

## ***Seeking Refuge in Times of Trouble***

Psalm 46

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Some of the psalms are written for good times, for seasons of well-being, when all is well and the world is at its best. They are psalms that break out in praise and thanksgiving to God for the abundant blessings that God gives to God's people. And then there are psalms written for times when things look bleak, when people are feeling anxious, when the world around us is changing in unpleasant and unexpected ways. Psalms of lament certainly fall in this category. But not all psalms written for bleak and troubling times are psalms of lament; indeed, some are psalms of confidence, psalms that help reorient us and assure us that God's sovereignty and providence somehow bring order to the chaos in which we find ourselves.

Psalm 46 is one of those psalms of confidence in the midst of trials and tribulations. The psalm begins with its central thesis statement: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble."<sup>1</sup> It is on the basis of the protection, the strengthening, and the helping presence of God that every other word of the psalm finds its meaning. It is the bold confidence behind the proclamation that God is our refuge and our strength that enables us to find peace and calm in a turbulent, chaotic, stormy world.

And ours is a turbulent, chaotic, stormy world. The image portrayed by the psalm is a vivid one: the earth giving way, the mountains tumbling into the heart of the sea, the waters of the sea roaring and foaming, mountains quaking... What's more, the political landscape is also in turmoil: the nations are in uproar, and kingdoms are collapsing. It is a picture of the world as we know it falling apart. The natural realm and the personal realm are in chaos.

I would assert that it is an accurate picture of the world today. Maybe you haven't experienced any earthquakes lately. And aside from a few rip currents here and there, the ocean isn't exactly roaring and foaming. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that many of you can tell me what it feels like to have your world crumble and fall apart around you.

In this economy, the number of people who come to the church seeking financial assistance has grown exponentially. We have to limit ourselves to a certain number of appointments each week, and unfortunately we end up turning more people away than we can possibly help. Just this past Tuesday, we had four people with appointments. About ten minutes before the first appointment, a young woman came into the office area, and she immediately broke down into tears. Her electricity had just been cut off, and now she was at a complete loss as to what to do. She wasn't one of the people who had made an appointment, but there was no way I could turn her away. So I sat her down, got a sense of her situation, and we were able to provide what she needed to have her power turned back on. Of the other four people we interviewed that day, there was another woman who had her power turned off that morning, and one whose power was due to be turned off on Friday--and she also had an eviction notice delivered to her the

day before. I promise you--the people who come through our doors looking for assistance know full well what it feels like to have the earth give way, and to have the waters of the sea roar and foam, even the mountains quaking at their fury. It's happening to them right now.

As a pastor, people will reveal to me the pain and fear and anxiety that they hide from others. Diagnoses of cancer, despair at loneliness, crumbling relationships, layoffs and economic uncertainty, the pressure to perform at school or work, grief over the loss of a family member or friend--these are just a few of the things that pile up on our shoulders and throw our world into chaos. Many of you know full well what it feels like to have the earth give way, and to have the waters of the sea roar and foam, even the mountains quaking at their fury. It's happening to you right now.

How do you find peace in this kind of tumultuous world? How can the chaos come under control?

The answer lies in the faith that is able to proclaim, "God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble." It is the bold claim of our faith that suggests that God is stable and in control, even when everything else in our lives is not. It is the bold claim of our faith that suggests that everything else may fall away, but God will always be present--in the storm, even as in the calm. It is the bold claim of our faith that suggests with utmost confidence that the Most High dwells among his people, that the Lord Almighty is with us, that the God of Jacob is our refuge.

John Buchanan tells of his friend and mentor, Art Romig. Art had been a missionary to China when World War II broke out. Japan was an occupying force in China, and in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, all Americans were rounded up and imprisoned. Art was cut off from the outside world; he lived under constant threat of death, daily facing the possibility of torture and execution.

Decades later, when John Buchanan was serving as pastor in his first church in Columbus, Ohio, he asked Art Romig (who had retired from ministry) to serve on his staff in the role of pastoral care. Occasionally Buchanan and Art would talk about Art's time in China. And when Buchanan asked Art what had sustained him during those most difficult times in China, Art's answer was, "Psalm 46. I read it every single day. God is our refuge and our strength."<sup>2</sup>

The kind of faith that sustained Art Romig takes intentionality. We have to come to know God before we can profess that kind of faith. It's not a knowledge that is simply the accumulation of information; it's a knowledge that comes when we attune our hearts to the voice of God, the voice that calls out to us and says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love... There is nothing that can ever separate you from my love... I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare, and not for evil..." It comes when we can quiet our soul and listen to God calling us to take refuge in him.

"Be still," says the Lord, "and know that I am God..."

But O, how difficult that is to do! How hard it is to be still in the deep sense of the world. We rush about madly from sunup to sundown, trying to cram twenty-five hours into the day. And even our sleep is restless because we have gone to bed with the sense that we have left at least a dozen things undone. We spend so much time and energy chasing after the wrong things, running around in fear and anxiety, cramming too much into our already hectic schedules, living life at a frenetic pace.

This past Wednesday evening I had a serendipitous experience of being still before God. You need to know what my day was like leading up to the moment of stillness. I arrived at church at 7:00 a.m. for the men's breakfast, and as soon as the breakfast was over I hit the road for a meeting at the Presbyterian Home in Summerville; while I was in Summerville I also made some visits and had lunch with our church

members who are residents there. But I had to hurry back, because I still had preparations to make for the Vesper service in the evening. The moment I finished setting up the sanctuary for the service, I received a call from one of my children who needed to be picked up at school. And so I rushed to the school, picked up Helen, and made arrangements for Ben to have a ride to church. Then I quickly made a couple of phone calls, touched base with Bill about the vesper service, stopped by the sanctuary to make a quick test of the sound system, and managed to rush into the fellowship hall and inhale a quick plate of food (alas, it is a shame that Debbie spends a whole day preparing a meal that I consume in just a few minutes!). Then just before the service started I was in the hallway behind the sanctuary trying to direct children into their classroom. Just as Thom started to play the prelude, I plopped myself down into my chair on the chancel.

But what a blessing the worship service was! We had beautiful music; we reflected on scripture, taking time to let God's word penetrate our hearts and permeate our being; we prayed for healing and wholeness; and we shared Holy Communion. As I think about that experience Wednesday, the overriding sense that I got was that, more than anything else, it was an opportunity for us to be still before God and allow God's presence to wash over us. It was because we could step away from the frantic pace of life, and we could indulge in stillness and peaceful reflection long enough to allow God to whisper his loving kindness to us, that we could leave the sanctuary renewed and refreshed.

There is an interesting word that crops up three times in the psalm. The word is "selah." Its literal meaning is unknown, but it is assumed to be a poetic or musical instruction, probably a pause in the reading of the psalm. In that word is a wonderful model for us: we need to pause from time to time, to take time to let God's word sink in. Don't just scan the words with your eyes; let them fill your heart. Pause every once in a while and consider the wonders of God's work in your life. Put a "selah" into your routine a couple of times every day.

Take time to be still. Because it's in being still that we hear God assure us of his strong presence. It's in being still that we can say with confidence, "God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in times of trouble. Therefore I will not fear..."

And that's a word we need, isn't it?

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 46:1

<sup>2</sup> John Buchanan, "For the Storms Which Give Toughness to Our Spirits," [www.fourthchurch.org](http://www.fourthchurch.org)