When Trials Come No Longer Fear

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Preacher: David Court

[0:00] Our scripture reading this morning is from the Old Testament, from the Psalms, Psalm 46.! So if you have a Bible, do turn there, and it's printed in our bulletins, and it'll appear! on the screens as well. And one of our deacons, Philip Brown, is going to come and read scripture for us. To the choir master of the sons of Korah, according to Aliboth, a song. God is our refuge in strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, and she shall not be moved.

God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter. He utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.
Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to end of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear.
He burns the chariots with fire. Be still and know the time, God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.
Let's pray together. Let's pray. God, our Father, as we turn to your word this morning, we pray that as we open it up, that you would open up our hearts to receive it. We pray that your Holy Spirit would be our teacher and instructor, and that your glory would be our chief concern. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.
[2:08] Psalm 46 is said to have been a favorite of the great reformer Martin Luther. Such was the comfort brought to him that he wrote his very own paraphrase of the psalm, a mighty fortress. During the tumultuous period of the Reformation, mid-great discouragements, Luther is reputed to have turned to his colleague and friend, Philip Melantham, and said, come, Philip, let us sing the 46th Psalm and let the devil do his worst. Luther wrote of the psalm, we sing this psalm to the praise of God because he is with us and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends his church and his word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, and against all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and sin. Luther, it seems, spent a great deal of time reading and reflecting on this particular psalm, and especially upon its promise that God is the great bulwark and fortress who never fails his people. And I think that is a promise that we are here over and over again as God's people amid our broken and uncertain world.

Because like Luther of old, it seems that we too live in an ever-changing, fluctuating world, where little appears permanent and secure, a world in which our lives often appear to be at the mercy of forces well beyond our control. Of course, we all like to think that we're in control.
We like to believe that we're in charge. We often comfort ourselves with the thought that we are the masters of our own destiny. But of course, that is only an illusion, an illusion sometimes brutally exploded by our experience of life. For after all, none of us knows what tomorrow will bring.
None of us can predict what slings and arrows of outrageous fortune may indeed come our way.
One day life can be like a beautiful, tranquil summer's day, not a cloud in sight.
And the next week can be caught up in some great and fierce and terrifying storm. There are those times when the very foundations of the earth seem to shake, nations rage, kingdoms totter, mountains appear to be carried into the very heart of the sea. And in such days, our hearts cry out for something solid, immovable, something that will not give way when everything else does.
[5:26] And by God's grace, the Holy Spirit has given us in the 46th arm a song for precisely such a time. Here we have the triumphant declaration of someone who has looked at the terrors of life full in the face and found that God is wonderfully and amazingly greater than all those terrors.

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He wants us to look to the Lord. He directs our attention to God. Fix your eyes upon the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Look to Him, know Him, behold Him, delight in Him.
And as we read through the psalm, you will have noticed, I'm sure that there are kind of three main stanzas, each concluding with that little word. It's not usually read, Selah, is believed by many to be a kind of musical term, probably indicating a pause. So, let's look at each of these stanzas in turn this morning. Let's pause and see what they have to tell us about the true and living God.
The first stanza, verses 1 through 3, let's look at this under the heading, God's power to secure us in a chaotic world. God's power to secure us in a chaotic world. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. So, the psalm begins with God and with what He is to His people.
He is our refuge and strength, a very present help. He is our place of safety, stability, and security. [7:21] And it's not that God will be our refuge one day. It is that God is our refuge today. He's not some distant deity who may, on some future date, notice our distress and come to our help. He is the one who now, today, at this very moment of trouble, is our refuge and strength. John Golden Gay translates this verse as, we have God as a shelter and stronghold. He always offers Himself as a help in times of trouble. God offers Himself to us as our refuge and shelter, directly, personally, covenantally.

