

What Are You Afraid Of?

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[0 : 0 0] Robert Harris, the novelist, writing in a newspaper just a few days ago said these words, for the first time in my life, and I am 54, I get the sense of what it must have been like to have lived in my grandparents or great-grandparents generation in 1913 or 1937.

One feels a great smash coming ever closer, almost in slow motion, and yet there seems to be no way to avoid it. How do we get ourselves into this mess? We are supposed to be living in an era of peace and prosperity.

Communism has collapsed, the threat of nuclear war has receded. Immense advances in technology were creating new economies. Fast markets were opening up.

Above all, we were supposed to have created the necessary institutions, the World Bank, the G20, the OECD, to ensure we never repeated the mistakes of the 1930s. Where did it all go wrong?

I wonder this morning, what are you afraid of? As Robert Harris, I think, points out, and perhaps others have written about it recently, we for the first time almost in several generations are now a generation of fear.

[1 : 3 6] We live with the fear of financial crisis, of people taking our homes away, of losing our jobs.

We live with the fear of being attacked by a nation. A few Sundays ago, we remembered the 10th anniversary of September 11.

We've become, and is particularly, a generation of scared people. Whether it's nationally, we don't know whether our banks will survive, whether we will come through this financial crisis.

Whether it is as a city, we wonder how do we cope with the homelessness, how do we cope with the increase in family breakdown. Or individually, we wonder about our job, or our family, or some health crisis we're going through.

What are you afraid of? I was reading a book a few months ago on preaching, trying to improve my preaching, and this book, it gave two summaries. It said, preaching involves at least two responsibilities.

[2 : 5 4] The first is to explain the Bible and relate it to life. The second is to take life and explain it in the light of Scripture.

And my intent this morning for the next few minutes is to draw us back to God, and to allow him to speak through his word.

And so the Herob Bible, will you turn with me back to the psalm we read a few moments ago for 46 psalm? This psalm was written in a context of problems, stress and uncertainty.

We're not exactly sure what was happening in Israel at this time, but what is clear is that in the author's mind, his world individually and collectively is crumbling all around him.

The state of Israel is in doubt. The nation is probably under attack. Will it survive? Will it be able to continue on?

[4 : 05] It sounds a wee bit like the church in Europe today. We're under attack. Will we survive? Will we go on?

Again, I was reading just a couple of weeks ago, there are now more churches in China than there are in the whole of Europe.

There are more people worshiping God in China today than the whole of Europe, including East and West. The church is it in terminal decline? Are we afraid that we will simply be wound up one day?

Where is the source of our strength? Is it individually in our government or our economy, in our history or even in ourselves?

And we will see this psalm has one clear message. We must return to God. We must trust him and him alone.

[5 : 16] Before we get into the psalm, will you notice at the end of verses 3, 7 and 11, that word, seller? It's a curious phrase. It's almost starting to be a musical term to either to tell the singers to stop singing and just allow the instruments to play, or for the singers to reach a crescendo and then be total silence so there can be reflection and meditation.

And the psalmist at three stages through the psalm causes us to pause and meditate on what they have been saying and singing. And so we'll do that this morning. After the three sections, we'll just have a moment of silence, of private prayer and meditation.

I want to divide the psalm into three, verses 1 to 3, verses 4 to 7 and verses 8 to 11. So verses 1 to 3, his protection.

In the midst of whatever we are feeling today, God desires to be our refuge, our strength and our help.

God is our refuge even when things seem to be demolished, our life seems to be falling apart. When the world crashes in and around us, God is still there protecting us and helping us.

[6 : 52] The word refuge literally means to flee as in running to a shelter to seek protection. The idea is that God wants us to run to him for protection.

The word strength implies that we can rely on him, that although we are weak, although we are defenceless, God is strong and he is able to protect us.

Because he is, the psalmist reminds us, our ever-present help. It means that God is quick to give assistance. He's not distant, he's not far off, but he wants to be there, part of our lives on a day-to-day basis.

He's proved himself to be the help in the past, therefore we can trust him in the present. I suspect for some of us this morning, God feels very distant.

God doesn't seem to be our strength and our refuge. Our world seems to be falling apart because of some crisis or other.

[8 : 12] God doesn't seem to be close. In fact, he's distant or perhaps not there at all. For those of us who are in that situation, and I've been in that situation in the past, perhaps we have to look back and remember what God has done in our lives individually and collectively in the past.

Remember how God blessed us and protected us and was our refuge and our strength on other occasions in the past. And if that is true, even if it doesn't feel like it this morning, we can know that God is our refuge and strength.

The word trouble can mean affliction or distress or tribulation. And God is calling us not to live our lives in fear.

Now, fear itself is a God-given feeling. Some fear is right to fear God, but Bible reminds us it's something we should do.

