

A Very Present Help

Psalm 46

Later this week we will turn the page on 2021 and begin a new year. As you think about the new year, I have a question for you. Are you more hopeful or worried? Are you anticipating good things, or are you concerned about the trouble a new year will bring?

Some of you are hopeful about the new year. You are confident that God is going to be doing good things in your life. You know there will be hard things, but you believe that God will show up and be enough for whatever life may bring.

For others, however, as you think about what the future might bring you are more concerned and worried. You might relate to what pastor Craig Groeschel writes in his book called, *The Christian Atheist: Believing in God but Living as if He Doesn't Exist*. One of the chapters is entitled, "When You Believe in God but Still Worry All the Time." In it he writes this:

In the light of day, I'm constantly encouraging people to trust God, no matter what. I can quote Scripture from memory without taking a breath. But when the night sets in, I stare at the ceiling, feeling alone, afraid to trust God completely. If I can be truly honest, I am often overwhelmed with worry. I know I'm not supposed to worry. I try not to worry, but sometimes it's hard.

He goes on to write:

Worry is bad for our health. In fact, our word worry derives from the Old High German, *wurgen*, literally "to strangle, constrict, choke." That sounds like worry feels, doesn't it? Worry absolutely strangles the life out of me. But there are just so many things to worry about, how can I stop?

Some of you relate to that, right? As you look at the new year there are just so many things to worry about. You would say the same thing he says, "How can I stop?" I certainly relate to Groeschel. I can tend to worry at times.

Well, today we are going to look at Psalm 46, which will remind of us some truths about God, and how He relates to His people. If we can believe these things and walk them, it will make a big difference in our lives. Though we don't know for sure, Psalm 46 seems to have been composed at a time of crisis, possibly in the context of battle. And the main message of this psalm is that God is a very present help in trouble.

And so, let's look at this passage. It is organized in three stanzas. **Stanza One** (vv. 1-3)

¹ *God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.*

This is theme of the psalm. God is a very present help! He is *our refuge and strength*. A refuge is a place of shelter. It's a place that you run into and are shielded from danger. Some of us were doing that a week ago Wednesday as the storm rolled through. We ran inside for protection. God is also our *strength*. Sometimes God shields us from danger, but at other times He strengthens us within to help us endure whatever challenges we face.

God is our refuge and strength, and because of that He is *a very present help in trouble*. The sense of this is His readiness to be found, and of His being enough for any situation. God is not a far off, uninvolved God. He is here. He is ready to give aid. And because this is true, the psalmist can affirm that they will not be afraid even in the most troubling situations.

*² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah*

The psalmist is using poetic language to paint the picture of a time of great crisis. He is describing the experience of having the immovable moved. The earth giving way; mountains sliding in the heart of the sea.

I mentioned in my last sermon that we lived in southern California during the time that I attended seminary. In those three years we experienced many earthquakes. The strongest was the Hector Mine earthquake that happened in October 1999. It registered as a 7.1 quake. Thankfully, it occurred about 50 miles from our home out in the desert and so it didn't cause much damage. But it was long enough and strong enough that it woke us out of our sleep, and we had time to get the kids out of their beds and gather under a door frame to stand there. And while we stood there it grew and grew in intensity. And the scary thing is that you don't know how bad it is going to get. The ground kept moving back and forth and we could hear things falling in our house and transformers exploding outside. Afterwards, as we looked around for damage, we discovered that our bathroom floors were all wet because the house had rocked enough that the water in the toilets had sloshed out.

When something that we think of as solid and immovable, moves, that can create fear and worry. The solid thing might be our health, or our relationships, our financial picture, or our plans for the future. When these things get turned upside down, it is very easy to experience fear. For some of you the language of these verses describes how you are experiencing life right now. You're living this upheaval.

But hear what the psalmist is saying about God. He is saying that because of who God is, even in the most catastrophic of situations, we can have confidence, because God is a very present help. He is near. He's a refuge. And He is our strength. And so it is possible to be able to say, *we will not fear* (v. 2). Our security is found in God and God alone. Even in the midst of the most turbulent of times, **God is a very present help.**

Stanza Two (vv. 4-7): In the second stanza, the psalmist presents God as their help in a city under siege. We get this sense from verse 6 where he talks about the nations raging. He says:

*⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.*

If you are in a city surrounded by enemy armies, having a water supply was vital. Here's the thing, there isn't a river like this that runs through Jerusalem. The psalmist is using the river as a metaphor to communicate that when God is present, it is like the provision of a river.

The *city of God* refers to where God dwells among his people. This is Jerusalem, or Zion, because that is where the Temple was. That is where God made His presence known. And if God is present, if He is with his people, it is just like the provision of a river in a besieged city. And God presence is there! Verse 5 says:

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

Because God is present, the people of God are safe. They *shall not be moved*. The mountains may be moved (v. 2), but not God's people. They are on solid ground, because God is with them.

When he makes the statement that *God will help when the morning dawns*, some believe that it is a reference to when the king of Assyria came and threatened Jerusalem around 701 BC. When this nation came and besieged Jerusalem, God gave help. We read this in 2 Kings 19:34-36. God says:

³⁴ For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David." ³⁵ And that night the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. ³⁶ Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went home and lived at Nineveh.

In that situation, when the morning dawned, the city saw that God had protected them by striking down the Assyrians. God's help was effective and immediate because He dwelt with His people. Whether that is the situation in view or not, the point is the same. God is near and He is the one who delivers.

The psalmist then goes on and says:

*⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.*

Nations may threaten, but God is in control. He simply speaks into the situation and men and nations collapse before Him. They *totter*. But not God's people. Because of God's presence, they will not be moved.