He is our strength and stronghold. He is our strength and stronghold, not merely a helper who supplies strength, but the one who is our strength Himself, a very present help.
The Hebrew here is emphatic. He is found to be a help exceedingly, abundantly, immediately, right here in the midst of the storm. And so, the psalmist continues, It's a word picture, a description of the seething dynamic forces of nature breaking out in chaos and confusion. The ancient peoples did not take the earth's stability for granted. They had little protection against earthquake, storm or flood, and these raw forces of nature often threatened their very existence. And so, this is a picture of the dreadful calamities this world can throw at us, the cataclysmic forces of nature that can wreak so much havoc in people's lives. It's a portrait of seismic upheaval. Here is a people for whom their world is literally being turned upside down.
The psalmist doesn't deny the reality of the moving earth, the roaring waters, the trembling mountains. He looks straight at the very worst that can happen, the very disintegration of the created order, and he says, we will not be afraid. Here are the chaotic times when things are so hard and difficult that it appears as if God is not in control. It's a portrait, isn't it, of extreme circumstances.
Here is a kind of worst-case scenario, times of earth-shattering turmoil, times when everything seems to be crashing down upon us, times when those things that we thought we could depend on are in total flux, times when nothing appears certain or sure anymore.
[10:50] Here are the circumstances of life that induce great fear and anxiety. There are great upheavals we must all face one day. That great storm of bereavement and loss of dear loved ones with serious illness or cancer, depression, other mental health issues, persecution and opposition, Alzheimer's, dementia, loneliness, social isolation. And yet, even in such times, of utter chaos, the psalmist boldly declares, we will not be afraid. Not the words of a stoic, gritting his teeth, stealing himself against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. These are words of trust and faith and dependence upon God. Now, how on earth can the psalmist make such a declaration?

Is it because he is strong and self-sufficient? Is it because he is in some way superior to others? Is it because he's someone who's really got it all together? No, it says, he says, only because God is our refuge and strength. This absence of fear in his heart is down to the power of the living God, not because of anything in him, but rather everything to do with the Lord's power to secure him and hold him fast. The Puritan writer Thomas Watson came across this quote from him. He says this, God has never promised a charter of exemption from trouble, but he has promised to be with us in trouble.
Better be in a prison with God's presence and God's promises than be on a throne without them. I wonder if you're in a prison this morning, locked up with your fears, trapped by your anxieties. Friend, remember God's promise, promises to you in Jesus Christ. Think of him who, while he walked this earth, calmed the raging waters and the turbulent waves, he whose command to them was, peace be still. John in his gospel tells us that all things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made. John 1.3, our world was fashioned by Jesus Christ. It bears his stamp upon it. He is the one who is our refuge and strength. He is Emmanuel. He is God with us. For in Jesus Christ, the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob, our refuge. And yes, at times

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it appears we live in days when the mountains seem to be shaking, moral confusion sweeping over the nations like a flood, ancient certainties swept away before us, the church tossed through to and fro by the winds and waves of false doctrine. And yet his promise stands, I will never leave you, I will never forsake you.
And that's why it's so important that we be found in him. That's why it's so important we put our faith in him. Because, friends, there will be days when the mountains quake and our lives will be shaken. [14:48] There will be days when the waters roar and we will be engulfed in confusion and despair. There will be days when we will feel flooded by fear and anxiety, and we will cry out for help.

But to whom will we cry? Will it be to Jesus Christ a God-given refuge for fallen, broken, rebellious men and women? Because faith looks and cries to Jesus.
I love those words of John Newton's hymn, How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear. It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, and drives away his fear. God's power to secure us in a chaotic world.
And then secondly here, in our second stanza, God's presence to keep us in a hostile world. Verse 4, There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, kingdoms totter, he utters his voice, the earth melts.
[16:17] The Lord of hosts is with us. God of Jacob is our fortress. Now, the picture depicted in the second stanza is one of deliverance and rescue for the city of God. Calvin, in his commentary, notes how well the circumstances fit Jerusalem's miraculous deliverance from the armies of Sennacherib in the days of Isaiah. And you can read about that in 2 Kings 18 and 19. And the imagery of these verses well suits such a scenario. There's a battle going on. Enemies are encamped around. They besiege the city of God. And we have this description of God here as the Lord of hosts in verse 7. It's a literal translation of Lord Almighty, stressing God's role as a leader of all the forces of heaven. Here is the God of battles, the God who fights for His people, a warrior who defends them as their shield, who will not let them be crushed.

