

Psalms 46

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[0 : 0 0] Well, today is Reformation Sunday, and it seems fitting to spend some time considering this psalm that we've just sung, Psalm 46, the psalm that provided the inspiration for Luther's most famous hymn, A Mighty Fortress.

But before we turn to the psalm, I thought it might be helpful to just briefly comment on the place of the psalms in Luther's theology and ministry, just in a very fleeting way.

We tend to identify Luther very particularly with Paul's letters, maybe particularly his letter to the Romans or his letter to the Galatians, the cornerstone of his theology expressed in Romans 1 and verse 16, the just shall live by faith.

What maybe isn't so often recognized is the influence of the book of Psalms in Luther's thinking and ministry. As professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg, he began expounding the book of Psalms in August 1513.

So, that's some four years before the events that we are remembering today or over these days. And in 1517, he published his first book, and that was an exposition of seven penitential psalms.

[1 : 3 4] The study of the psalms infused Luther with a vision of God so great and glorious that once converted, he was fortified to stand unwavering against all opposition in defense of the gospel of grace that he had discovered in the pages of Scripture and that he had experienced in his own soul.

One historian who writes about these things suggests, and it's his perspective, that while the book of Romans would principally formulate Luther's doctrine, it was the Psalms that emboldened him to proclaim the gospel to the world.

And he puts it rather pithily in these words, Romans gave Luther his theology, but it was the Psalms that gave him his thunder.

With respect particularly and specifically to Psalm 46, we need to turn to trials that Luther was experiencing in 1527, some ten years after the events that we are remembering today.

In that year, the crisis was not only one that Luther was facing, the Black Plague was sweeping across Germany and many parts of Europe. Luther's own son almost died, and Luther himself was close to breaking point under the mounting pressure that he was under on many fronts.

[3 : 0 3] And it was the midst of this crisis that Luther turned to the promises of Psalm 46. And as he took them to himself, he was inspired and moved to compose the hymn that we've made mention of already, A Mighty Fortress.

Now Luther had taught from the book of Psalms, he translated the Psalms into German. It was at this point of crisis in his life that he found himself living the Psalms as never before.

And it's said that many times during this dark and challenging period in his life, he would turn to his friend and fellow reformer, Philip Melancthon, and say, come Philip, let us sing the 46th Psalm together.

Well, let's turn this evening to this Psalm, Psalm 46, and spend a little time giving thought to the content of it.

Who is the God of whom the Psalmist speaks and to whom the Psalmist renders his praise? It's significant that the Psalm is divided by and culminates with a declaration of praise that describes the God of the Psalmist.

[4 : 19] We find this twice repeated declaration in verse 7 and in verse 11, the Lord Almighty, the Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.

The language of course from which the hymn gains its name. The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.

And I think in these two lines, we have in synthesis a stirring description of our God of power and of grace. The Lord Almighty or the Lord of hosts.

This is a name or description of God that emphasizes His unrivaled power. All the heavenly hosts ready to do His bidding.

Our God is a God of might, a God of sovereign and unrivaled power. And yet immediately the Psalmist goes on to acknowledge that this God is the God of Jacob.

[5 : 21] The God of Jacob is our fortress. Now I don't know what thought you've ever given to this name that is given to God that He takes to Himself the God of God of God.

In some ways it's difficult to imagine a name for God that more strikingly points to His grace, His gracious condescension in identifying Himself with the most unappealing of characters.

Jacob was not a nice man. He was in many ways an unsavory character. I suppose none of us are without faults. But we know the story of Jacob.

I won't go over it now. And yet God identifies Himself with Jacob. He is willing to be known as, to be identified as, and indeed to delight in being known as the God of Jacob.

And that is a reality that brings hope to all of us, whoever we are, however unsavory we might be, however far short we fall. Our God is the God who declares Himself and reveals Himself to be the God of Jacob, a gracious God who comes down to our level and embraces us and identifies with us and even takes our name into His name into His name, the God of Jacob.

[6 : 51] Feel free to put your name there, the God of whatever your name happens to be. Power and grace in beautiful harmony.

That's, of course, what we see in the person of Jesus. The most eloquent expression and revelation of God that we have in the person of His own Son.

Power and grace joined in beautiful harmony. Well, what does the Psalm tell us about our God of power and grace?

Well, the Psalm describes God as a God who is sovereign in a number of realms or spheres. We can maybe just identify them as we look through, scan through the Psalm, and then just briefly spend a little time on each of them.

He's the God who is sovereign over nature. Then in verses 2 and 3, we have a very vivid description of this reality. Sovereign over nature, but sovereign also over Jerusalem, over the city of God.