But when we fear circumstances, when we fear the future, when we fear even the moment that we are living in, then that is wrong and sinful and we need to run to him and ask for his protection.

[9 : 40] This theme is developed in the New Testament because rather than us having to run to God, the picture is given of God running towards us.

The prodigal son is a lovely, powerful, and in that, we know the story well, but in that the father is looking for the younger son to return and every day he goes out and looks and waits.

And then the day that the son comes back in the distance, far away, it says that the father lifts his jacket and he runs towards the son.

Now, culturally, that would have been completely unacceptable in that time and stage. But yet the father loved the son so much that as soon as he made the effort, he ran towards him to protect him and love him.

In fact, if you read about the second, the older son, he goes out as well and tries to bring him back. If we move towards God, God will move towards us.

[10 : 47] Now verse 2 is only true if verse 1 is true. If God is our refuge and strength, you do not have to worry about anything this morning.

He will do his part, he will protect us and look after us. In verse 2, the writer is imagining the worst possible thing that can come upon his nation, whether it's earthquakes or the canals erupting, mountains slipping into the sea.

Even if the earth gives way, this armor says, God will be there, he will be our strength and our refuge. Again, in the time of the writer, the mountains were the place that you went to for refuge and protection.

They were seen to be secure as part of nature. Now, probably in our culture, hopefully, we won't have an earthquake or a volcano going off.

This morning, probably the mountains won't fall into the sea today. But I wonder what are my mountains? What are the things that I think are absolutely secure that would never move?

[12 : 10] Perhaps we would have said a few years ago, RBS or the Bank of Scotland, that were they're secure, they could never thwart it. Perhaps it's a relationship or a friendship.

Perhaps it's my intellect that will always get me through on my job. And the Sarmah says, none of these things are secure.

These are all temporal. Only God can be that individual. Only he can be the foundation that we build our lives upon.

I could first read the cut goes on to talk about rolling waters, rolling around. You see, our circumstances today may not change. The thing that's causing you to worry and fear probably will be there when you go out after worship this morning.

Whether it's an illness or a family breakdown, whether it's the insecurity you have at work, that will not probably change overnight.

[13 : 19] But our attitude towards it and our circumstances may not change, but God is still with us in it. But we can know that when we go from this place, God is with us.

I wonder when you see tragedy in our world, when you see bad things happening in our nation, how do we react? Do we respond to someone who simply grumbles and complains?

Or does it turn us back to God? When we see a disaster happening, are we like the offer?

Do we say these words in 2 Chronicles 7, 14? If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will hear their land.

That would be great if we did that as a church. If we humbled ourselves, confessed our sin and asked God to come and revive us.

[14 : 34] So we come to our first pause. Let's pause just for a moment to reflect silently upon God's protection and our need to seek refuge in Him. Perhaps we want to confess any personal or collective sin or even national sin that we think is around.

So let's be still in the presence of God.

Amen. So we turn then to verses 47, His presence. God protects us when we seek refuge in Him. As we've noticed, we don't have to run far from Him, that He is close by us.

I'm a slow individual. I must have read this psalm hundreds of times. I never noticed verse 4, because verse 4 paints a picture that is easy for us to miss.

It reminds us that God is present in His city, that is Jerusalem. But won't you notice it talks about a river running through it. Now for those of you whose geography is bad as mine, there is no river running through Jerusalem.

[16 : 03] It's one of these places that doesn't have one. Babylon was built on the Euphrates. Egypt has the Nile. Rome has the Tiber. But Jerusalem has no physical river flowing through it.

So the psalmist is obviously taking this as a spiritual thing. And he says, what is better than a physical river is God's presence flowing through is there all the time.

God's grace flows through like a river and brings gladness and joy to His people. While it ocean raids, while it forms, God's presence is calm and gentle stream.

Again, it's amazing how sometimes when our world is falling apart, we can still know God in it.

God's presence with His people is a central theme throughout Scripture. Verse 5 says that God is within her. Verse 7 tells us that the Lord Almighty is with us.

[17 : 13] The root word here is Immanuel that we find in Matthew 1, 23. God with us. And for those of us who are believers, post the cross, as we read back into this Psalm through the cross, we can know that in dwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Christ promised us that those of us who believe in Christ will have the Holy Spirit living in us forever, wherever we go, whatever happens.

God is faithful to us. He will never leave us nor forsake us. Paul picks up this theme when he writes to the church in Rome and says, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The question I ask myself and I ask you this morning is not only do you believe it, but do you live that verse out day by day?

When I go back into work tomorrow morning, when I go back into my halls of residence, when I switch on my television or read my newspapers, do I really believe that nothing can separate me from the love of God?

[18 : 42] Verse 7 concludes by saying that the God of Jacob is our fortress. In verse 1 God is depicted not only as powerful, but as a fortress that we can run to for safety.

