

PSALM 46: Certainty In Uncertain Times

A mighty Fortress is our God, a Bulwark never failing; Our Helper He amid the flood, Of mortal ills prevailing; For still our ancient foe Doth seek to work us woe; His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal.

Words of a Hymn written by *Martin Luther* in 1527. A bubonic plague had swept through (Saxony) now Germany, Luther had made the decision to stay and opened his home to minister to people through the plague. And in the middle of that situation he wrote this Hymn, inspired by the words of his favourite passage of scripture: Psalm 46.

It was the battle hymn for protestants and Luther's point was that God never fails, he never crumbles – like an ancient fortress wall may have – the hymn reminded them of Gods absolute power and sovereignty over all evil, despite circumstances of the time and treatment toward them.

Would we, could we stand as confidently today and not only say, but trust, that God is who he says he is, when we are challenged in a 'battle' or trial? Why I feel very convicted by the statement "these are uncertain times"...¹on a human level we feel that, worry and fear are natural responses, but in Christ there is absolute certainty!

I have once again been reminded through COVID-19, and through events occurring across our world, events in the USA, the ongoing conversation back home here with regards to decisions made by Govt. (think self-assist dying bill, abortion, marijuana...) and elections on the horizon...**God, is God.**

69-51. This was the vote late last year for the assisted dying bill, and God very clearly said to me as I yelled at the TV "NO", he said "**I know**, I've got this in hand". **God, is God!**

Some of these matters are not cut and dry, and are very complex. But our reference is Christ, our reference is the word of God. This is how we measure was it true and what is false, what is of God and what is well, *not*. Oh, how we constantly need the wisdom of God. How we need not be leaning our own understanding but in ALL our ways acknowledging him, and he will make our paths straight (Prov. 3:5-6)². I say this often, but there is no more important time than to have God's word in our heart, that we might not sin against him.

This is how and this is the way we navigate the complexities and struggles of this world. It is only in God, through Christ. By his word. Looking to his truth. Everything is measured against the truth of scripture. Because "my soul, finds rest in God alone; my hope comes from him (Ps. 62:5).

My task today is to encourage you in the word, and say you can leave this place 100% confident in who God is, and that he is sovereign. So I want to call us to a greater depth in God. You might say how can that be; how do I do that. ***We come as a child...*** and we do that, in faith realising that in the uncertainty and the chaos we have seen, are seeing, will see in the world, that God and the scriptures are the only place we find truth...who else can we turn to!

¹ We've probably all said it...including me...

² See Rom. 1, etc.

You know one of the benefits of the Psalms is they often capture what we feel and they give us a way of coming to God when our own words fail us. What I want us to see how real and present God is for those writing the Psalm and therefore can be for us. *Present*.

(READ)

God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble.

2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea;

3 Though its waters roar and foam, Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. *Selah*.

4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, The holy dwelling places of the Most High.

5 God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.

6 The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered; He raised His voice, the earth melted.

7 The LORD of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our stronghold. *Selah*.

8 Come, behold the works of the Lord, who has wrought desolations in the earth.

9 He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariots with fire.

10 "Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth."

11 The LORD of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our stronghold. *Selah*.

The message of the Psalm is this: the most serious chaotic circumstances can occur – not minor setbacks but planet earth changing, mountains slipping into the sea, earthquakes, not just isolated to certain parts of the world, this is the dissolution of the world as we know it, rampant world war...strength a very present help in trouble...the Lord of hosts is with you...cease striving and know that he is God...God is your stronghold".

There's a lot going on in this Psalm, but I want to keep it to two simple truths this morning: *God is our source of refuge and strength; God is our solution to striving*.

1. GOD IS OUR SOURCE FOR REFUGE & STRENGTH (see v. 1, 11b)

A mighty Fortress is our God, a Bulwark never failing; Our Helper He amid the flood Of mortal ills prevailing...

Luther's point again was that God is absolutely trustworthy, he is the wall of protection that will never crumble...but one thing to know this, *faith*³ actually steps us into this truth about God in the battle. However, to help us understand whether God is our refuge let's look quickly at what a *false refuge* might be. So these are the things we might 'run to' in lieu of God.