[7 : 55] Sovereign over the nations. There in verse 6, we have this described for us. But then sovereign also over history and over the future, not only the past and the present, but also sovereign over the future.

Before we think of each of these realities, we can maybe just notice that the Psalm begins with an all-inclusive expression of hope and confidence in the Lord.

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. So, 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 also the one who grants us the inward strength to confront all manner of trials and tribulations.

And then the Psalmist goes on to stress the quality of this help provided by God. The word translated there, our ever-present help in trouble, is, we are assured, a word that has the effect of intensifying what is being said.

In the case of the Lord's help, it is an ever-present help, a huge help, a help that exceeds all expectations. That is the help that God provides for His people.

[9 : 25] God is our refuge and our strength. But having noticed how the Psalm begins, let's move on to these spheres or realms over which our God exercises His sovereign authority.

We said, first of all, that the Psalm identifies our God as a sovereign over nature, over the created order. Verses 2 and 3, 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.

The picture painted, I think, is one we can identify with. We can almost picture it in our mind's eye. A picture painted of natural disasters of one kind or another, earthquakes and tsunamis and storms and hurricanes.

And such disasters are terrifying. Even today, the most powerful nations on earth are largely impotent in the face of such phenomena.

Just very recently, we have seen the hurricanes that have wrought destruction, not only across the Caribbean, but into Florida and Houston and in other parts of the United States.

[10 : 39] A nation of great wealth and power and yet so vulnerable to the power of nature. But the Psalmist can declare that the believer need not fear in the face of nature's fury.

And why is this so? Because our God is the God who controls the element. And as we read what is said here of God in these two verses, does this truth concerning God not remind you of the one we meet in the Gospels?

Does it not remind you of Jesus, the one who in the face of the raging storm was able to declare, be there, quiet, be still.

And what happened? Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. Our Lord reigns over nature. It's maybe worth noting before we move on to the second realm that the Psalmist identifies as being under the sovereign rule of our God.

It's maybe worth noting that the language that the Psalmist uses here in the first couple of verses possibly paints or points rather to something more than the known natural disasters that blight our planet.

[11 : 55] The language does have a cataclysmic flavor, possibly contemplating the end of the whole created orders as we know it. But even in such a scenario, if indeed that is what is being suggested, the Psalmist is confident that the believer need not fear because our Lord reigns.

Sovereign over nature. But also sovereign over Jerusalem. Let's read verses 4 and 5 as we make our way through the Psalm. 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. And leaving the reading there. Sovereign over Jerusalem. The Psalmist there speaks of the city of God, of Jerusalem.

It's possible that the Psalm was written in a particular historic context of external threat to the city. It's, I think, impossible to know for sure, but some have suggested that one possibility is that the circumstances, the historic circumstances of the Psalm were a failed attack of the Assyrians under Sennacherib on Jerusalem in 701 BC.

It's possible, though it may refer to some other occasion or perhaps not to any specific historic occasion. But if it does indeed refer to a particular occasion, in such circumstances, the people of God might begin to doubt as they see the power of the approaching armies surrounding their city.

[13 : 39] And they see their own resources and see them as very paltry in comparison. And so, it would be understandable if doubts began to emerge.

Is our God sovereign over Jerusalem? Can He deliver us in the face of this threat? Well, the Psalmist is in no doubt and identifies God's authority and rule over Jerusalem.

Indeed, he identified God's authority and provision for His city as threefold. He sees the Lord as the city's source of joy. There at the beginning of verse 4, there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.

So, even in the face of trouble, in the face of danger, there is this source of joy that comes from God Himself. He's the city's honored resident or inhabitant.

The verse goes on, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her. And He is also the city's protector. God will help her at break of day.

[14 : 50] She will not fall. Sovereign over Jerusalem. But of what help is that to us today? We don't live in Jerusalem.

But we are as the church, the spiritual Jerusalem, the church of Jesus Christ, over which the Lord is sovereign. Now, we know as the church in our own nation, the church in Scotland, we're not short of challenges and problems and difficulties.

Some problems perhaps of our own making. But also the hostility and the opposition. Perhaps the apathy is the biggest challenge of those around us.

And it is easy to lose heart. It's easy sometimes to perhaps be disheartened, to huff and puff, to try to keep the house up, as others would endeavor to blow it down.

And in those circumstances, we must always remember that the Lord is sovereign over Jerusalem. He is sovereign over His church. He will, in the words of the psalmist, at the break of day, deliver us.

