

Psalm 46

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[0 : 00] I'd like us now for a few moments to turn to the first psalm that we sang, but in the version we have in the Old Testament, Psalm 46, and I'll read the first verse and the following verse. God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear. Therefore, we will not fear.

The book of Psalms is a body of colourful, poetic literature. And one of the metaphors that we find again and again in the Psalms is the metaphor of God being our refuge. It occurs as one of the dominant metaphors in the book of Psalms. And what the psalmist is saying here is that because God is our refuge, we will not fear. The gospel comes to us as an antidote for fear. Many people today live in fear of life itself. Many people are burdened by anxiety and by worry for a whole multitude of reasons. God comes to us in the midst of our anxiety, in the midst of our worry, and he tells us that he can be our refuge. He can be our strength. He can be an ever-present help and aid to us. And that we need not fear because he is with us. Now today, many people are afraid. Many people are afraid of what will happen to

Western society. We know that there is a great challenge of what has been described as a challenge of civilizations today. Between Western civilization on the one hand and Islamic civilization on the other.

Not only Islamic civilization but Hindu civilization, Buddhist culture. All these ancient religious civilizations are being renewed and are now resurgent in the world in which we live and are challenging the dominance of our Western way of life. Now our Western civilization is by no means perfect, but it has been informed to a considerable extent by the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We must be careful not to identify the West with the gospel, but nevertheless we do have to acknowledge that many of our values, our values of liberty, our values of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, come to a large extent from the Christian contribution to Western civilization. And yet today people are aware that the West is pining, that we have a problem.

The leader of the body called the British Muslim Parliament some years ago said, Western civilization is the sick man of the modern world. It is destined for oblivion and will eventually take its place in the same dustbin of history that has already swallowed up Marxism. Islam alone, he says, is the antidote to a morally bankrupt and sick world.

[4 : 08] Now not every Muslim would say that, but radical Muslims certainly would and do. And in fact many Christians acknowledge that Western civilization is sick and that in many ways it is morally bankrupt.

One of the challenges that we face today is the challenge of radical Islam. And we need to remember that many of the countries that we read about in the Middle East, countries of which we read in the Book of Acts, centuries ago, were Christian or Christian majority countries. And today the Christian majority has been replaced by a Muslim majority.

When in the 16th century, Western Europe was in danger of falling to Islam, Martin Luther found refuge in this Sam. The Turkish army was at the gates of Vienna.

That in a quite remarkable turn of fortune, the army was turned back. After besieging the city in vain, it turned back to the Balkans. And in 1529, Martin Luther wrote his famous hymn which is based upon this Sam.

A mighty fortress is a mighty fortress is our God. A mighty fortress is our God. A hymn that has been translated into well over 80 languages. And he wrote that hymn as an expression of thanksgiving for what God did to preserve a Christian Europe.

[5 : 57] Now the theme of this Sam is the divine protection of the people of God. And God has promised to protect his people, however the enemy may do, however strong it may be. God is

committed to protect his people.

He has committed himself to save us from persecution. He has committed himself to saving us from suffering. In the world, Jesus told us, we will have tribulation. But he is committed to the future of his church.

And there is no power in hell that can destroy the church of God. Churches may be closed. Christians may disappear virtually in one part of the world. But in others, they grow. The church of God goes on. Because God is our fortress. And the mighty fortress at that. But perhaps a greater threat to Western civilization is a more insidious one. The threat of the secularizing process that has become part and partial of our political, social development in the Western world.

The secularization theory assumes that ultimately all religions will disappear. That is the ultimate end of the theory of secularization.

[7 : 39] That religion is a means that we need when we grow up. But having grown, having matured, we will no longer have need of religion. There are many disciples of secularization in our society.

And that is one of the reasons why there is this bias, an increasing bias in our society, against religion of any type, of any kind. Religion must be marginalized. Religion must be diminished. It must be pushed into the corners in order that this secularization process might continue. In order that we might achieve this fruition of mature humanism.

We've seen this happening and we're seeing it happening today. One of today's historians is a man called Eric Hobsbawm, whom I'm sure some of you may have heard of and have read.

And in his history of the latter part, or the greater part of the 20th century, from 1914 to 1991, he divides that section of European history, or Western history, into three periods.

[8 : 59] The first from 1914 to 1945, the period of the two world wars, he calls the Great Catastrophe. Then from 1946, after the war, post-Second World War, to 1973, he says that was the golden age.

That was the age when the American dream, the Western dream, became a reality. But from 1973 he detects what he calls the landslide. That there is a landslide in Western values, which began then and continues today.

The history, he says, of the 20 years after 1973, is that of a world which lost its bearings and slid into instability and crisis.

