

“God Provides Refuge”

Lesson Text: Psalm 46:1-7

Background Scripture: Psalm 46:1-7

Devotional Reading: Jeremiah 31:3

Psalm 46:1–7

¹ God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, ³ though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. ⁵ God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. ⁶ Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. ⁷ The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

INTRODUCTION

Stuart Briscoe, in *What Works When Life Doesn't* (Victor), included a study of Psalm 46 in a chapter titled "When Your Stresses Are Greater Than Your Strengths." He told of a man who went to his doctor complaining about severe headaches. He was told to stop smoking, which he did; but the headaches continued. He was told to stop using alcohol, with the same results. He was told to lose weight—no improvement. Finally, it was discovered that he was wearing a size 15 collar on a size 16 neck, causing the problem!

There is no way for us to avoid all the stresses life has to offer. Some of us are more prone to stress than others, but even the best of us will at times be faced with situations that cause stress. On those occasions we sometimes wish we could flee like a bird to the mountains, as David was told to do in Psalm 11:1.

There is a place for believers to go in times of dire need. Proverbs 18:10 tells us that “the name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.” The Bible does not promise believers that their lives will be trouble-free. The promise is that God will provide stability for us and help us weather the storms that arise.

This is not a new strategy. Today’s lesson derives the same message from a psalm written three millennia ago, and its truth still speaks today.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: unknown **Place:** Judah

Psalm 46 is an expression of victory, relief, and thanksgiving. Although the author is not specifically named, the psalm appears to have been written in the aftermath of a significant threat to the city of Jerusalem that had been overcome. The psalm ascribes this wholly to the Lord, showing us the hopeless situation that prevailed.

A possible setting for this is during the time of King Hezekiah, who reigned over Judah about 727–696 BC. Hezekiah’s Jerusalem was besieged by the mighty host of Assyria’s King Sennacherib in 701 BC.

Sennacherib and his armies had raged through Syria (capital city, Damascus) and northern Palestine, crushing all opposition.

The prospect of being conquered by the ruthless Assyrians terrified the trapped residents of the city. Sennacherib later claimed to have confined Hezekiah “like a bird in a cage.” But the people were delivered by one of the mightiest miracles recorded in the Old Testament: the angel of the Lord slew 185,000 of Sennacherib’s troops in their sleep, causing him to retreat to Nineveh (2 Kings 19:35,36). This surprising rescue was immortalized much later in Lord Byron’s poem “The Destruction of Sennacherib”:

*Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green, That host
with their banners at sunset were seen;*

*Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown, That host on
the morrow lay withered and strown.*

We can imagine the relief and celebration that followed such a victory. However, there were no armies to fete and no generals to acclaim. The victory was entirely the work of God, and the desire to praise Him was overwhelming. In this, Psalm 46 has similarities to Psalms 47 and 48, all connected with the “sons of Korah” (in the superscriptions).

Psalm 46 is unique in its directive to sing it “upon *Alamoth*,” which occurs in the superscription. This rare word may refer to young women, thus indicating the psalm was intended to be sung by soprano voices (compare 1 Chronicles 15:20). Since this psalm was intended to be sung for a special service of thanksgiving in the temple, it may be an indication that women participated in the musical ministrations of the temple.

TODAY'S AIM

- **Facts:** to understand from David's experiences how to trust God to sustain us during troubling times.
- **Principle:** to show that God will always be our solid refuge and strength.
- **Application:** to remember that when we are afraid of all that is happening around us, we can trust God to be our refuge.

HOW TO SAY IT - Sennacherib Sen-*nack*-er-ib.

CONFIDENCE IN GOD’S POWER (Psalm 46:1)

The psalm begins with a bold statement of two major characteristics of God.

Calling God both "refuge" and "strength" indicates a strong shelter that is impenetrable and unconquerable. God is often described this way in the Psalms. "I will love thee, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower. I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from mine enemies" (18:1-3).

It was common in Old Testament days to build cities on hilltops and surround them with thick walls. No matter how strongly they were constructed, however, it was possible to break into them with sieges and prolonged attacks. "While other nations boasted in their impregnable castles perched high on inaccessible cliffs secured with iron gates and protected by fierce warriors, Israel was in a safer position than them all. God was her refuge and her strength" (Falwell and Hindson, eds., *Liberty Bible Commentary*, Thomas & Nelson).

