

## **GOD, OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH**

### **Psalm 46**

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Psalm 46 is a musical psalm, a psalm to be sung.

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. *Selah*. There is a river whose streams make glad 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. Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*. Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought 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. ‘Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.’ The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*” (Psalm 46:1–11, NIV).

This psalm is one of the more well known psalms and probably enjoys a rank that very few of the psalms hold, like Psalm 23 and Psalm 51, for being the kind of psalm that has sustained people in difficult moments in their life. It is a tremendous psalm or song of confidence. This psalm was a great encouragement to Martin Luther and became the hymn of battle cry of the Reformation.

The psalm is a very robust expression of faith in God. It proclaims God’s supremacy over three areas. Each area more strategically wider than the previous area.

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First, there is God's ascendancy or power or supremacy over nature in verses 1–3. Then in verses 4–7, the second part, His ascendancy over the attackers of his city. When we look at the city that's being referred to, it's obvious that it's Jerusalem, but the city has reference not only to the earthy city but the heavenly New Jerusalem as well. Then the third part of the psalm takes us into God's ascendancy or power or supremacy over the whole warring world, from verses 8–11. So nature, city, world is the movement of the psalm. It is a powerful and defiant psalm, suggesting, in the tenor of its language, that it was composed at a time of crisis. When statements of faith are made at a time of crisis, they ultimately prove to be more powerful. Anyone can sing when the sun's shining bright. But it's something else when you can have a song in your heart at night. Obviously, this psalm has been written through some very perilous times. Yet the psalmist proclaims in the midst of those difficult times that the Lord is sovereign and supreme.

You'll notice, if you've been looking at the text, as I've given you the three divisions of the psalm, that at the close of each division, there is that wonderful word "*Selah*." I think earlier I talked about the possible meaning of the word. If we can appreciate the meaning, I think the psalms can be more meaningful to us, as we use them in corporate worship. There are three possibilities for what *Selah* means.

The first idea is that it indicated a musical direction to either the singers or the orchestra to "lift up." Therefore, if it was being sung by a choir or a soloist or accompanied by an orchestra, this was the time to pull out all the stops and really bang the drum. To wake people up out of their seats. The forte. The crescendo. The mezzo forte.

Another possibility is that it's a liturgical mark meaning to "lift up," which suggests to the person who is using it in the psalm that at this particular moment they need to lift up their voice or lift up their hands or do something vocally or physically demonstrative to underline the

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message or content of that particular moment. It may have been used in the times of the exile, when Israel was in captivity, to underscore some particular moment, the need for a tremendous response from the congregation, like a wave of hallelujah or a chorus of praise that sweeps across a body of believers as they recite together the praises being given to God.

Some have suggested that “to lift up” has to do with lifting up the eyes for the purpose of repeating the verse. Others have suggested that to lift up also mean to bow. Rather than the worshipper lifting up his eyes or lifting up his hands, they may even find it appropriate to fall prostrate before God. But the idea is to do some demonstrative act, which underscores the particular nuance of expression that is being given in worship.

A third possibility is that *Selah* is akin to an outburst—“Hallelujah!” “Amen!” Like, “Stop, think about this. Praise the Lord for this. Lift up your hands. Lift up your voice. Lift up your heart.”

#### **I. Verses 1–3 might be headlined “God in the tumult.”**

The tumult obviously has to do with nature here. It speaks of time of trouble. “Ever-present help in trouble” is used. The times of trouble in these three verses, is from the viewpoint of creation. This psalm is written with a creation motif. The psalmist is consciously going back to that time when God created order out of the chaos. We know that before God formed the land and divided it from the waters, the earth was formless and void. And He brought creation out of chaos. What is trouble? It’s the re-imposition of the chaos upon the creation.

That is what is happening here. There are two fundamental things that are happening in creation in these three verses. One is the earthquake and the other is a tidal wave. Those are tremendously frightening times. That figure of nature, the chaos imposing itself on the structure and order that God has created, is meant to re-imply for us that this is what trouble in life always is. Trouble plunges us into chaos. We can see, of course, that the structure of our life is suddenly threatened.

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What seems to be so secure is no longer secure. From the psalmist's point of view, verses 1–3, nothing seems to be more secure than the earth on which we're standing. The sea confined within its limits seems to be so secure. Therefore, when the earth is rolling and the sea moving beyond the bounds not appointed to it, we see the tremendous sense of all that is stable being threatened. That is symptomatic of the struggles of life.

We don't give a lot of thought to our earthly security and needs until they begin getting impinged upon by the chaos. Food and shelter—we take those for granted until our sources of finance become cut off. Psalm 46 is a helpful psalm when we're going through relational difficulty, because it's as though the earth is moving underneath our feet. Bad health can be that. We take our health for granted, but when that begins to slide away from us, again it's the chaos emerging in this structured body that God has made. Whatever it is—chaos can be the cessation of meaningful activity in our life.