He argues that when Marxism collapsed in the former Soviet Union in 1989, this exposed the crisis, a crisis that exists in the Western world, which, in contrast with Marxist socialism, is motivated by Western capitalism.

The point that Hobsbawm makes is that capitalism works, but it works only because the people making it work bring to it a sense of rights and duties, mutual obligations, family solidarity, sacrifice, hard work, thrift, conscience, and who bring virtue to it.

[10 : 34] And he argues that these values are so diluted today that the whole structure of Western society is in danger of collapsing and imploding. And he says that it may happen just as quickly as the Soviet system imploded in Eastern Europe and throughout the Soviet Empire.

And certainly one of those who suffered under Soviet communism, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, has expressed deep concern that Western society is concerned only with individual rights and the feel-good factor.

We become so individualistic. We become so concerned about what we want. We have been so concerned about feeling good that we don't care, or we're ceasing to care about others.

And we're losing the capacity to provide a glue which keeps society together. And so we are faced today with these two strong dynamics which are at work.

Islam is challenging the permissiveness and the licentiousness of the Western world. And there's much in the critique of Western society that we as Christians have to agree to.

[11 : 54] We're not Muslims, but we recognize that in some areas, Islam, we are co-belligerents with Islam. On the other hand, Islam is determined in its radical expression to be dominant and to eliminate any and all other religions and to exercise a theocracy, a dictatorial theocracy, here in the Western world and throughout the world.

On the other hand, we have this process of secularization which is seeking to undo religions, which is seeking to undermine not only Christianity, but all religions, and to encourage people to believe

that we can live without religion, that we don't need religion.

Now it's fascinating that in Eastern Europe, when communism collapsed, we discover that in fact, religion revived.

And although that revival is not as marked today as it was then, nevertheless it is still there. And the whole theory of secularization, to some extent, has been challenged by that. And many sociologists are questioning the theory or different theories of secularization, and some are rewriting them, and recognizing that the all-inclusive concepts of the theory of secularization may not be correct. But nevertheless, there is a determination in the part of the establishment in political circles, in cultural circles, in media circles in our country, that secularization is the way ahead.

[13 : 42] And that's the way we need to move. And this will inhibit the growth of the church, it will inhibit belief in the Christian gospel, and this is one of the forces that are set against the church today.

And so, people are asking themselves the question, will the church survive against these two powerful dynamics, secularization on the one hand, and radical Islam on the other?

Will the church survive? Now, the answer to that question, I believe, is found in this psalm. And just as Martin Luther found the answer in the crisis that faced Western civilization in his day, so I believe that we can find the answer in this psalm.

A psalm which is spoken not only to Martin Luther's generation, but to multiple generations. A psalm through which God commits himself to his people, and assures us that his cause will prevail. Now, this psalm is a very colorful psalm. It not only refers to God as a refuge, but it produces two vivid word pictures which demonstrate the opposition that the people of God were confronting when this psalm was written.

[15 : 04] In verses 1 to 3, the picture is that of an earthquake, of a giant tsunami, of flood and mountains falling into the sea. A gigantic earthquake.

It's difficult for us, living in the part of the world where earthquakes are relatively rare, to realize, to understand, and to appreciate the enormous fear that people who live in parts of the world, such as the Middle East, where earthquakes can take place.

The enormous fear that people have of earthquakes. For a number of years, I worked in Peru, and there, there's an enormous, deeply embedded folk fear of an earthquake.

And if one was preaching in church and there was an earth tremor, you could see in the faces of the congregation, panic. Is this going to be an earthquake? Is this going to be a great earthquake?

An enormous sense of fear. But the second picture that we have here is a picture of a city that is besieged in verses 4 to 6.

[16 : 11] A city which is surrounded by nations in uproar. A city which is under siege. A city which is under attack, not only for one enemy, any way but for many, because the reference here is to the nations.

Now, in the face of these vivid metaphors of opposition and indeed destruction, there is this strong note of confidence in this psalm, supreme confidence in God's protection through such crises.

Therefore, says the psalmist, we will not fear. Even though the earth be removed and the mountains be plunged into the sea and an earthquake, the most terrible earthquake, come, we will not fear.

Even though our city be besieged and surrounded by an international army, we will not fear.

There was this confidence in God's purpose. And that confidence is expressed again in a metaphor in verse 4. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.

[17 : 32] There is a river. Now, those of you who have been to Jerusalem will know that there is no river in Jerusalem as such. This may be a reference to the tunnel that Hezekiah built from Gion to the pool of Siloam.

Some of you may, in fact, have visited Israel and walked through that tunnel. He built that tunnel in order to provide a water supply for Jerusalem.