1. ***What is indicated in the first verse about God's care for His people (Psalm 46:1)?***

The second line of this verse expands on the image of God as a protective fortress to glorify the Lord's active role in our troubled lives. The psalmist sees God as much more than a wall to hide behind for shelter. God is "a very present help," one who fights alongside of us. Our relationship with God involves more than safety. It involves assistance. When this is fully grasped, its comfort is immense. We are not called to run away from harsh realities. Instead, we can face life without being paralyzed by fear (see Isaiah 41:13).

2. ***Why is it important to us that God is a "ever present help" (v. 1b)?***

CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S PROTECTION (Psalm 46:2,3)

"Therefore will not we fear." The "therefore" reveals the result of recognizing the fact of God's help in verse 1. Fear is a horrible reality in the lives of many people. Fear can freeze us into inaction. Fear can haunt our every waking moment, even disrupt our sleep.

The psalmists described several possible scenarios that would normally cause panic (v. 2). In hyperbolic description, they portrayed tremendous upheaval on the earth, speaking of it as giving way and having its mountains carried away into the middle of the sea. They described the waters as roaring and greatly disturbed, so much so that even the stately mountains were shaken by it. Can you picture an earthquake of such magnitude that mountains shake and collapse into the seas, causing huge, rolling waves?

This physical description is intended to convey anything that would be earth-shattering circumstances for us. We expect that natural disasters will strike terror in the hearts of those affected. Yet all of these are connected with the psalmist's earlier refrain "*therefore will not we fear.*" There is no imaginable circumstance that should shake our trust in the Lord (compare Hebrews 12:27). Whether our tsunamis and earthquakes are caused by people or nature, we are secure in God's protective hands.

That is when we need to remember God's repeated words of assurance regarding His presence: "*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.*" (Isa. 41:10,13). We understand that these words were originally spoken to Israel, but the universal truth contained in them can encourage us as well.

The psalmist ends this section with the Hebrew word *Selah*. We do not know exactly what this word means, but it seems to be some type of musical direction related to the public performance of a psalm. It may indicate a planned pause or that a different group of singers is to begin its part. *Selah* occurs again at the end of verses 7 and 11.

3. *What do the descriptions of seas and mountains in turmoil indicate regarding fear (vs. 2,3)?*

CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S PRESENCE (Psalm 46:4-7)

There is a stark contrast between the description of this peaceful river (v. 4) and the turbulent waters just mentioned (vs. 2,3). The immediate meaning of "*the city of God*" appears to be Jerusalem, where the temple was located and the presence of God was symbolized in the inner sanctum called "the most holy place" (1 Kings 6:16). Jerusalem, however, does not have a river flowing in it.

The city of God was threatened by neighboring nations, but the inhabitants of Jerusalem were calmly trusting in God for protection. How could that be? The answer is that ever since the Garden of Eden, God has always had a river to bring peace to His own. It is the river of God's grace. The psalmist is so certain of God's grace in bringing about victory that he exclaims, "God shall help her, and that right-early" (before disaster overtakes them).

If this psalm is written in the context of the deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian horde, we can understand the power in these words. Imagine the relief the city feels after it had first cowered in fear when threatened by this overwhelming, hostile military force!

David, the most well-known of the psalmists, celebrates these themes often in his musical poems. After he is delivered from his enemies, including King Saul, he breaks out in ecstatic praise and piles up many images of God's immovability in his life. God is his "rock," his "fortress," his "deliverer," his "shield," his "horn of ... salvation," his "high tower," his "refuge," and his "savior" (2 Samuel 22:2,3; compare Psalm 18:2). God is powerful to deliver us from danger or threat. God's presence in our lives brings a stability that we cannot duplicate on our own.

4. *What does the "river" and the "city of God" most likely refer to (vs. 4,5)?*

The stability and protection provided by the Lord is contrasted here with the ungodly nations that are helpless before God's power. God is more than the protector of Jerusalem; He is the master of all nations. When it comes to God's protecting His people, it does not make any difference whether the number of the enemy is small or large. You might have one person opposing you about something significant right now, and God is more than able to protect you and bring about a solution. Maybe you have had to take a stand at work that is different from that of everybody else in the office. The numbers are not important to God; He will care for His people whether the threat is small or large.

