

Psalm 46

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[0 : 0 0] How do you approach 2013? Do you embrace the new year with excitement and expectation? Well, if you do, good for you. Or perhaps, more likely, I would imagine for many of us, I wonder if the coming year is approached with some trepidation. What will the year hold? What surprises, perhaps some unpleasant surprises, are around the corner? Are you fearful? Are you nervous? Maybe just a little stressed out as you wonder what 2013 holds. Perhaps you don't have the time or the inclination to be speculating about the future. In the words of the gospel, sufficient unto the days is the evil thereof, is maybe your philosophy. Why worry about tomorrow when there's nothing we can do about it anyway? Well, wherever you stand as we approach the new year, there are words of God that you would do well to listen to as we close one year and begin another. They're the words that we've already highlighted as we were about to read the psalm that we're going to be considering, Psalm 46, and very especially words that we find there at the beginning of verse 10, be still and know that I am God. Before we think about these words and particularly think about why it is possible for us to be still and know that God is God. We need to spend just a little time considering what is actually being said. What is meant by these words, be still and know that I am God?

Is it that we are to be still in order that we might focus our attention on who God is and what He is like? You know how it is. We are so busy rushing from here to there and doing stuff that we seldom stop and in a moment of stillness focus on God and who He is. Is this what is meant by these words, be still in order that you might have the time and the space to fix your eyes and consider who God is?

Or is it rather a call to be still or tranquil or calm in the light of who God is? Is that the idea?

Be still, be calm, given who God is. Is that what is being suggested by this exhortation? If it is, I'm sure there's a t-shirt there. Keep calm, know God are words to that effect. Now, just to complicate matters as we consider these words and the meaning of them, we do have to recognize that in their original context, in the psalm that we have read and have begun to sing and are considering, these words most probably, we can't state this with complete security, but most probably, these words were delivered in the first instance to the enemies of God. When we read them in their context, it becomes clear that that is the most likely way of understanding them. They're words that maybe are familiar to us and generally we think of them completely outwith the context of the psalm. Be still and know that I am God. They just sound nice, don't they? Such a nice word of encouragement. But when we read them in the context of the psalm, and when we read them in the context of God's enemies opposing God's people and seeking to destroy God's city, and how God stands in protection against the enemies, and we read of the desolations that He has brought on the earth and how He makes wars to cease, and then we read,

Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. It is reasonable to conclude that their primary application, the primary direction in which these words were originally delivered, were to the enemies of God, those who huff and puff and seeking to oppose God, and God comes and says, Be still, be quiet, for I am God. But though I think it is reasonable to recognize or to conclude that in their original context they were primarily directed to the enemies of God, it is also true that they are words that we as God's people can also listen to and take profit from. And this evening that will be our primary concern, to see what they have to say to us as believers, as God's people.

[5 : 26] And so, Christian friend, this evening, these are the words we want to think about and consider, be still and know that I am God. Now, that is easier said than done. But this psalm, as we will see in a moment, provides us with some very good reasons to be still, to be calm in the midst of so much upheaval and difficulty and opposition. We have good reason to be still, to be calm. And, of course, that reveals, in the light of what I said a few moments ago, that this is how I think we are to understand these words.

Not, be still in the sense of take a moment of quietness to think about God, but be calm, be still, because of who God is. And, as we will see, the psalm gives us very solid and grounded reasons why we can be still, be calm, as we consider who God is, and particularly as we recognize His sovereign authority across a number of spheres.

Because this is what the psalm does for us. It recognizes how God is sovereign, how God is in control, over a number of spheres. We'll notice what they are, and then we'll think of them each in turn.

First of all, we'll notice that the psalm begins by recognizing that God is sovereign over nature, over the created order, particularly verses 2 and 3 make that very clear. But then, as we continue, we'll notice that God is sovereign over Jerusalem. And we'll recognize there that His sovereign authority over Jerusalem, as we would apply it to ourselves in our own day, speaks of His sovereign authority and government over His church. God rules in and over His church, sovereign over nature, sovereign over Jerusalem, but also sovereign over the nations. We'll notice that as the psalm develops.