And then we find the first of two identical refrains:

*⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah*

The *Lord of hosts*, the God of the heavenly armies, is with us. He is the *God of Jacob*, which is a name for God that has in view His protective, covenantal relationship with Israel. He is *our fortress*, which was an elevated place of protection from an enemy. That is who God is.

Again, where do you sense threats in your life? Where do you feel that the "armies" are gathering around you? As you look at these threats, know that God is with you. He is near. He dwells with you. The answer to your fear is in knowing who God is and that He is indeed with you. **He is a very present help in time of trouble.**

Let's look at the final stanza. **Stanza Three**

*⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.
⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.*

If this psalm is indeed prompted by the threat of the Assyrian army, the psalmist is saying "look at what God has done." *Come, behold the works of the LORD*. If it was that event, then the people of the city when they arose that morning could look out and see how God has struck down the Assyrian army. They could see the *desolations* that God had brought upon the Assyrians. They could see that He had made the war to cease. It was if God had gone out into the camp of the Assyrians and broken their bows and shattered their spears and burned their chariots with fire. Come see His protection. Look at who God is and what He has done.

Now, this passage is written in general enough terms that it is an invitation to all of God's people in every age to look at what God has done. It is an invitation to remember God's acts of salvation. History is full of God's interventions for His people. If we could remember those acts, it would help address our fears.

In verse 10 God Himself speaks:

*¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!"*

We often read this only as a command to God's people, but I think God is declaring to both His people, as well as to all the nations, that He is ultimate, not us. He will be exalted. He will be honored. And so, to the nations that rage against God, it is a call to surrender to Him.

But is it also a call for God's people to yield to Him and to trust Him. For Israel, when they were threatened by invading armies they would often appeal to other nations for help. They would abandon God and work to secure their safety through political alliances and military might. Fear drove them to such pursuits. But God is saying here, "Stop! I'm God. I'm in charge. Yield to me. Trust me."

And then we find the refrain from verse 7 repeated:

*¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah*

God is with us. What an amazing truth! **God is a very present help in time of trouble.** That's the truth that this psalm teaches about God. That's the truth that if we can believe and walk in will make a world of difference in our lives.

God is not an aloof, far off, distant God. He isn't looking down on you and your situation and saying, "Sure hope you can figure that out." No! He is near. He is a very present help in time of need. If there is one thing that Christmas proclaims to us, it is that God has come near. He is Immanuel, God with us. He took on human flesh to come to our aid. And so, one of the best things you can do to find peace in troubled times is to remember this truth that God is near. It is God's presence that gives us stability.

But here's the thing, if we don't really know God, if we don't know the attributes of God, then it will not do much to address our worries. And so if want to walk in hope and confidence **get to know God.** Remember the psalmist said that it was because of what he knew to be true about God – He's a refuge and shield – that he could say "therefore we will not fear." If you want to walk in faith-filled confidence, you must get to know God. Fear and worry very well may be an indication of a lack of knowledge of who God is.

One of the core ways that we get to know God is through the Scriptures. And so **spend time in the Scriptures.** Hearing a weekly sermon like you are doing today is important, but that cannot be all. If you truly want to get to know God, you need to regularly and consistently be in the Word for yourself. We would encourage you to practice the rhythm of daily devotion. If you have never done this, let me give you a very practical way that you can start. Let me encourage you to simply read one psalm each day. And as you read, ask, "What does this teach me about God?" Over time as you do this, it will help you get to know this God who is near.

Another way that we get to know God is by **remembering what He has done.** When the psalmist urges the people in verse 8 to come and see the works of God, he is inviting them to look at how God has acted on their behalf. He had delivered them. When we remember how God has

provided, or protected, or healed, or led in the past, we experientially come to know that God is a God who does these things. And so we need to remember what He has done.

Here's an example from my life. As many of you know, Rooted is one of our core ministries. Three times a year we launch new groups through Rooted. The thing about Rooted is that I never know how many facilitators we will need, because we never know how many people are going to sign up. And so as I'm working to find facilitators, I can get anxious not knowing if I've found enough. But you know what? We've done Rooted nine times now, and every single time, God has provided the right number of leaders. And so, when I'm tempted to get anxious, I remember what He has done. And as I do that I'm learning to relax and trust that God is in control. He has provided. He knows the need.

And so as you think about areas of your life in which you can tend to worry, let me encourage you to remember the truth that God is near. He is a very present help in trouble. And let me encourage you to continue to deepen your understanding of this God who is near by spending time in His word and by remembering what He has done.

Now, I want to make one other point clear. The promise that Psalm 46 proclaims is not that God keeps us from trouble, but that He is a very present help in our troubles. Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33). God in His wisdom does allow us to go through difficulties at times. And if He does, we need to trust that there is some good purpose.

We can trust that when God allows us to go through troubles, He is still in control. He was in control when the only place Mary and Joseph could find to deliver Jesus was in an animal stable. He was in control 33 years later when the Son that He loved was nailed to the cross. He had a greater plan. Sometimes He has a greater plan that we simply don't understand, and He lets things happen in our lives that we don't make sense to us. We can trust that even then He is in control and working for our good.

Finally, there is a sense where the promises of this psalm of protection and safety are only fully realized in eternity. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you have the hope and promise that you are ultimately safe in eternity. And knowing that makes a difference as we face troubles in this world.

God is a very present help in time of trouble. May we believe this and live in light of this truth in this new year. May we deepen in our understanding of who God is so that we live lives of confidence and trust in our great God.