And again and again, Jerusalem survived siege after siege because of that tunnel. And what the psalm is saying, there is a river, there is a tunnel. There is this symbol of God's presence, this symbol of God working to protect His people.

And this psalm encourages us to have, to share this supreme confidence with reference to whatever antagonism, whatever adversaries we may have to face.

However much the church may be besieged, however far secularization may advance, however much Western culture may collapse, like mountains falling into the depths of the sea, we need not

fear.

[18 : 53] The people of God can have confidence even in an earthquake, even in when a city is under siege, in the midst of a terrible war.

Now how can we know this confidence tonight? We are not facing an earthquake, we are not facing a siege, but there are many earthquakes and there are many sieges that beset us all.

There are problems, there are animosities and we are afraid. Anxiety is one of the key features of the society in which we live. And God is encouraging us to discover this confidence in Him which will enable us to say with the psalmist, we will not fear.

Now the psalmist says that there are three things that we may do in order to discover this confidence. First he says is that we've got to come. He tells us what to do.

Come, he says, see the works of the Lord and the desolations that He has brought on the earth. Come. Now this is a strong word.

[20 : 06] It's almost like some teacher saying, pay attention. Come. Stop. See what the Lord has done.

Now the implication is that the people to whom the psalm is written, including ourselves, are living lives which are being lived at such a rate and with such a preoccupation of other things that we don't have time to stop.

We don't have time to see the stop sign. What the psalmist is doing, he's putting up a stop sign and he's saying, stop. You need to pause. You need to pause in the roller coaster of life, in the rat race which envelops all of us.

Stop. And see what the Lord is doing in the world today. We live in a society which is under increasing pressure.

Pressures of work, pressures of pleasure. They dominate our lives today. The speed of change is accelerating. And in this situation, God is telling us, stop.

[21 : 15] Pause. Think. He's telling us to take a Sabbath, if you like. One of the great tragedies of our society is that we've lost this concept of the Sabbath, this concept of stopping, this concept of resting, of pausing, of reflecting.

And that's the first thing we must do. We must put the brakes on. We must stop and pause and consider. Having stopped, he says, we should see in verse 10.

Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations and will be, I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.

To know in the sense of to see, to discover that he is God. In some translations, in fact, translate this, be still and see that I am God.

But the seeing here is the seeing of the inward eye. A discernment. Having that discernment that the leaders of Israel, the men of Issachar, rather, in the Old Testament had.

[22 : 37] When they were able to discern the times and to know what Israel should do. They were able to discern, not simply to read the newspaper, not simply to watch the news and television, but to discern what God is doing in and through contemporary history.

And so God is encouraging us to pray for the spirit of discernment. Paul prayed for the Ephesians that they would have the spirit of wisdom and of revelation and knowledge of Christ.

There's a very real sense in which we need a spirit of revelation to understand what is happening in the world in which we live today. God has promised to grant us his Holy Spirit.

He's given us his Holy Spirit to enable us to discern what is happening. But we won't discern unless we stop, unless we're still. We need to be still and to know that God is present with us.

be still here is literally the word of God. Verse 10 is in the inverted commas. God is here speaking.

[23 : 51] The psalmist is here quoting. God literally. Here we have the Epsism of Erba of God himself. Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations.

I will be exalted in the earth. And so we need to come, we need to stop, we need to be still.

We need to have the spirit of discernment which will enable us to see what God is doing in the world. We need to have that space to make that space. And God has given us in the Sabbath, he's given us that space.

So the whole principle of the Sabbath is a valid one. It's valid not only on one day in seven, it's a valid principle we need to rest, we need to pause, we need space in order to discern what God is doing, in order to be able to understand, comprehend what is happening around us.

And we need to be able to listen to what God is doing. I remember when we were in school, in primary school, in the village of Edmonton, the headmaster who was the father of the Reverend John McPherson who was known to some of you, asked us, he said, when can you hear the river? [25 : 15] Now, those of you who know the village of Edmonton know that there are two rivers, not very large rivers, but nevertheless rivers. And the school was very near one of them. And he said, when can you hear the river?

The answer he was looking for was on a Sunday. In these days, there was no very little traffic on the A9. There was no agricultural work being done on the farms.

The community was still. And on that day, you could hear the river. And what God is saying to us, there is a river in the city of God. But we need to listen.

We need to be quiet. We need to be still. We need to make the space to hear, to listen to what God is doing through his providence in the world in which we live.

And he says, be still and know that I am God. God is here saying that he can be known. God is transcendent. God is majestic. God is the creator of all things.

[26 : 20] God is a God whom we cannot contain. We cannot adequately define God. He is a transcendent God. And yet, he can be known.