- a. When life is particularly stressful the things that might *become our refuge* are food, drink, or binge-watching television...
- b. When we're faced with difficult circumstances and our plans are shaken up, our initial reaction is to do all we can to control things. Our finances, strategies and plans *become our refuge*. We put our hope in those things, not God.
- c. Finding meaning, validation, significance, and worth from success, means success has *become our refuge*
- d. When we have a mental list of regrets and we find ourselves saying "if only such-and-such happened, life would be so much more awesome..." our refuge has been in opportunities lost.⁴

³ Faith says "I not only know you're with me God. I'm going to step into the battle every day leaning into you, practicing the very faith I espouse"

⁴ We might summarise these as operating independently of God

Luther – “Ask and examine your heart diligently, and you will find whether it cleaves to God alone or not. If you have a heart that can expect of Him nothing but what is good, especially in want and distress, and that, moreover, renounces and forsakes everything that is not God, then you have the only true God. If, on the contrary, it cleaves to anything else, of which it expects more good and help than of God, and does not take refuge in Him, but in adversity flees from Him, then you have an idol, another god”⁵

Where do we turn for refuge? Let me talk about how the Psalmist arrived at *God, being a refuge*.

Let’s look at the connection between verses 2, 3 and 6. (v. 2 & 3) “though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride... (*natural disasters*) (V.6) the nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered...”

The writer is saying that irrespective of where the threat comes from (natural, political or societal) God is our refuge. In other words, don’t fear even if the world as we know it is literally disintegrating around us. *In many respects it is...* but living Christianly in this chaotic world requires us to constantly be diverting our focus off self and lifting our vision to him, it requires us to be so full of the Spirit and so hungry for his word.⁶

Folks we will find ourselves doubting, unstable and on shaky ground when our eyes are off Christ. We can flail all over the place spiritually but it will not change Christ being our rock. And we cannot respond toward God as if he doesn’t understand how hard things are for us. *He knows*⁷, he knows, how massive your issues, your mountains are...so much so he gave his son for you.

Who or what do you turn to, when your circumstances seem hard and confusing? Do you turn to some of those other things we discussed earlier, or is it God? How present is he, for you?

The picture of the extreme circumstances in the Psalm is deliberately contrasting, because faith and trust in God is never dependant on the seriousness of circumstances...*point!*⁸ In uncertain times, we have the absolute certainty of God.

God is your source of refuge and strength; he is an ever present help in trouble.

The amount of times as a kid I fell over, stacked off my bike, got cut open playing rugby and dad was an ever present help for me, so many times...

We cannot put a number on how many times magnified than this God is present for you and I. Infinitely more!! He “is”. He is presently present. He’s here. A “a very present help in trouble”. I think this is one of the toughest truths to live out. He’s never distant. In the small things and big things of life, he “is”. God is in parts nowhere; God is in his fullness everywhere!

The idea here...2 Kings 6 (Elisha) “When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?” the servant asked. “Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see.” Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

⁵ <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/where-your-refuge/>

⁶ We give an ordinate amount of attention to matters of this world in light of us passing through. This life is a mist.

⁷ He knows your financial situation, he knows about your wayward son or daughter, he knows about your illness...

⁸ The question of this not being an easy thing to do is tempered by the fact Christ died knowing it wouldn’t be, but so that in him you might find peace.

I think it was Robert Murray McCheyne who said for every one glance at our problems give 10 glances to God.

There's more: God is your source of refuge and strength, and ever present help. **And, the God of Jacob is your stronghold⁹**. Mentioned twice in verses 7 and 11, both times followed by "Selah". Now to fully understand God being our refuge, strength and stronghold, we need to know first who God is. What is the point of me telling you that God, is your stronghold without first knowing who God is? Look at the passage there...in v. 7 and 11 we have "the LORD (NB: capitals) ...and the God of Jacob". The two most prominent names for God in the bible.

1st...**LORD** (*Yahweh* or *Jehovah*), the most frequently used name for God in the OT (5321 x) (see Ex. 3:14 "I AM WHO I AM") It means that God is self-sufficient, self-existent, meaning he has no needs outside of himself. He is forever the same, being. This is what *Yahweh* means. He is the LORD of *hosts*. He is the Lord of the armies of heaven. Commander of the chiefs of the armies of heaven, he reports to no-one, no-one is above God.