And then finally, we'll notice that He is sovereign over the future. And so, for all of these reasons, as we consider them and as we process what is being said by the psalm, at the end we will be able, I think, to listen to these words, be still and know that I am God, and be able to say, yes, amen. That is something I can do. As I look into a new year with all the uncertainty that it holds, I can rest secure in my knowledge of who God is, the one who reigns supreme over all.

[8 : 21] But before we do consider each of these spheres over which God exercises authority as they are laid out for us in the psalm, let's just notice that the psalm begins with an all-inclusive expression of hope and confidence in the Lord. Before moving into these different spheres where God reigns, there is this opening affirmation, this opening testimony to God's help for His people. God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. It's possible that in the use of these two words, refuge and strength, the psalmist is recognizing God as the one who provides protection from external attack of any kind, and as the one who grants us the inward strength to confront all manner of trials and tribulations. He's our refuge when others would attack us, but He is our strength. He is the one who grants to us the strength to confront all manner of troubles that life brings to us.

But the psalmist then goes on to stress the quality of the help provided by God. You see there, as the verse continues, God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

The Hebrew word that is translated ever-present is an interesting word. It is a word that has as its intention to emphasize what is being said. So here, what is being said is that God is our help in trouble. And the word that the psalmist uses, the Hebrew word that he uses there to accompany the word help, has this idea of emphasizing, of stressing the quality of the help that God provides. Now, the manner in which the translators have opted to bring this out is by speaking of God's help as an ever-present help. And of course, that is true. But we could understand the word to simply be a way of magnifying the quality of God's help in different ways. We could speak of God's help as being a huge help, of Him being exceedingly helpful to His people. Whatever the trouble is, however great the trouble, God's help will be sufficient. It will be ever-present. It will be of a scale that is adequate for our needs. His help, the psalmist is seeking to do, is to magnify the quality and the nature of God's help. God is our refuge and strength, an exceeding help, a huge help, an ever-present help in trouble. This is the help that God provides His people. It's the help that He provided the psalmist and the people of God when He wrote this psalm, but it is the help that He continues to provide

His people today, for God is the same, and His ability and willingness to help has not changed. Indeed, here alone, without even going on to consider how God is sovereign over these different spheres of human activity and indeed of the world, even before we consider that, here in these opening words, we have good reason to be still in the face of all manner of trouble, actual or imagined.

But moving on to the spheres over which the Lord exercises His sovereign authority that grant us reason to be still, to be calm as we live our lives and as we look into the future. First of all, then we notice that God is sovereign over nature, sovereign over the created order. This ought not to surprise us. He is, after all, the Creator of all that there is. It ought not to be surprising to us that He is also the one who controls that which He has created. But the psalmist makes it explicit in the language he uses. In verse 2, therefore, we will not fear. As God's people, 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. The picture painted is of natural disasters of one kind or another, earthquakes and tsunamis and storms. And such disasters are frightening, even today, with all the understanding that we have as to why these things happen, all our ability in some measure to predict some of these disasters. Yet even today, the most powerful nations on earth are largely impotent in the face of such phenomena. We think of some of the most powerful and wealthiest nations on earth. We think of the great earthquake that struck Japan in 2011, and how despite all its wealth and technology, here was a nation impotent in the face of nature's fury. Indeed, just a few months ago, the great storm that hit the northeast of the United States, the most powerful nation on earth, and they could almost simply wait to see what would happen. Some measures could be taken to mitigate the effects of the storm, but in great measure, impotent in the face of nature's power.

[13 : 54] But the psalmist, here as he pens this psalm, the psalmist can declare that the believer need not fear in the face of nature's fury. Why? Because our God controls the elements. Our God reigns supreme over nature.

We are thinking of God's words, be still and know that I am God. And as we think of God's power over nature, does that not remind you of the words that were once directed to the wind and the waves by a certain citizen of Nazareth? Be still, and they were still. As we think of God's protection and God's authority over nature, I'm reminded of an evening service in Moyabamba in Peru back in 1991.

I had arrived there in 1990 as a result of an earthquake and was involved in relief efforts following that earthquake in 1990. But then in the following year, surprisingly, there was another major earthquake. And I do well remember on the Sunday evening following the earthquake, when many of those who were present were returning to homes, to houses that had been damaged by the earthquake, there were the after tremors and all the fears that that produced, and the very real possibility that in some cases they were returning to homes that might be subject to collapse at any moment.