This God who is the God of God and kings of kings can become our father through the Lord Jesus Christ. We can come into his presence and use the most intimate term, Abba, the equivalent of Daddy.

To speak to God as intimately as that, God can be known personally. And that's what this psalm is telling us, that this is what it means to have God as our refuge.

To be able to know God as our personal father. To know God as our personal savior. To know God as our friend. To know God as our God.

God can be known. This is the ultimate discovery in life.

[27 : 23] It's interesting when Jesus went up to the festival, probably the festival of Tabernacles, which is that visit which is recorded in the Gospel of John.

I think it's in chapter 7. Chapter 7 of the Gospel of John. He went there on the last day and he spoke there on the last day of the feast.

And on that last day of the feast there was, we are told by Jewish scholars, there was an expectation that the prophecy of Ezekiel that a river would burst forth out of the threshold of the temple would be fulfilled.

That was the expectation. And on that great, on that last day of the feast, that great day of the feast, the people, who led the worship then, were reminded that of the prophecy of Zechariah, that living water would flow out from Jerusalem.

They would read the passage from Ezekiel chapter 47 of the river flowing from a rock underneath the altar. And the custom was, we are told, that in each of the seven days of the feast, the people would go in procession from the temple down to the fountain which supplied the pool of Siloam, down to the beginning of Hezekiah's tunnel.

[28 : 54] And there a priest would fill a golden vase with the running water of the stream and carry that vase back to the temple through the water gate. And priests would process around the altar singing prayers from the end of Psalm 118.

And water would be poured out over the altar. And this would be done in each day of that week of the feast. But on the eighth day, the last day of the feast, it was different.

This was the day in which the people hoped the river would burst forth from the altar. The crowd gathered in the temple court. There was silence, the silence of anticipation.

Then they were led in prayer by one of the priests for the great day to come when the hope of Israel would be fulfilled. when the fountain of running water would burst open in the temple courts.

And it was on that day, in the midst of that silence, that John tells us that Jesus stood up and he said with a loud voice, let me read his words to you in John 7, verse 37.

[30 : 10] On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.

Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believe in him were later to receive. And so Jesus broke the silence.

Jesus said, he is the living water. He is the one who has come to be the security of his people. He is the one who will take away our fear.

He is the one who is our refuge and our strength. He offers to be our hope and our confidence.

And so this psalm in a very real sense, when it speaks of the river in the city of God, points forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit upon the church.

[31 : 12] That is the basis of our hope and confidence. Now, tonight, you can have that hope by the grace of God. You may live and be aware of the fact that you live in a world of anxiety, indeed, often a world of fear.

But God comes to us through Jesus Christ for me. He offers us this living water. He offers us this deep spiritual security that will enable us to say in the face of earthquake, in the face of military siege, we will not fear because God, because Jesus is our refuge.

A sure stronghold, said Martin Luther, our God is still. And so this is God's message to us through this psalm.

He comes to us. He offers us hope. We live in a world in which many people are beginning to wonder what hope there is.

Many people are grouped by anxiety and by fear. Many people wonder what life is all about. Jesus comes to us and he says, he is our refuge.

[32 : 26] He can become our refuge and our strength. But, as the psalmist tells us, we need to come. we need to see, we need to be still in order that we might know God, that we might come and enter into this personal, intimate relationship with him through the gospel, by the Holy Spirit.

Now that is the offer of the gospel and that offer is being made to you tonight. It will be made to all of us. You have been invited to come into this new relationship with Jesus Christ and discover that he is your refuge.

Discover that he is the one who can deliver you from fear. And my prayer tonight is that you may so come, that you may trust the Lord Jesus Christ as your refuge and discover God to be your heavenly father and enter into a new relationship with him, having been justified by faith, having been put right with God, having been brought into a new relationship with him through the gospel.

That is an offer tonight. But, as the psalm tells us, we have a responsibility. We need to respond. We need to come. We need to be still.

We need to know. May God grant that we may come, that we may see, that we may be still, and that we may come to know God tonight as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and as our Father who is in heaven.

[33 : 58] Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ. We bless and we praise you for him. We thank you that he is the one who has come to a world that is thirsty for hope, a world that is thirsty for security, a world that is thirsty for confidence.

We thank you that if we come to him, we can drink and find the living water, that running water that flows from him. Help us, O Lord, our God tonight to trust in him.

We pray that you will enable all of us not to hesitate any longer, not to fight against the Holy Spirit, but to come to the Lord Jesus, to trust in him and simply to commit our lives to him, give ourselves to him and ask him to become our refuge.

And grant, O God, that we may therefore be enabled to say, because he is our refuge, we will not fear. We ask this in his name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[35 : 18] Amen. We ask this in aba or... Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.