

## GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH

### Psalm 46

Growing up in a solid Christian home and church, even as a very young boy, like some of you (no doubt) I was **encouraged to memorize Bible verses**. Be it at church, or at Good News Club, prizes were often given to those who memorized various Bible verses.

As an adult I have continued to memorize Bible verses, though now there are **no prizes** being offered. Although I was never involved with Navigators: a Christian ministry that works with college students and emphasizes the memorization of scripture, I would later learn from them the hand diagram: **hear, read, study, memorize and meditate**. (Though it always seemed to me like there should be a sixth finger: apply!) So, anyway, I have continued to memorize Bible passages.

Well, about 20 or so years ago I attended a funeral for a man. Following the funeral was the burial in a cemetery right next to the church building. The burial was handled by a much older man than the one who pastored the church and who had conducted the funeral. At the burial this old man – and I mean VERY OLD – quoted by heart, Psalm 46. As he did, I was not only impressed with his memorization of the Psalm but with the way in which he recited it. And so that day I determined to also memorize Psalm 46 figuring that if this old man could memorize that Psalm then I certainly should be able to memorize it as well. And it is to that Psalm we now turn our attention...

I am going to quote it from the NIV, which is the version I memorized it in:  
Psalm 46

As you can see, or as you heard, Psalm 46 is divided into **3 sections**, each section being marked off with the word "Selah." There is no definitive agreement as to what Selah means, but in general, it is believed that it was a **musical term**, likely suggesting a **musical interlude**. Nearly all if not all of the Psalms were written as poems meant to be sung. For that reason many of the Psalm begin with some note of introduction such as "To the choirmaster," "For the director of music," or "A song." In the English Standard Version **Psalm 22** is headed with the words "To the choirmaster: according to The Doe of the Dawn." This would be like writing a poem that you intended to be sung and noting at the top, "Meant to be sung to the tune of 'Light My Fire' by the Doors"...or words to that effect.

Selah. As close a comparison I can make on the intention of that word is when in the song *Silver and Gold* by U2, Bono, near the end of the song, after basically preaching to the crowd about the evils of racial prejudice says and apartheid in South Africa (this was back in the 1980s), "Okay, Edge, play the blues" and with that Edge rips into a guitar solo that flies.

So a musical interlude following each of the 3 sections.  
Any "edgy" guitar players here ready to rip away?

### **Section 1: We can trust God.**

Recently I was in Phoenix, Arizona visiting my sister, our daughter (Esther), and spending a bit of time with a friend of mine named Bruce at the home of our former youth pastor from back when we were both in high school.

While Lancaster County has now entered the "green" zone, with most restrictions on meeting being lifted, Arizona seems to be moving in the exact opposite direction. So even if I am wearing a mask quite a bit while in Lancaster, it seemed like it was **even more so** back in Phoenix. Indeed, as Bruce and I visited with our now 79 year old former youth pastor, he went on and on and on about how, with the coronavirus, he had never seen or experienced anything like it in his whole life. He said, "to even imagine a time when the churches would be closed...who would have ever imagined it." And we both agreed.

Now I understand the issue of precaution. As one who has already had the coronavirus (in early March, and who after 100 days I still have not recovered my sense of taste and smell) I can speak to how I can see it could kill someone, particularly someone with pulmonary issues. In April I conducted my first funeral for a person whose death was marked off to being the result of the COVID-19 coronavirus. I have a friend – a good friend really – who weighs nearly 450 pounds. He would have trouble walking from here to where the cars are parked. If he gets the coronavirus, it could well mean the end of his life. The cough that I had alone could kill him. And there are some that have not yet returned to church and the truth is **THEY SHOULD NOT YET RETURN TO CHURCH.**

But there is a difference between caution (which is justifiable) and fear. And in these verses in Psalm 46 it is **FEAR** that we are told to let go of.

Ruth and I have a son, David, who is a Captain and a Ranger in the U.S. army. He is part of E.O.D. – Explosives Ordnance

Disposal. In short, he disarms bombs for a living. I have always thought their motto in EOD was and is great:

"Initial success...or total failure."

Meaning, we need to get it right the **FIRST TIME** or we won't live to give it another try.

But in each email we receive from David, he ends his email with the Bible reference "Matthew 10:28." Matthew 10:28 is where Jesus said to his disciples,

"And **do not fear** those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell."

Meaning there is a right or correct kind of fear (a fear of God) and an incorrect or misplaced kind of fear.

Back in Psalm 46 the focus of a potentially misplaced kind of fear is a fear of what nature may bring:

- the earth giving way
- the mountains falling into the heart of the sea
- the waters roaring and foaming
- the mountains quaking with surging of the sea

These are all what we would call "natural disasters."