The description of God as the Lord Almighty is the first part of verse 7. It means the Lord of hosts, the armies of heaven, the King of kings, the creator of the world, indwells you as a believer, that he is with you and beside you, that his comfort and his presence is something we can seek.

Perhaps we're not always aware of the presence of God. That perhaps has more to do with us than it does with God himself.

So let's pause again for a moment and thank God for his presence with us. Let us thank him that he is here today through his Holy Spirit. Let's be quiet in the presence of God.

Amen. So we've seen we can depend on God during times like this because of his protection and his presence.

[20 : 29] And then finally in verses 8 to 11 we can see his position. As a church reading this psalm we are called to come and see the works of the Lord.

We are to run or to pursue. We are to gaze, we are to stop, we are to contemplate on who God is and what he has done.

Verse 9 shows that his position as the almighty God. He can make wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear.

He turns the shields with fire. At this time, as the psalmist is right, the Syrian army is the force to be reckoned with. Almost certainly it has probably conquered other nations and it is now on the boundary of Israel.

And it is about to take over Israel as well. Is there any hope? And the answer was historically less there was.

[21 : 31] God had other plans. A broken bow is no value and a spear that is shattered is no longer effective. God is sovereign.

God is in charge. And we need to hear that in our culture and in our world today. But whatever happens, God is in charge.

God is sovereign over it all. And as a result of that, verse 10 causes us to bow before his position as sovereign ruler.

We are called to be still and know that I am God. That sounds quite fluffy and nice.

It sounds a bit like, you know, let's go and lie on a couch and just, you know, do nothing. But actually the psalmist is rebuke the nation here.

[22 : 34] To be still means to cast down or let fall. It's the idea of not putting forth exertion. The picture that many commented to say is almost like letting your hands fall to your side.

To leave everything to God. To say I cannot control anything, leave everything to him. It's not just a moment of silence.

It's not just being quiet. The purpose is so that we can know God. To acknowledge and to comprehend, to discover him.

I wonder, are you good at being still? Even gelichos, whatever the denomination, are normally activists. We like to be out doing something.

We like to be at a prayer meeting. We like to be at a Bible study. We like to be doing something. How often do you simply stop and know God for himself?

[23 : 45] How often do I stop and simply reflect on him? How often do I stop my own striving and my own working?

How often do I think I won't do this in my own effort, but I'll submit it to God's will and God's plan?

I wonder, are we so organised? Are we so intellectually tuned in that we feel we can do all?

And we don't ever seek God in it? Look at the last part of verse 10. I will be exalted among the nations.

I will be exalted in the earth. As we quiet our souls, as we reflect upon him, his position as Lord of the whole world, we will recognise his supremacy.

[24 : 44] We will be quiet because we will see how awesome God is. Again, have I lost? Have you lost the awesomeness of God?

There's a danger that we always want to bring God down to my level and to my standard. But God is beyond us.

God created the cosmos. God created the world. God did everything that was needed so that we could come and have salvation's plan laid out.

No matter what happens this week, this month, this year, God will be exalted amongst the nations. Paul wrote in Philippians 2.10 that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Verse 11 is a summary of the Psalm. It's a statement for the state of Israel, and it can be a statement for us as the church. The Lord Almighty is with us.

[26 : 06] The God of Jacob is our fortress. We can trust him. The Lord of hosts is with us. And because of that, we can have his protection and we can know his love and his mercy.

Jesus Christ is beyond history. Nothing happens outside his plan. Nothing leaves him surprised or astonished.

Nothing catches him unaware. While there is tragedy and war, while the mountains fall into the sea, those that know Jesus Christ ultimately have nothing to fear.

Whether nature wreaks its havoc or the nations rage against one another, God is our refuge. So let's pause for a third time.

And let's be still before God. Let's simply exhort him and acknowledge him that he is supreme in the nations.

[27 : 17] Let us be still in God's presence. So as we conclude, let me just give some practical steps.

So what does this Psalm mean for me and you as we go into this week, as we go into another busy time in our lives? Well firstly, the Psalm reminds us, get right with God.

As Billy Graham, not our Billy Graham, but the Billy Graham, if I can put it that way, said after 9-11, those people who died on Tuesday were not planning to die.

They got up in the morning, they jumped on a plane or went to work. They had no idea that they would wake up in eternity.

So the real tragedy of 9-11 was that so many people died without knowing Christ. And so my challenge to each of us this morning is do you know Jesus personally?

[28 : 51] Do you know Him as your Saviour and Lord? Do you know that your sins have been forgiven? Do you know Him not just as an intellectual exercise, but as a personal thing?

You must do it before it's too late. None of us know what today or tomorrow will bring. James 4, 14 asked the question, what is your life?