This psalm is telling us that in a time when everything is shaking, we may find that the only security we can count on is God. Who is going to help when the earth is moving and when the sea is moving in? Man's help is no longer available. Of course, since we're human, all of us probably turn to other people to help us. But the deeper our needs are, the deeper our problems are, the more we have to find, as believers in the Lord, that there are some things that only God can help us with. They are really beyond human solution.

There are some problems that human ingenuity and human will and human purpose and human resources simply can't address. In those kinds of times, if we don't find our help in God, we are without hope and without help. But conversely, the psalmist is saying in that time of shaking, "We can find God." God offers His presence to us when the chaos attempts to reassert its supremacy over the order of creation.

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“God is our refuge and strength. An ever-present help,” meaning He’s not just available to help us sometimes, but He is ever-present in the times when the earth is moving under our feet and the waters are engulfing us.

The psalmist is saying that in those kinds of times we’ll find that God is our refuge and strength. Refuge and strength brings to us a reminder of two aspects of God’s care for us when we are going through times of trouble. “Refuge” speaks of the defensive or external aspect of His salvation. That we can find in Him one in whom we can hide. One in whom we can place our security in such a time. But the word “strength” refers to the dynamic aspect, the positive aspect, the internal aspect that God is within us. God is one to whom we can escape and in whom we find security in our times of trouble.

But He also is one who energizes us in our times of trouble; He gives us not only a fleeing place but a sustaining place, and empowers us on the inside to walk through it. The twin aspects in facing trouble as a Christian are reflected in those two words. What is one of the things we want to do in trouble? We want to get away. There’s nothing wrong with escapism, as long as you balance it with the other factor. It’s not just escapism, it’s also the strengthening power of the Lord to walk through it. We need both. At any give moment, we may be more on one side or the other, depending sometimes on the hour of day we’re in. The psalmist is saying that God is both of those things to us.

**II. So we go from the theme of God in the tumult of our life to “God in His city” (verses 4–7).**

The writer turns from the upheaval in nature, verses 1–3, to the totally different imagery of a city under siege. But as you look within the city, you’ll find the city at peace. It’s as though God has already dealt with the enemies of the city. The city is both a representation of earthly Jerusalem

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and of the city of God. In that city, there are waters of life. Notice the difference in water between verses 1–3 and 4–6. In verses 1–3, it's the water that's the source of chaos. But in the city of God, the waters are not a menacing sea, but a life-giving river. That is God's way of saying that He makes nature serve Him. It is in the turbulent world that we experience the overwhelming threat of the flood. But in the security within God's refuge we find the most menacing elements of creation subdued and they produce instead not only beauty but nourishment and refreshment.

The mountains may fall, verse 2. But this city will not fall. God has given His people security. His help, the psalmist said, is at the break of day. God will help at the break of day. One is reminded of the invasion of Sennacherib, king of Assyria, when he had surrounded Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:13). Some think this psalm was written during the days of Hezekiah when, according to Sennacherib's own records, he "shut Hezekiah up like a bird in the cage." That is not found in the Scripture but in the annals of Assyria. That quote was found in reference to his siege of Jerusalem, which he suddenly lifted. There were six hundred thousand casualties that the angel of the Lord caused to the Assyrian army on that occasion, which left Jerusalem secure as a city. The city was made aware of the great victory that had been accomplished at the break of day.

The reference to "break of day" could be that particular victory, or it may point backward, to the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 14:27). When the children of Israel had come out of Egypt again, they were in a time when chaos threatened to engulf them. The waters of the Red Sea were parted. The waters—the turbulent thing that needs to be tamed by the hand of God—were ready to engulf them, but God created a way through the sea and at daybreak, Moses stretched out his

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hand over the sea and the armies of Egypt were drowned in the sea. God's greatest victory of the Old Testament occurred at daybreak.

And God's greatest victory in the New Testament also occurred at daybreak. It was very early in the morning, Jesus rose again from the dead. Mark 16:9 states that.

God is our help early in the morning. "Nations are in uproar. Kingdoms fall. He lifts his voice and the earth melts" (Psalm 46:6). It's interesting that that little verse suggests that God's judgment in human relations works two ways. There is, first of all, an inherent instability in human institutions that nations fall. Why is it that we have nation after nation that come on the world scene and then collapse? Is it because God imposes a direct judgment? In most cases, no. He simply lets them fall of their own weight. There is kind of an ascendance a kingdom or empire goes through and then it collapses. So nations fall. God can work His judgment from just the normal laws of sowing and reaping. But God also works His judgment in a direct way, as here, when His voice is decisive in dissolving the world of man.