Entire nations might rage against Jerusalem, and other kingdoms might have already fallen, but God will do what He wants for His city. Hezekiah was once threatened by the Assyrians, who were conquering many nations (2 Kings 18:17). Their boast was that they had overtaken other nations whose gods had not been able to protect them and that Israel should not count on their God for protection, either. But God stepped in, sent an angel, and destroyed 185,000 of the enemy (19:35). Psalm 46:6 was proved true!

On the other hand, God can refuse to help. Joash had turned away from Him.

We read, "*Although the Aramean army had come with only a few men, the Lord delivered men into*

their hands a much larger army. Because Judah had forsaken the Lord, the God of their ancestors, judgment was executed on Joash." (2 Chron. 24:24). Israel could count on God's help as long as they stayed in a right relationship with Him, but when they decided to live on their own terms, He sometimes refused to protect them. Obedience to the Lord is very important for His people.

Whatever Jerusalem was facing at that time, when God spoke, everything changed (Ps. 2:1-4). The nations are under His control (Isa. 40:15).

5. *What effect does the raging of heathen nations have on God? How is this encouraging to us (v. 6)?*

The final verse of today's lesson text includes a dramatic title for God: *Lord of hosts*. This phrase occurs more than 250 times in the Old Testament and means "master of the heavenly armies." No earthly army can stand against the angelic hosts of God. Consider that the 185,000 soldiers of Sennacherib were killed by 1 angel (2 Kings 19:35). What earthly army can stand against 12 legions of angels mentioned in Matthew 26:53 or against the 10,000 times 10,000 angels of Revelation 5:11?

Sometimes the armies of ancient Israel are seen as a part of these angelic battalions (see 1 Samuel 17:45). For this psalmist, however, the potential of military power is not the most important thing. The key concept is that the commander of these armies *is with us*. His presence ensures victory. It is OK to be under martial law if your commander is the Lord, perfectly just and invincibly powerful. In this sense, military rule is a refuge.

This perspective is important for us in understanding the protective power of God as it applies to us today. Although this psalm may have been written to celebrate an ancient military victory, it has resonated throughout the centuries for the people of God who look heavenward for help in times of distress and discouragement. Our God is still here!

6. *What is meant by the term "Lord Almighty" (v. 7)? What reassurance do we find in this verse?*

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. God provides all the protection and strength we need to endure trying times (Psalm 46:1).
2. If we fear God, there is no reason to fear circumstances or people (vs. 2,3).
3. God does not promise us freedom from trouble but rather what we need to endure trouble (v. 4).
4. We trumpet God's grace when we stand unmoved while all around us are disturbed (v. 5).
5. The wicked should not distress us, for God will eventually end their rebellion (v. 6).
6. If God is with us, no one can triumph over us (v. 7).

CONCLUSION

The Mighty Fortress

The most famous hymn to come out of the Protestant Reformation was Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," written around 1527. It is still sung regularly in churches nearly 500 years later.

Luther drew the basic ideas for this hymn from Psalm 46, our focus text for this lesson. Luther transformed the victory over the Assyrians to the Christian victory over Satan.

We may see evidence of this in several phrases. Luther's description of God as a "mighty fortress" is derived from Psalm 46:1. Luther pictures God as "our Helper" in the flood of "mortal ills," a paraphrase of the psalm's description in verse 1 of God as "a very present help in trouble." Luther identifies God as "Lord Sabaoth" (46:7, same as the "Lord of hosts"). Luther states that the devil's "rage" can be endured, for "his doom is sure," a reference to the rage of the "heathen" who are powerless before the Lord (46:6). Luther recognizes the might of the voice of the Lord when he claims, "One little word shall fell [the enemy]" (compare 46:6).

Luther's final phrase sums up the message of the psalm: "His kingdom is forever." Kingdoms and nations may come and go. Families, careers, and fortunes may wax and wane. But the eternal kingdom of God Almighty does not change and will never fail. There is no end to the reign of our king (Luke 1:33; compare Revelation 11:15). When we are part of the people of God, we are citizens of the eternal city. Our hope and future are secure in the rock of our salvation.

PRAYER

Holy God, Lord of hosts, You are our rock, our fortress, and our refuge. Though the storms of life assail us, may we trust in You. Though the attacks of the devil be down on us, may we be loyal to You. In the turmoil of our lives, may we be still and acknowledge that You are God. May we exalt You above everything in our world. We pray this in the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God still provides an unassailable refuge.