

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Psalms		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	6		Mason Depew
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Our Only Fortress

Introduction - Psalm 46 was Martin Luther's favorite psalm. You can probably guess why if you compare the words of this psalm with those of his most famous hymn, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God. Luther said, "We sing this psalm to the praise of God, because God 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."¹ We might summarize the main point of this psalm with the rhetorical question Paul asks in Romans 8:31, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

I. Refuge at the end of the world: Psalm 46:1-3²

A. The very first line of the psalm very clearly sets up its main theme. "God is our refuge and strength."

1. God is *ours*, he belongs to us, says the psalmist, and he protects us even when that doesn't seem to be the case.
2. This is very clearly one of the main points of the whole history of Israel. When the Israelites trust God (and sometimes even when they doubt), he wins their victories for them. When they turn away from him, they are defenseless against their many foes. We have seen this already in this series as we studied psalms about David's life and the Exodus, for example.
3. The word "trouble" in verse 1 is quite the understatement compared with the events described in verses 2 and 3.

B. Verses 2-3 (as well as verse 6 later in the psalm) depict nothing less than the unmaking of the world. The whole creation falling apart.

1. The earth and the mountains appear perfectly stable in our ordinary, day to day lives. Yet even their stability provides no safety compared with the awesome power of God.
2. Even when the earth "gives way," most likely referring to severe earthquakes, and the mountains tumble into the sea causing massive tsunamis, we have no reason to fear as long as we have God on our side.
3. Through Noah, God had promised a certain degree of stability and consistency in the life of the world to all creatures, but that promise was limited in its duration.³

¹ Spurgeon included this quote in his sermon on this psalm in *The Treasury of David*.

² Psalm 46 is one of the easiest psalms to outline because it has three instances of the word "selah" at regular intervals, indicating the stanzas.

³ The promise in Genesis 8:22, "seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" is only for "while the earth remains," not forever.

4. We should associate this kind of dramatic imagery with the end-times language of the prophets, such as Joel and John. Like the earth and mountains, the sun, moon, and stars are supposed to be among the most reliable and stable parts of the creation. Yet they too will be unmade at the end, when God purges his creation from all the effects of the Fall.⁴
5. One of the most persistent questions that the prophets ask when contemplating the Day of Judgment is, “Who can withstand the day of the Lord?”⁵ In other words, who can possibly survive the final decreation of all things, worse than Noah’s Flood? Psalm 46 is designed to answer that question. If God is yours and you are his, you have nothing to fear even from that terrible Day of Judgment.

II. The hope of God’s people: Psalm 46:4-7

- A. This stanza is all about the special relationship of God with his people. He belongs to them, and they to him forever. This bond is unbreakable.
- B. Why does the psalmist start talking about a river in verse 4? There is no river that runs through the literal city of Jerusalem then or now. The psalmist as well as his original audience would surely have known this.
 1. In fact, this has always been a problem for the growth and maintenance of Jerusalem as a city. If you visit Jerusalem today, you will notice that many of the important archaeological sites, such as cisterns and aqueducts, have something to do with addressing this water supply problem.⁶
 2. We should remember the context of the end-times language in the previous verses. There are a number of prophetic passages in the Bible which depict the New Jerusalem on the day of the Lord as having a river which runs directly through it and abundantly refreshes all life.⁷ This psalm appears to be picking up that imagery from them, just as it takes up the vivid depiction of the world being unmade. This is therefore not a statement of fact about the current status of Jerusalem at the time of the psalmist, but a promise of God’s future abundant provision for his people.⁸
 3. In contrast to the dangerous, destructive waters of judgment represented by the sea in verse 3, the river in verse 4 is safe, refreshing water that sustains life.
- C. Verse 5 gives a firm statement of assurance: “God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved.” When everything else gives way, including the earth and the mountains, God will cause his people to stand unmovable.

⁴ Consider Joel 2:10, “The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.”

⁵ For example, Joel 2:11 says, “The LORD utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?”

⁶ In the 1902 edition of the University of Chicago Journal of Religion, E. W. G. Masterman described this problem in great detail. He notes, for example, that in his own time there in Jerusalem 120 beasts of burden were required to constantly haul water up the slopes of Jerusalem to the city, day and night, from other sources. If you are curious, you can search for “The Water Supply of Jerusalem, Ancient and Modern” with his name or type in this link: <https://doi.org/10.1086/472951>

⁷ For example, Ezekiel 47:1-14 describes the new temple as having a new river that flows out from it, so deep that Ezekiel could not pass through it. Joel 3:18 similarly says that on the Day of the Lord, “a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD.”

⁸ Similarly, Revelation 22:1-2 depicts this river flowing from the throne of the Lamb and watering the Tree of Life, which heals the nations. “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” It is worth noting that the previous psalm, 45, is all about a wedding, which is also a very important part of Revelation’s depiction of the New Jerusalem.