This second of God is within His city. It is concluded by an affirmation. God is both the LORD almighty and the God of Jacob (verse 7). Those are two contrasting phrases when related to God. "LORD almighty" suggests to us His powerful sovereignty, but "God of Jacob" suggests to us a God whose victory we know when we've really wrestled with Him. He is the God of the struggler.

If any person ever epitomized struggle in life, it had to be Jacob. It's encouraging to me to continually find that great phrase being used of God in the Old Testament. That He is the God of Jacob. I think that's especially a reference that can be used for all of us who go through struggles in life and have to contend with things that are bigger than us, and at times even wrestle with God over matters.

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God is our fortress. The God who is the God of Jacob. “Fortress” here is a different word than “refuge” in verse 1. “Fortress” implies an inaccessible height. We find in God not only the security of being in His city, but we are lifted up in such a place of protection that nothing can assail us or reach us there. God in His city.

**III. Then “God exalted in the earth” (verses 8–11). We have an invitation into the future—this is where the psalmist goes eschatological.**

He jumps into the future. Now not just the present. He invites us, on the basis of victory that has just been won in Israel, to look at that as a tip off to all that God is going to do in that day.

“Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought 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” (Psalm 46:8–9).

It’s interesting how God brings peace here. He brings peace through conflict. Through war, God imposes His peace upon a rebellious humanity. Peace is not always won through gentleness. That is always God’s first effort and should be ours as well. Peace sometimes comes at the price of horrendous conflict. The peace that the world is at today among its nations, in terms that here is no current world war, was won at the price of the horrible conflicts of World War I and II. That is being played out here.

Also, I might add that what the Scriptures indicate about peace being won through conflict may sometimes also be the case in difficult personal situations that we find ourselves in, in which we’re wanting a resolution on a matter. Whether it’s a financial matter or a health matter.

Sometimes, the way to peace in the body is to fall under the surgeon’s knife. Sometimes, the way to peace in a relationship is to no longer duck an issue but to face it head on and be prepared for the aftermath and the conflict that will occur as a consequence. Here’s an area where God said

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that ultimately He's going to face down conflict against Him and He's not going to deal with it gently. But He will accomplish His peace, because when He is done burning the shields and shattering the bow and spear, He invites us then to be still and know that "I am God" (verse 10). Here in the psalm God is now speaking directly. It is no longer the psalmist speaking. "I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth."

I wouldn't be surprised at all if Jesus had this psalm in mind when He was at the Lake of Galilee. I think if you look at Mark 4:35 to the end of the chapter, you will see all the elements of this psalm present in that experience of Jesus being in that boat on the Lake of Galilee. The chaos of waters gone wild threatening the structured order of creation and the structured lives of the disciples. Suddenly, everything is out of control. Nature—adversity—is raging. In the middle of that context, Jesus stands up and recites, really, the words that occur here in Psalm 46:10, "Be still. Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted in the earth. I will be exalted among the nations." It's good to again know that God does bring us that peace in the midst of the storm and peace in the midst of conflict.

With renewed confidence, the psalmist goes back to speaking the words of verse 7—a repeat. A reminder that the LORD Almighty and the God of the struggler is our fortress. God in the tumult, God in the city, God triumphing in the earth. God over the nations and exalted in the earth.

Psalm 46 is a great psalm of encouragement, to remind us that in a time of trouble, when we don't have anyone who can help us, God is there.

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Lord, we come to you tonight refreshed with the words of this psalm. You are our refuge and our strength. How we need that two-sided dimensionality of your person tonight in our life. Some of us are here this evening and we need a moment of escape and a moment of respite from

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our struggle and our problems. It's so good to come into an atmosphere of your presence where there is such peace and tranquility and confidence and we feel safe. We think of an analogy of a frightened child who finds security on a mother's lap, and we often feel that way in Your presence, Lord. When around us it's intimidating and unpredictable and dangerous, psychologically or physically or financially, we can come to You and we can find a secure place in You. A hiding place, a strong protective place, where God provides the grace to persevere. Thank You, Lord, that we can enter into that in You. And thank You also that it is in the place of refuge that You give us the dynamic aspect of Your indwelling in our life, that You also strengthen us to go out and emerge from that cocoon-like shelter of Your presence, to face—with our feet on shaking ground—the disturbed elements of our personal world and find that in that strengthening, You are present. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth be moved and the mountains be cast into the sea. Who of us would not fear at such a sight? But here in Your Word we find that, even in such a cataclysmic moment as that, You're saying to us that we have a place of refuge and a place of strength. That when our world is shaken, You're not shaken. When everything that can be moved is being moved, You're not moved. Your world is secure. Your city is secure. Your victory and consummation of victory in the age to come—that is secure. There is nothing about You that is insecure. Our future may be insecure. But in You we have our security. You are our refuge and our strength. Thank You, Lord, for being that to us tonight. Thank You for Your strengthening presence. We praise You. Hallelujah.