2nd name for **God** in the Psalm, and 2nd most used name in the OT, *Elohim* (2301x) – means strong and mighty, and he has infinite and limitless power. Think of Gen. 1:1: "in the beginning (*Elohim*) God".

This God is your stronghold, *Yahweh*, the commander of the armies of all heaven, he is *Elohim*, God of infinite and limitless power. This God, is your stronghold!

We are not being surrounded by the types of enemies we read of in the OT, Syrians, Amalekites and Babylonians...but we do have threatening powers of other kinds and are very much in a battle: powers of liberalism, moral relativism, drug and alcohol addiction, rampant pornography, family violence, immorality, injustice, (personal) fears and anxieties... (*think of your battle now*) ...God is your refuge, strength and stronghold.

A distinguished painter was conducting a class for aspiring artists. He was speaking on the subject of artistic composition. He emphasized that it was wrong, for example, to portray a woodland, a forest or a wilderness, without painting into it a path out of the trees. When a true artist draws any kind of picture, say a landscape, he always gives his picture an out.

Otherwise the tangle of trees and the trackless spaces depress and dismay the onlooker. In the same way God encourages His children by providing a way, not necessarily, but certainly through, trials...¹⁰

....and this Psalm provides that solution, pathway and calls us to run to the only certainty - among so much that isn't - *Yahweh*, *Elohim*, God!

When we feel like things are uncertain, when the 'mountains' may crash into the sea, the first thing we must remember is that our refuge, strength and protection is not in better circumstances, or in avoiding the problems, or in anything on this earth. It is, in God, very present with us, in us through the person of the Holy Spirit.¹¹

⁹ Unassailable, impenetrable, stronghold, a mighty tower, a mighty fortress of all fortresses

¹⁰ <https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/114814-is-god-your-refuge-psalm-46a>

¹¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/uncertain-but-unshaken>

2. GOD IS OUR SOLUTION TO STRIVING (see v. 10)

“Cease striving and know that I am God...” Other versions might be “Be still and know that I am God” This is one of those nice bookmark verses isn’t it? But it carries a lot more meaning than we may realise.

“Cease striving” isn’t the spiritual equivalent of putting our feet up on the lazy boy and doing nothing. It doesn’t mean to be quiet or calm as much as it means to stop your striving to do life on your own, your way. The picture is like Christians pacing back and forth, frantically trying to figure out things *independently of God* as if there’s no need for God.

Martin Luther was confronted over this very issue: during the days of the plague he was depressed...and he arrived at breakfast one morning, gloomy, and his wife was dressed in black, and Luther says to her, “who died”. And she says “apparently God did by the way you look and are behaving” You see when God is not our refuge, when we’re not depending on him, when we’re not able to be still, it wears us emotionally spiritually and physically. We wear it on our disposition, like Luther did. “Cease striving” means stop, so that you can see the futility of that and recognise God’s place. Know he is God, let him, God, know he is your *very present* help, know you can *depend on* him.

And I think right there we hit on one of the core messages of this Psalm, depending on God. Letting go and letting God! Many Psalms, including this one, capture how much for the writers, God was so present, and so dependent on Him...that is conflicting for us, because we all - to different degrees - want to control our circumstances and outcomes, and we can’t...

*Think about a baby - I got to hold a new born baby a couple of weeks ago, careful with their neck, hold the head right, so fragile, so dependant - Psalm 139 is about us being created to depend on God.... a baby enters our world, from the safety of the womb, as a total stranger, depending completely on its parents. The child knows what dependence on its earthly parents means. **Is that not an indicator of what life is meant to be like in our relationship with our heavenly father?***

When I think about how God can be our refuge and strength and know he’s our ever present help, and know how to find him through ceasing to strive...**it is to be like a child.**

Whatever our ‘storm’, battle, hard circumstance is at present will we depend on him, today? Will we draw on him as our resource? In a time of difficulty and trial we turn to what we trust. A worldly person turns to the world’s wisdom. **Christians turn to Christ.**

Only in Christ will you have the certainty to be able navigate this chaotic world. This is a time for our faith in Christ to grow and gain momentum...you say I’ve been doing that all my life. Everyone’s got another gear!

God is the source for refuge and strength. God is the solution to your striving.