1. The Jews knew God was in their midst chiefly because of the Temple and the priestly system that accompanied it. This was the greatest proof of his special relationship with them.
 2. The disciples in the book of Acts know God is with them because of the presence of the Holy Spirit.⁹
- D. We must notice the contrast between God's elect in verses 4 and 7 with the reprobate in verse 6.¹⁰
1. Verse 6 describes the utter and complete destruction of all those nations and kingdoms which oppose God. Before God's awesome and triumphant power on the last day, they will all melt away like wax.
 2. That great and terrible day of the Lord we have seen depicted throughout this psalm as the unmaking of the world is actually a new morning of hope for God's people. Contrasting verses 4 and 7 with verse 6 highlights for us that they will not only survive and endure it, but actually triumph through it! For those who do not know God, contemplating his judgment is a terrible thing, bringing only fear and despair. But for his chosen ones, it calls to mind the sweetest and most beautiful hope of our deliverance from this fallen world.¹¹
 3. The difference is not the inherent righteousness of one group over the other, but the fact that "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."

III. Peace for all time: Psalm 46:8-12

- A. Verses 8 and 9 seem like a jarring contrast. How can the same God who brings peace bring such awful desolations upon his creation?
1. If you understand the depth and severity of sin, as well as the corruption of the Fall infecting all aspects of life in this world, then you will understand why destruction is necessary to rebuild. God is not going to prop up and tweak the fallen world here and there. He will tear down the whole warped building to its foundations and start fresh. Only then will there be peace.
 2. Verse 9 describes God making war on the war-makers, and utterly removing their capability to wage their destruction on his world. It is not enough to make a negotiated settlement, which may be the best we can hope for from human governments in many cases. God will actually remove the possibility of war itself in his judgment.
 3. The word in verse 9 for making wars to "cease" is the word for the sabbath, so you could translate it more literally as "He makes wars rest." This is one of many passages in Scripture, such as Hebrews 4, that connect the Sabbath as a day of rest with our ultimate rest. Part of that ultimate rest will be a permanent sabbatical for war.¹²

⁹ For example, when Gentiles in the city of Antioch believe and perform miracles by the Spirit, the Jerusalem church admits that they must recognize gentiles as having the Spirit in their midst as well. Peter argues this in Acts 15:8-9.

¹⁰ This is very similar to the contrast between the elect in Jude 21 and the reprobate in Jude 15. The same day of Jesus's appearing will bring mercy for his beloved and judgment for his enemies.

¹¹ There may well be an implied allusion to the Resurrection specifically, here. Scripture often speaks of the Resurrection as God's people awaking, as if from sleep on a new day. That of course fits very well with the end-times themes of this psalm.

¹² I borrowed this phrase, "a permanent sabbatical," from James M. Hamilton, Jr., in his commentary on this verse. See volume 1, page 477, of his commentary on the psalms.

- B. Verse 10 reminds us that this is ultimately God’s work and not ours.¹³ If we tried to wage this world-ending crusade on all evil, we would quickly become supervillains and not heroes because it is not our place to accomplish this. We do not have the power, the wisdom, or the perfect righteousness to execute this judgment, and so we must leave it in God’s hands alone.
1. There is a wonderful echo here of Moses’s words to Israel at the Red Sea in Exodus 14:13-14. “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.” This silence at God’s total destruction of their chief enemy is followed by overflowing praise in Exodus 15 with the Song of Moses and the Song of Miriam.
 2. The reference to the nations exalting the LORD in verse 10 is foreshadowing that some from every nation, even these same ones who rage against God, will join his chosen people.
 3. Therefore the application of this psalm is to wait patiently, watching for God’s ultimate deliverance. When we see claims that the end of history has already arrived and there will be no more wars, we should be skeptical. It is of course good to be peacemakers, but it is not within human power to put an end to the effects of the Fall. As long as there are sinners holding the reins of power in the nations of the world, envy and pride will lead to strife and the loss of much life.
 4. Similarly, the spiritual war we are all a part of is not ultimately ours to win. We must strive against the influences of the world, the flesh, and the devil all the days of our lives, but when we make progress it is only because we have been given the armor of God with his Spirit dwelling in our midst and giving us new life. That warfare, too, will not disappear from this earth until Christ returns.¹⁴
- C. The psalm concludes in the last verse with a restatement of its main theme: “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.
1. Whether we are faced with physical or spiritual warfare, our hope is the same. Martin Luther’s famous hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, gives powerful voice to both of these ongoing battles. Verse 3 speaks to spiritual warfare against the devil, and verse 4 is about the violence of “earthly powers” that rage against the Word of God.
 2. The Church today has even less reason to fear than Old Testament Israel did, because our temple cannot be taken away from us through exile. Our brothers and sisters are spread throughout all the nations that mock and attack our faith, and even as they are martyred God wins countless little victories through their witness, all leading up to his greatest victory when Christ returns.¹⁵

¹³ James L. Kugel notes in *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, page 9, that the word for “know” in this verse was commonly used in ancient Middle-eastern treaties to refer to acknowledging a foreign sovereign. This means God is likely implying the connotation, “Be still and acknowledge my rule.”

¹⁴ This is why Paul says in Philippians 1:21-24 that he is hard pressed between resting from his labors with Christ and continuing to serve the church in her neverending struggles

¹⁵ Consider how Romans 8:38-39 would hit differently with you if you were living under very direct threats of violence and martyrdom for your faith.