Yes, mountains and kingdoms may topple, but not the city of God. Why? Because God dwells with His people. It is the habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of them. The coming of dawn, the reference there is to a time of battle. First light was the moment when a besieged city would have been attacked.
A terrifying moment of truth when its very future would be decided. But despite all the forces arrayed against this city, she will not fall, for God is within her. God will help her when morning dawns.
For this is the city of God. These are the people of God. And God brings to them the joy of His spirit. He brings to them gladness of salvation and life. Because this city has a water supply that will never run dry. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. While the waters of chaos rage, a gentle life-giving stream flows within. Not a river of human effort or of religious activity or devotion, but the very river of God's own presence. And you'll notice that this river makes His people glad. He brings life and joy. He nourishes them. The river that flows through the city, the source of gladness and confidence is, as Corey has already mentioned, our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember Jesus' words in John 4, whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Christ by the Spirit is the river whose stream makes glad the city of God. Spirit-given joy is what characterizes the people of God in every age and generation. We are people who rejoice in the Lord. Herman Bavinck writes,
God saves by causing Himself to be known and enjoyed in Christ. In the gospel, God offers us Himself.
[20:09] The great Anglican preacher of a bygone age, Charles Simeon, wrote this, The gospel is a fountain of life to a ruined world, nor is there a cistern in the universe that can afford waters so salubrious. Calvin, our whole salvation, all its parts are comprehended in Christ. We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else.

Let us drink our fill from this fountain and from no other. And yes, friends, we are often tempted to drink from the broken cisterns of this world to try and find meaning and purpose and satisfaction in all kinds of places. Yes, in our work and career, health and appearance, qualifications, in our family, in our bank balance and sexual excitement, in our sense of self. And it's not that these things are bad, but they simply cannot provide the lasting joy that we crave. Such things will not quench our

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thirst. They will not and they cannot satisfy. I love the words of that old hymn, I tried the broken cisterns, Lord, but ah, the waters failed. E'en as I stooped to drink, they fled and mocked me as I wailed. Now none but Christ can satisfy. None other name for me.
There's love and life and lasting joy, Lord Jesus found in thee. And one day in the new Jerusalem, the river of life bright as crystal will flow from the throne of God and of the Lamb.
And yet until that day, the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son is that river in our hearts, refreshing us, gladdening us, sustaining us. The Spirit of God is with us, bringing us life and joy and peace and hope, bringing us strength and courage for the struggles and the battles of this life. And I know today that we're less than comfortable with the idea of a Christian life as a conflict, a battle.
But in a battle, we surely are. Great forces of evil arrayed against the church of God, besieged on every side. And yet our hope and confidence is not in ourselves. It's not in our gifts, our talents, our aptitude. It's not in our traditions or our great history. It is that we are dwelling in which God himself lives by his Spirit.
[23:09] Bavinck writes, What is that?

What is that? I believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting. Jesus said, I will build my church and the very gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And yes, the nations may rage and kingdoms may be moved, but when God utters his voice, when he speaks, the earth melts. And so we declare with the psalmist, the Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. When all else crumbles, the city of God remains. God's power to secure us. God's presence to keep us. And thirdly and finally here, God's peace to calm us. His peace to calm us in a frenetic world. And this third final stanza, I think is understood best as an appeal to both God's people and also the surrounding nations.
Commentators differ a bit in their understanding. But in verses 8 through 9, the psalmist seems to be making a victory pronouncement to his own people. Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes war cease to the end of the earth. He breaks the bow, shatters the spear, burns the chariots with fire. It's an invitation to God's people to look and see what Yahweh, their God, has accomplished. The battlefield after victory, the bow is broken, the spear is shattered asunder, the chariot burned with fire. And those words are a reference to the destruction of an enemy's weapons. They signify complete and utter victory. The God who made the earth is a God who unmakes the weapons of the mighty. He brings wars to an end because he is the sovereign Lord.
And because he is, his people are never at the mercy of blind fate or human tyrants. They remain ever and always in the palm of his hand. Here is the reminder that we are in the hands of the maker of heaven and earth, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christopher Ashe, in his little commentary, says this, the verb cease here is the one from which we get the word Sabbath, the whole of creation, moving towards that Sabbath rest for which it groans. Our God, the great peacemaker, before whom all nations and peoples will one day bow down and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.
[26:18] Be still and know that I am God, verse 10. I will be exalted among the nations, exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob, our fortress.