And I remember the service ended by singing these verses of Psalm 46. 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.

And I remember the one who was leading the singing of the praise, no doubt he had it in mind to sing these verses perhaps once or twice. But in the light of the manner in which the congregation were singing these words, expressing their confidence in God in these circumstances, we sang again and again and again.

[16 : 06] And folks returned to their homes, no doubt, yes, as human beings, still somewhat fearful for what the night would bring, but with their confidence placed very firmly and squarely in the God who is sovereign over in nature. Our Lord reigns over nature. And so I say to you, people of God, be still and know that I am God. Before we move on, it is worth noting that the language of the psalmist here in verses 2 and 3 possibly points to something more than the known natural disasters that blight our planet.

A year doesn't go by without there being many earthquakes and many storms and hurricanes and you know all the different natural disasters that there are. It's almost an ordinary and an expected thing. But it would seem that the language of the psalmist is going beyond that. The language has a cataclysmic flavor, contemplating the end of the whole created order. Listen to the language. It seems to be pointing to something more than just a great earthquake or a great tsunami. We will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. The picture would seem to be of something greater, something, as I say, cataclysmic. Well, if that is the case, then we can say that the psalmist, as he envisages such a scene, is able to declare, even in such a scenario, even if we were to be subjected to something beyond what we have ever experienced, yet we will remain confident in our God. We will not fear, for our Lord reigns sovereign over nature. But as the psalm continues, we discover that the psalmist also paints for us and highlights for us that our God is sovereign over Jerusalem. In verse 4, 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 fail. She will not fall. God will help her at break of day. The psalmist speaks of the city of God of Jerusalem. Now, it's likely that the psalm was written in a particular historical context of external threat to the city. It's impossible for us to know for sure the historic occasion on which the psalm was written, but some would propose that a likely candidate for the psalm was written was the failed attack by the Assyrians under Sennacherib on Jerusalem in 701 BC.

We won't go into the reasons why some consider that a likely context for the writing of this psalm. But as you can imagine, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, as they're surrounded by a powerful enemy, by the great world power of that time, you can imagine their fear and their concern, and perhaps God's people begin to doubt. And they perhaps begin to ask themselves the question, is the Lord sovereign over Jerusalem? He who has always reigned supreme in this city, His city, but we're surrounded, we're weak, we're about to fall. Does He really reign? Can He deliver us?

And the psalmist, as he pens these words, be it during or perhaps after the event, is able to declare without any doubt, as he contemplates God's authority and provision for His city, a provision and a care for a city that is threefold. Notice the language that is used to speak of God's care for and authority over His city. God is the city's source of joy. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. God is the city's honored inhabitant, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her. She will not fall. This seems to be the psalmist's great confidence. We can't fall, for God is within us. Yes, the nations surround us. Yes, they huff and they puff and they have all their weapons of mass destruction. But God is within us. God is within us. God inhabits Jerusalem, and so Jerusalem will not fall. The city's honored inhabitant, the city's protector, God will help her at break of day. But as we consider God's reign over and rule over and care for Jerusalem, the question does rather emerge of what help is that to us today. We don't live in Jerusalem, but we are the spiritual Jerusalem. The church of Jesus Christ is the spiritual Jerusalem, and the Lord is sovereign over His church. And we forget this truth at our peril. We think of the church in Scotland, and we know that we are not short of challenges and problems and crises of one kind or another, problems of our own making and the hostility of those who would oppose us. And it would be easy to lose heart, to be disheartened, to look to the year that comes with trepidation as we think of the church that we form part of. It would be easy for us to huff and puff to keep the house up, as others would endeavor to blow it down. But we must ever remember that the Lord is sovereign over Jerusalem. He is sovereign over His church. He will, at the break of day, deliver us. In His good time and in His appointed way, He will deliver His people. The language that we read there of the city not falling is language that is used very deliberately by the psalmist to paint a telling contrast. You see, in verse 2, He has spoken of the mountains falling into the heart of the sea.