You are a mist that appears for little, and then it vanishes. The writer to the Proverbs reminds us not to boast about tomorrow, because we do not know what a day will bring forth.

Life is unpredictable. Sadly, for often too brief, and without God at the centre, we simply do not know what will happen.

We count our lives and years, but God tells us in Psalm 90 verse 12 to number our days. The truth of the matter is that everybody in this congregation today is a heartbeat away from eternity.

[30 : 02] A car accident, an illness, a terrorist attack can simply snuff out our life. First time in 23 David said, yet I surely as the Lord lives and as you live, there is only a step between me and death.

Interesting, if you look at the parable in Luke 13.5, when the tower fell in the first century and 18 people were killed, Jesus did not go into a theological discussion about suffering or anything like that.

He said these words, unless you repent, you will perish. There's two certainties in life, death and tax, neither of them are very nice, but we both have to do them.

Now I hope all of us have a great day and a great week and a great month and a great year and a great decade, but I can't guarantee it.

Are you ready to see Jesus? Because secondly, I think this song reminds us that we are to get ready for the return of Jesus. The world will not last forever.

[31 : 19] Jesus is coming back and we need to be ready to face Him and see Him. Luke 21 says, nations will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom.

There will be great earthquakes, famines, in various places and fearful events and a great science from heaven. Jesus can come at any moment.

Are you ready to see Jesus? The passage on close to the end of his life wrote these words to Christians and now dear children, continue in him so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.

I think for me, perhaps my generation, we do not live with eternity in our hearts. We don't generally believe that Jesus could come back today or tomorrow.

When I was a child, the New Year Day sermon was always on the second coming. And there was, I think, within previous generations a general belief that we live with Christ possibly to come.

[32 : 34] Now we may have theological discussions if certain things have to happen or don't have to happen, but at the heart of it, do I live with the thought that Jesus could come?

When I do my work, when I'm trying to live socially, do I live with the thought that Jesus could come? But thirdly, I think it reminds us that we are to tell others about Jesus.

I'm always struck when you see an earthquake in a country and you see people digging in the rubble, trying to get people out.

And I'm challenged in my own life and I start with myself, I know further, do I exhibit that same zeal to rescue people from their sins?

Do I generally believe that my neighbour or my work colleague or my family member that doesn't know Christ will spend eternity without them?

[33 : 38] Does it motivate me to steer Christ with them? You see, when a crisis occurs, whether it's 9-11 or whether it's something different, it creates opportunities.

It creates opportunities to help us to point people to Christ. Let's be bold. Let's take people to Jesus.

Why? Because fourthly, it's time for the church to be the church. You see, the church must act like the church. We need to stop playing games.

We need to bind ourselves in unity. We need to minister side by side with each other. We need to pray that everything depends on God because it does.

When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor 60 years ago, there was a feeling of happiness among the enemies. But one man knew better.

[34 : 43] The head of the Japanese navy wrote in his diary this, that victory is no longer secure. Japan has instead sold the siege for its final defeat.

We've awakened a sleeping giant and filled him with a terrible resolve. Friends, we as the church need to wake up.

For too long here in Scotland and Edinburgh, in Britain and in Europe, we have been a sleeping giant. We need to involve ourselves in ministry and prayer, in adoration, in caring, in telling others about the gospel.

We have the good news that contains our society. Let the church be church. And finally, I think it caused us to love people who are different from us.

Matthew 5 verse 43, you've heard that it is said, love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, but you may be sons of your father in heaven.

[35 : 59] I wonder, who is your enemy? Who is the person that if he came and sat next to you this morning, you would struggle with?

Is it somebody from a different part of society? Is it somebody who is different from you economically or socially? Is it somebody who you just simply can't get on with?

There are no barriers in God's kingdom. God caused us to love and pray for those that we find difficult. And actually to go beyond that, to stand up for those who are wrongly persecuted, to stand up for the oppressed and the poor, to stand up for those who have no voice.

Why? Because we worship the sovereign God, who revealed himself in Christ. Let's play together.

Be still. I know that I am God. And Father, we come with all our energy, all our fear, all our concerns, all our strivings, all our plans, all our aspirations.

[37 : 40] And we lay them down and we say, Father, you have your will. And Father, we know that's really hard sometimes to say, have your will in our life, in our family, in your church, in this nation.

But we know that you are sovereign. And we pray that you would help us in our weakness and in our questions and in our fears to be still in your presence, to know your love, to know your hands around us, to know your protection.

Thank you that you are our Father. And we pray that you would help us to take this good news back to our communities, to our neighbourhoods, to our workplaces, to our social networks.

Father, we pray again that your will will be done here on Earth as it is in Heaven. And that in our sinful state you would still use us.

And we pray this in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. We're going to close with our hymn.