

## BE STILL

### Psalm 46

Psalm 46 is a beautifully crafted piece of poetry. It was also a stirring piece of music, though we don't have the original tune. It is one of the great treasures of the Bible and entirely appropriate for a day like today, a day of remembrance.

It comes in three distinct parts, each ending with the enigmatic word 'Selah'. It's a psalm of great confidence. 'God is our refuge and strength. ... There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. ... The LORD Almighty is with us. ... He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth.'

#### Verses 1-3

The psalm causes us to look in several directions. It encourages us to look up. Right at the beginning it turns our attention to God. It encourages us to look around, at one another. God is *our* refuge and strength. It enables us to look out, at the world around us, not ignoring its problems, not pretending that things are other than they are, but facing reality and finding God's help in it.

God's protection is spoken of in two ways. God is our refuge, a shelter to which we can retreat. And God is our strength. He gives the strength with which to advance. Life contains both these scenarios. There are times when we are forced to retreat, to get away. There are also times when we need to advance, to step out. In both circumstances God is there for us.

He is an ever present help in trouble. That word 'trouble' has within it the idea of things being narrow, tight, confined, cramped, restricting. We need to get away, but we can't. We need to move forward, but we can't. In those circumstances God is there for us: an ever present help in trouble.

The older translations say, 'a very present help'. I like that. Those of you who have been teachers know that a class can be 100% present, in body at least, but a million miles away in thought or attention. Dare I say it, the same may be true of a congregation. God is not just present, or even ever present. He is *very* present, focused, attentive, ready to help, whether it's to provide a refuge that we can escape to or the strength to progress and advance.

In this opening section, verses 1 to 3, God's protective presence is promised against a backdrop with which we have become all too familiar, the backdrop of earthquake and tsunami, the earth giving way, the mountains falling into the heart of the sea, its waters roaring and foaming, the mountains quaking with their surging.

This description of natural disasters represents the ultimate in instability, the reversal of the natural order of things, disaster as extreme as it can get. Tragically, for many people in the last twelve months, it has not simply been a representation of the worst that *could* happen but the reality that actually *has* happened.

But it's within this section of the psalm, against this backdrop, that we find the only personal response to God's word. 'Therefore we will not fear.' We have a choice. We can look out at the terrible troubles of the world and tremble in fear or we can look up at the God who has promised to be our refuge and strength and say, 'Therefore we will not fear.' Faith or fear.

#### Verses 4-6

In verse 4 there is an amazing development. It doesn't just speak about an absence of fear but an abundance of joy. 'There is a river whose streams *make glad* the city of God.' Throughout the Bible the sea is an image representing trouble and turmoil but the river symbolises life and fruitfulness. There was a river in the Garden of Eden. In the new Jerusalem there will be a river, the river of the water of life.

If an ancient city was under siege it was essential that it should have an internal source of fresh water as well as strong defences. That is the idea here. We're in the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her. She will not fall; God will help her at break of day.

The night may be long but daybreak will come. Verse 4 talks about a river and streams. A river is a natural feature but the word used for streams indicates artificial canals, channeling the mighty resources of the river to meet the needs of the city. The vast resources of God that created a universe and hold everything in place are channeled to meet your needs and mine.

The first part of Psalm 46 contrasted God's care with the force of natural disasters. The second part of the psalm contrasts God's care with the force of national conflicts. 'Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts.' Again we can identify with these issues: war, terrorism, the nuclear threat. Nations are still in uproar. Kingdoms still fall. And the answer is not in political strategies but in the presence of God. 'The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.'

### **Verses 8-11**

The final part of the psalm issues two invitations. The first is in verse 7, the second in verse 10. Come and see. Be still and know.

The first invitation invites us to look back, to consider the works of the LORD, to see what he has done in the past. He has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the shields with fire. The picture we have here is not just victory in battle or the end of war but a peace so reliable that disarmament is possible.

What has been the sticking point between the IRA and the Unionists in Northern Ireland? It has been the issue of decommissioning, not just laying down your weapons but destroying them altogether. Come and see the works of the LORD. ... He breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire.

Come and see. That's the first invitation. The second is: Be still and know. Be still. Stop struggling. Let go. Relax. On Monday morning I was in my study and these words came into my mind. Be still. When I was absolutely still I heard something. The ticking of my clock. It had been there all the time but I couldn't hear it until I was still.

God is there for us but we can miss his presence, his protection, his provision, his peace. We can miss his reassuring voice. We need to be still and know. When we do we will hear his voice, giving us confidence in spite of the turmoil of the nations: 'I will be exalted among the nations;' and giving us confidence in spite of the ravages of nature: 'I will be exalted in the earth.'

The psalm ends with a repetition of verse 7. 'The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.' You may be more familiar with the older translation, 'The LORD of hosts is with us.' Translators have quite wisely changed that. Today we associate hosts more with people who provide accommodation or meals and that's not what it means here. LORD of hosts means LORD of armies, commander of the armies of heaven, the supernatural militia. The God who commands them is with us. He has all the power we need.

But notice what it says next. 'The God of Jacob is our fortress.' What a contrast. Jacob? The deceiver? The cheat? Yes, the God of Jacob, the God who stuck with Jacob, the God who never let go until Jacob was a changed man, changed for the better. The God of Jacob is our fortress. He has all the patience we need.

He is everything we need: protecting, providing, giving us peace, giving us power, and eternally patient with us.