My wife and I have a small 9-year-old Shiatsu and Yorkie mix dog, Rocky. Rocky is, by any accounting, a very cute dog. But when it begins to thunder outside that dog that is **SO GOOD** at barking to let us know when someone is at the door (indeed I have suggested he should have been named Doorbell)...when the storms come that dog becomes a total wreck, begin to physically shake and will look for someplace to hide.

In Psalm 46 we are reminded that even when natural disasters strike, God is our refuge and strength...**an ever-present help** in such a time of trouble...and that because of that not only **SHOULD** we not fear but as the Psalmist puts it **WE WILL NOT FEAR**.

In 2020 that means, "Even if the coronavirus strikes our family...or our church...or our body, **WE WILL NOT FEAR**."

Again, this is not to suggest that we should not take precautions. It would be pretty STUPID to build a house at the base of or on the rim of a semi-active volcano and then to expect nothing will ever go wrong. So too, we are to be careful.

I was at a pastor's prayer vigil (for racial justice and harmony following the death of George Floyd) a month or so back and at the end of it, one of the pastors, in closing, said, "Let's all come around now and grab the hand of the person next to you... Yes, we all know about the coronavirus but our God is greater than any virus...so let's grab hands and close in prayer."

Well, I did not grab the hand of the person next to me. I'm not afraid. Again, I've already HAD the virus...so I'm not afraid. But it still didn't seem like the best recommendation to me.

So caution, yes.  
But fear...no. No fear.

And if you know someone who truly SEEMS AFRAID of the coronavirus, you should tell them about Psalm 46, and encourage them to put their trust in God. For God is our refuge and strength and he is over it all.

Okay, Edge, play the blues...Selah.

## 2. **Our God is Stable.**

In verses 4-7 we are encouraged to see that this God in whom we put our trust is very secure. The imagery of his surroundings is peaceful: a river, streams running into that river, our God sitting on his throne seemingly "glad" or happy...indeed the entire city of God is described here as being "glad." This is the **exact opposite** from the nations of the earth that are in uproar. The ESV puts verse 6 as

"The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;  
He utters his voice, the earth melts."

Whenever I see or hear the words "the nations rage" I don't know about you but I think of Psalm 2. Do you know that Psalm?

Psalm 2

If there ever was a commentary on our age it is Psalm 2. Indeed this is the story of our age in America where there is a very real desire, on the part of more than a few, to **"throw off" the bonds of God and His ways**. We may not yet be feeling it, as a church, but if you hold to the truth of God's Word, you...we...are increasingly **drifting further and further apart** from the rest of the world as our Western world **moves away...even RUNS AWAY...from its Judeo-Christian roots**.

The end result of this throwing off of God and His ways is, as Psalm 46 suggests, "kingdoms tottering." And isn't that what we are seeing happen today? **The nations of the earth are in uproar...they are tottering...and many governments and governmental leaders risk being toppled.**

And what is God's attitude about it all? Psalm 2:4...**God laughs**. God laughs because he sees and knows where such nations are heading. Listen: Godlessness leads to lawlessness leads to anarchy leads to totalitarianism. Logic shows this and history proves it. Abandon God, and the results will be devastating.

I **love** verse 12 of that Psalm:

"Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you perish in the way,  
For his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in  
him."

Amen! That's why we are here today. We take Refuge in God and in God's Son. Amen? Amen.

Selah

### **3. Watch what God may do.**

Now verses 8 and 9 TOGETHER...in COMBINATION...are at the heart of a great tension that we have regarding what goes on in this world.

Let's read those two verses again...

verses 8 and 9

You see, so many who are fairly ignorant of the teaching of scripture, hear of some disaster, some calamity, some tragedy and they immediately think, "God had nothing to do with that!"

How well I remember a Sunday School teacher and a class that he was teaching some years ago. My wife was attending the class and in the class he said something to the effect that when we hear of some calamity or disaster we should be quick to remind ourselves that **God had nothing to do with it**. My wife, as I came to hear from her, challenged the teacher about this in class and...well...as I also heard...it didn't go well.

So, having heard about it, but not having been in the class, I invited the teacher (whom I knew quite well, and liked very much)...**I invited him to lunch**. We'll call him Fred (not his real name). Over lunch I told Fred that I had heard from my wife about her disagreement with him in class. We discussed it a bit and then I said, "You know, Fred, you actually do agree with my wife." "How so?" he asked. "Well, Ruth believes that when these disasters take place that whether one views it as God **ORDAINS** it or **ALLOWS** it...either way...**God is over it** and God could have easily enough **stopped the disaster** from happening. And if that is the case that means that God is, as she was arguing, "over" or "sovereign over" these disasters.