And in that verse, it appears that God is, or the psalmist rather, is throwing down the gauntlet to the nations around. These verses seem to be a challenge to the enemies of God. Be still and know that I am God. Now, this famous verse has often been understood as a kind of reflective, meditative sense. The idea of being that we should quieten our hearts before the Lord. In my youth, we would often, in church, sing the chorus, be still and know that I am God. And we would sing it in just that kind of way. It reads this verse as a kind of soothing balm. Amid the turmoil of this world, retreat and be still in the Lord's presence. Commune with Him in the silence.
But that is, I think, almost certainly a misreading of this text. If we understand these words are directed to the nations in uproar, certainly the word for God here is not God's covenant name, but the more generic Elohim. Then this is hardly a command to still hearts and know fellowship with God. No, be still and know that I am God. It's not, I think, to be understood as a kind of gentle breath for us to repeat as a quiet song. It's more of a mighty roar.
Here's God's word to the nations. And His word is this, be quiet, be silent, be still. Well, cease your rebellion. Stop trusting in your horses and chariots. Abandon your hostility.

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Acknowledge God's sovereignty and kinship, and know that He alone is God. Friends, a day is hastening on when the false gods and idols of war in which men so readily put their trust will be utterly routed.
[28:47] History has one aim. It is not the glory of any man or any woman or any army. It is the very glory of God Himself. It's His name that will be exalted among the nations. It's His name that's going to be exalted in all the earth. The great kingdoms and empires of this world will all come to an end.

Yes, they rise, and then they fall. Their statues corrode and crumble. Their emblems and proud boasts soon forgotten. Their heroes faded from memory. Ancient generation. It's hard not to think of those images around the fall of communism in Eastern Europe back in 1989. Those huge statues of the heroes of the communist revolution toppled over and utterly smashed to the ground. Seventy years.
The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever. The great eternal self-existent creator of all things will be exalted among the nations of the earth.
And friends, this is where our broken world is headed. Not perhaps and not maybe. He will be exalted. Because there's one kingdom and one city that will stand forever. The city of God and the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. And His memorial is no statue. It is an empty cross. His glorious name now proclaimed in the gospel as great among the nations. And indeed, that day is coming when the kingdom of this world, all the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.
We began with Martin Luther. Well, his great hymn, A Mighty Fortress. Here in Scotland and the UK, it was translated, that hymn was translated by Thomas Carlyle.
[31:04] And in the final verse of his translation, this is how he puts it. God's word for all their craft and force.

One moment will not linger. But spite of hell shall have its course, tis written by his finger. And though they take our life goods on our children wife, yet is their profit small. These things shall vanish all.
The city of God remaineth. The city of God remains. Friends, what is your trouble today? Is it the roaring sea of doubt? Is it the trembling mountains of fear?
Is it frailty in your own heart? Is it the hostility and antagonism of the world? And here again, the word of the Lord. God is our refuge and strength.
A very present help in trouble. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge. His power will secure us. His presence will keep us.
[32:12] His peace will calm us. And he is with us supremely in the Lord Jesus Christ. Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven.

Who was crucified. Who rose again. And whoever lives to make intercession for us. In him all God's promises are yes and amen. In him we have a refuge that cannot fail.
In him we have strength for every weakness. In him we have a hope that cannot fade even with the passing of the years. And so faith can sing.
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Strong defender of my weary heart. My sore to fight the cruel deceiver. My shield against his hateful darts.
My song when enemies surround me. My hope when tides of sorrow rise. My joy when trials are abounding.
[33:15] Your faithfulness my refuge in the night. Let's pray together. Lord, our prayer is that we might know you.

The Lord of hosts. The God of Jacob. As our refuge and strength. Lord, whatever our circumstances may be this morning.
May your power secure us. May your presence keep us. And may your peace calm us. And may you lead us forward in faith.
Always looking to Jesus. The author and finisher of faith. And we pray these things in his name. Amen.
Amen. Thank you.

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