[15 : 59] He will, in the words of the psalmist, the language there of, she will not fall. Notice there in verse 5, at the beginning of verse 5, God is within her, she will not fall.

It's language and it's a use of the verb that paints a telling contrast. Already in the psalm, He's spoken of how the mountains may fall. Notice there in verse 2, He'll go on to speak of how the kingdoms do fall in verse 6, but the city of God will never fall. And why is that so? Because the Lord is within that city to protect His own.

Sovereign over nature, sovereign over Jerusalem, but sovereign also over the nations. Notice what is said there in verse 6, nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall, He lifts His voice, the earth melts.

The question that could be posed is, does God's authority extend beyond Jerusalem? He is, after all, the God of Israel, so sovereign within the frontiers, within the borders of His own nation.

But does that authority extend beyond Jerusalem? He's the boss at home. But what about away fixtures? Where does He stand beyond His own holy city? What about the nations that strut and rage? What about the nations like our own that have seen fit to reject God and take great delight in extirpating God's Word and God's law from the statute book and from the public square? What of God's authority in such a nation, in such a time as ours? Is God impotent as Holyrood and Westminster trample underfoot His Word?

[17 : 52] Does God look on in frustrated disappointment, wishing that it were other? Well, the psalmist is clear, our Lord reigns over the nations, over every nation, 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. Now, nations may fall by their own folly. We can see that happening as we observe history, the past and even the present. And the psalmist, I think, acknowledges that. In verse 6, nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall, often as a result of their own folly, their own pride, their own overextending of themselves, their own over their own ambition and internal turmoil and grabs for power and all manner of reasons why nations crumble as a result of their own folly. But that's not the only reason why they fall. They can also fall by the express command and word of God. Nations are in uproar, the kingdoms fall, He lifts His voice and the earth melts. Just one word, that's all it takes. Listen to how Luther in his famous hymn 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 from the mouth of God is a word imbued with unrivaled power. One little word from Him. The words that come to my mind, even as we're reflecting on this, are the words that were directed to Jesus by the centurion advocating on behalf of His servant, just say the word and my servant will be healed. Just say the word. And indeed, that is so. One little word is sufficient. Our Lord reigns over the nations. But then there's another realm that the psalmist touches on and identifies God's sovereign rule over. And we're describing it in this way, sovereign over the future. Again, follow with me as we read through the last, or the verses 8 to 10 of the Psalm.

Come and see the works of the Lord, the desolations He has brought on the earth. He makes war 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, the first of the three verses we just read there, is a call, an invitation to us to see what God has done in delivering His people at a given point in history.

We can maybe identify different points in history where God has worked in delivering power. And we can look and we can observe and we can admire and we can celebrate God's power on those occasions.

[21 : 24] Indeed, on numerous occasions through history and indeed to this day, God works in this fashion. But the language used suggests that this is the seeing of the seer or the prophet. The psalmist has 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, something that is yet in the future. But more, much more. 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. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. This is a vision that will see its ultimate fulfillment when Jesus returns in glory and majesty and authority. And what does Jesus say concerning that eventuality? Well, very simply, I am coming soon. And when He comes, this reality that is being described will be seen in its full extension. Our Lord reigns over the future.

And of course, not only at that global or cosmic level, He reigns over your individual and personal future. He reigns over the future of your family. He reigns over the future of our congregations, of His church here in Aberdeen and Scotland and beyond. Our God reigns over the future.

The Lord Almighty, the Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Our God of power and grace who rules supreme over nature, over His church, over the nations, and over the future.

Solly, Deo, Gloria. To Him alone be the glory. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come and we acknowledge You as the sovereign God of whom the psalmist speaks and to whom the psalmist renders his praise. And we join with Him in bowing before You, our sovereign God. We thank You that You are indeed the Lord Almighty, the God of hosts. We thank You for Your unrivaled power and power that is exercised on our behalf. We thank You for the many ways in which You have done so in the history of Your church and indeed in our own individual lives and experience. We thank You that You are the God of Jacob. We thank You that You are the God who looks down on the most unsavory of characters and the most undeserving of men and women. And we count ourselves among such. And You reach down to embrace us and to draw us in to Your family.

We thank You for the manner in which You govern and reign supreme in every realm that we could care to identify. We thank You for Your reign over nature. We thank You for Your sovereign rule over Your church. We thank You that You are sovereign over the nations of the world. And we thank You that even as we look to the future, be it immediate or distant, we can be sure that You reign there also, over time and eternity. And for this, we are grateful. And for this, we bow down before You and lift up our voices in praise to You. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.