossible for them to rage and destroy. The people of God need only look to him for his deliverance.

The promise of verses 8-11 is yet to be fulfilled. God has certainly brought up and taken down kings and kingdoms according to his purposes, but the ultimate demonstration of his power—and the permanent destruction of his enemies—will not happen until God brings history to a close. For now, we wait in hope.

The Rest of the Story

The chaos listed in Psalm 46 is the result of sin. Because of the sin of Adam, the ground was cursed along with those who worked it (Genesis 3:17). "The whole creation," Paul says, "groans as in the pains of childbirth (Romans 8:22)." But one day all of creation will be set right. There will be a new heavens and a new earth that will be the new dwelling of God with his people. The old physical order of this world will be done away with and the natural disasters we see now will be no more.

But it's not just nature. And it's not just individuals. Sin has also infected us as a human family and made even our geo-political relationships hostile and strained. The kingdoms of this world rise up against each other and commit unspeakable atrocities in the pursuit of dominance. Kings spill the blood of their subjects in order to fulfill the cravings of their heart. They threaten and rage and make war. But one day all of that will be set right. One day the King of Kings will establish the kingdom of God and all competing kingdoms will be brought to nothing and he will rule with righteousness and justice forever and ever.

Conclusions

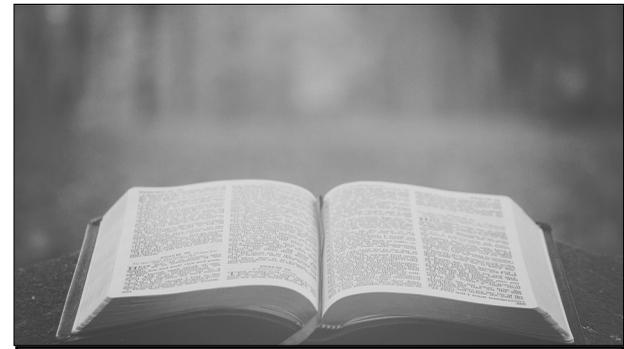
First, God is our refuge, our strength, and our help. Because of that, we do not need to live in fear. I am not saying that we should never be afraid. To be afraid is human. I think Psalm 46 is saying that because God is our refuge, strength, and help, we do not have to panic or live in terror because God is sovereign over all things, whether natural, political, or military. God does not want us to live in fear and we don't have to live in fear. God is present and sovereign over every part of your life.

Second, God will be glorified in the earth. He will be exalted above all other kingdoms and rulers and authorities. The portions of Scripture that help us picture this, albeit a bit oddly from where we sit in history, is the prophets who have visions of the kings and kingdoms at war with God. There are lions and leopards and rams and goats and the like, but all of them are subject to God's power.

Likewise in the New Testament, the book of Revelation describes dragons and beasts and war mongering. Yet in the end, they are all subject to the rider on the white horse whose name is faithful and true and from whose mouth comes a sword to judge the nations. So take heart!

Third, as the people of God, we should turn to him in our time of trouble and wait expectantly for him to intervene. That doesn't mean we don't do what he has given us to do, or what we can reasonably be expected to do, but that we recognize that at the end of the day, he is sovereign over all things and we're not. In fact, much of the control we think we have is an illusion. Our hope and confidence is in him. He is the one who subdues nations and protects his people. He is the one whose voice melts the earth. He is the one who smashes the weapons of war and burns them so that armies are unable to resist any further. God wants his people to wait on and trust in him.

Four, through Jesus, the powerful and sustaining presence of God now lives in us. God has always lived among his people, albeit in different ways. God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. God's presence traveled with the tabernacle and then remained in the more permanent temple. God walked among us in the person of Jesus. But after the death and resurrection of Jesus, God sent the Holy Spirit to live in us. As Paul says, "we are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Corinthians 6:19). The presence of God that lived in Jerusalem and sustained that city now lives in us and sustains us.



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