[22 : 25] In verse 6, He goes on to say that the kingdoms will fall, but in stark contrast, in dramatic contrast, in glorious contrast, He is able to say, God is within her. She will not fall.

The mountains may fall. The kingdoms will fall, but the city of God will not fall. Our Lord reigns over Jerusalem. And so, people of God, we are able to hear and recognize the validity of God's words. Be still and know that I am God. But sovereign also over the nations.

Notice what the psalmist goes on to say in verse 6, Nations are in uproar. Kingdoms fall. He lifts His voice. The earth melts. Does God's authority extend beyond Jerusalem? He's the boss at home. But what about away fixtures?

What about the nations that strut and rage? What about the nations like our own that have grown out of God and take great pride in extirpating God's Word and law from the statute book and from the public square? Where does God stand in relation to the nations of the world today, including our own? Is God impotent as Holyrood and Westminster trample underfoot His Word? Does God look on in frustrated disappointment?

And we can respond that by no means our Lord reigns over the nations, including our own. He will not be mocked, and the ultimate demise of any and every nation that stands in opposition to the Almighty is assured.

[24 : 17] Nations may fall by their own folly. That would seem to be the implication of the first statement in verse 6. Nations are in uproar. Kingdoms fall. Without any help from God, they fall by their own folly, eventually.

Well, they may fall in that way, or they may fall by the express command and word of God. He lifts His voice. The earth melts. But however they fall, if they would oppose the Almighty, they must fall.

Just one word, that's all that it takes. Martin Luther wrote his famous hymn, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, inspired by this Psalm 46. And we see in that hymn many of the themes that we find in the Psalm. And listen to how Luther expresses the power of just one word from the mouth of God.

The Prince of darkness grim. We tremble not for him. His rage we can endure. For lo, his doom is sure. One little word shall fell him. One little word shall fell him. Our Lord reigns over the nations.

So, be still and know that I am God. But finally, the psalmist also recognizes that God is sovereign over the future. And I'm thinking of verses 8 to 10. 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. Now, it's possible that verse 8, this invitation to come and see the works of the Lord is an invitation to consider what God had done at a given point in history in delivering His people. And it is, of course, true that even today, we can still see how God has delivered His people and brought down kingdoms in the course of history.

[26 : 35] But while it may be that that invitation did refer to a particular historic deliverance by God of His people, I think we do conclude that the language used by the psalmist in these verses suggests that the seeing that he is talking about is the seeing of the seer or the prophet. The psalmist is given an insight into the ultimate and final victory of the Almighty, when all wars will cease and every bow and spear will be shattered, every trident missile and drone destroyed, all chemical weapons rendered harmless, and we could go on.

See, the language speaks of the whole earth and the ending of conflict in the whole earth. And as we look around us, we'd have to say, well, that is not a current or present reality. Yes, we're conscious of God as He chooses intervening to bring wars to an end, even today, and He has the power to do so. But that final vision or that final scenario is a future one that the psalmist would seem to be speaking of here in these verses. But of course, also, we can recognize in these verses a future vision and prospect in what he goes on to say, or as he would present to us the very words of God, I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth. The psalmist is granted a vision of a day when the Lord will no longer stand in opposition to the nations, but will be exalted among the nations. And this is a vision that will see its ultimate fulfillment when Jesus returns in glory and majesty and authority. And as we were remembering this morning, what is it that Jesus says to us as we contemplate the coming of that day? I am coming soon. You see, our Lord reigns over the future, over the distant future, over the future of the world in its totality, but of course,

He reigns also over your own individual and personal future. He reigns over the future of your family. He reigns over the future of our congregation and our denomination and His church in Scotland, in our land.

Our God reigns over the future. And so, we can listen to His words as He directs them to us. Be still and know that I am God. Do not fear what the future holds, for I am the one who reigns supreme over the future. Well, let's return to where we began.

How do you approach 2013? Are you fearful, a little nervous? Be still and know that I am God, the God who is sovereign over nature, the God who is sovereign over Jerusalem, over His church, the God who is sovereign over the nations, the God who is sovereign over the nations, the God who is sovereign over the nations, the God who is sovereign over the future? 2013, bring it on. Let us pray.

[29 : 47] All right. All right.

All righty.