Fred then said, "The disasters that God brings only come as a result of sin." "Really?" I said. "What about hail storms, or floods where animals or small "innocent" children die. Isn't God over those as well." "No," he said. "Oh, you say no but you really actually **DO** believe he is over these." "No I don't," he said.

"Yes, you do," I said.

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do and I will prove it to you."

I then said, "In the days of Noah, when untold numbers of innocent animals and children died, who sent the rain?"

Fred didn't answer.

"Come on Fred," I said, "Who sent the rain? Who sent the rain that killed all those children and animals? Who sent the rain."

"You know," he said.

"Yes, I know...but I want you to say it...Who sent the rain?"

After pressing him hard, he finally said, "God."

And with that I said, "I rest my case."

In verse 8 we are told that God brings desolations...disasters...calamities on the earth. Then in verse 9 we are told that God makes wars cease and brings peace. So God brings the upheavals and God brings the peace.

**Both of these are the teaching of scripture.** Is there a TENSION between these two? You bet there is! But that is a tension that is found throughout the Bible.

And so, for example, consider how Jesus comes along and opens the eyes of the blind. He does that and we say, "Isn't God good?" But back in Exodus 4:11 God himself said to Moses, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf or seeing, **or blind**? Is it not I, the LORD?"

Should any of you question this and be taking notes, other passages you might look at are Deuteronomy 32:39, Job 5:18, Isaiah 45:7, Jeremiah 18:5-11, Lamentations 3:38 and Amos 3:6.

In response to all of this, the Psalmist tells us, in verse 10 to simply,  
"Be still and know that I am God."

That is, stop fearing, stop fretting, **stop worrying about it all** and just be still.

Can you do that?

For many people – Christian or not – that is a great challenge: to simply be still. To be quiet.

For 35 years I have been doing premarital, marital and post-marital counseling. I have counseled with literally many, many hundreds of couples through the years.

The old line is "It takes two to **tango**"

We counselors use the line, "And it takes two to **tangle**."

For couples who are having troubles getting along they need to be reminded that **it takes TWO to have a fight**. And one of the

the best things a person can do if one is being pulled into a verbal fight, is to simply be quiet. Getting up and walking out of a room may infuriate the other but at least it won't come to blows (physical or verbal).

I witnessed this very thing while in Arizona: a growing conflict between a girl and her father. The girl wisely, at a certain point simply got up and walked out of the room. It didn't settle the point of conflict, but that walking out allowed it to be diffused.

Be still...be quiet...and know or be reminded that God is God. He is over it all and whether the situation results in desolation or peace, he is over it.

It is interesting that among Christians, verse 10 is the verse that is best known. Maybe that is because so many of us have had those times in our life when we knew the best thing we could do at a particular moment was just be quiet...just be still...and let God sort out the problem. Let God sort it all out and in doing so allow him to be exalted among the nations and in the earth.

I was talking to a fellow this past week about the chaos that is going on in the world. When I heard that a statue of Francis Scott Key (a strong Christian man and the composer of our national anthem) was toppled I was truly sick in my heart. Where IS our nation heading? But then I am reminded God is going to be exalted, one way or another, he is going to win. We may not see that victory in our lifetime. The U.S. as we know it may come to nothing. Who knows? But God will be exalted among the nations and in the earth.

Verse 11 is, as you can see, the same as verse 7. So two out of these three sections close out (before their musical interlude) with the words,

"The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."

Some years ago I was mentioning Psalm 46 to a man and he said, "Doesn't that get you? The God of **Jacob**? Why the God of **Jacob**? Jacob", he said, "was nothing but a conniving, crooked, sneak and a cheat. Why Jacob?"

That was probably 20 years ago or more when that fellow said that...so I have had a **long time to ponder his question.**

It seems to me that what this fellow said about Jacob was correct. Jacob was a conniving, crooked, sneak and a cheat. We know that most principally because of his interaction with Esau his brother. Jacob deceived his father, and in the language of the Bible "stole" his brother's birthright. Even his interaction with Laban (himself a cheat) was characterized by being a bit less than above board.

So why Jacob?

Maybe it is as simple as this: it is because most of us are ourselves a bit like Jacob. And if God could save, use and bless a man like Jacob – the one whom after the entire nation of Israel came to be named – then maybe God can **save, use and bless** the rest of us as well.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ, put your trust in God. For He is our refuge and strength, even in this most strange of all years.

Selah. Okay, Edge, play the blues...