

HE IS OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH

Psalm 46:1–11

Key Verse: 46:1

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

When you're in trouble, where do you go? To your room, to hide in bed? To a parent, a mentor, or friend? Many try to escape their troubles by watching YouTube or scrolling on their phones. Some get into substance abuse or destructive habits. But Psalm 46 tells us things about God that help us react to our troubles differently. As we reflect on this Psalm, we want to learn more of who God is, what he has done, and what he will do for us. Knowing this God doesn't mean we hide from the world; in fact, he is “a very present help” even when we're living amidst many troubles. We want to learn how all of this is fulfilled in our Lord Jesus. May God speak to us today.

After the main statement in verse 1, Psalm 46 has three sections. Verses 2–3 describe troubles in the world of nature. Verses 4–7 describe troubled nations and kingdoms. And verses 8–11 describe how God himself will subdue both troubled nature and nations. The whole Psalm encourages us to turn to him.

Let's read verse 1. This is a powerful confession of faith of a community of believers. They learned this faith in their history through repeated experiences. Our refuge and strength are not in our numbers, nor in our buildings. Our real refuge and strength are in our united faith in God. God our “refuge” is repeated throughout the Psalms.¹ “Refuge” means shelter, a place where desperate, needy people can find protection and rest. God our “strength” is also repeated often in the Psalms.² We all get tired—not just physically, but spiritually. When we lose our strength, we're vulnerable. We're afraid to admit such weakness. But verse 1 tells us God is “a very present help in trouble.” “Very present” literally means “greatly ready, near, and available.” We can't see God and often don't feel him, but still he's “very present.” Sometimes when we're in trouble, we find that the people who could help us are not available. Even if they are, it may turn out that they are actually no help at all. But if we're in some kind of trouble and turn to God, we find over and over again that he is “a very present help.” He may not change our situation. But he hears, comforts, protects and strengthens us.

And he doesn't just help us “barely make it.” Read verses 2–3. It begins, “Therefore we will not fear...” Yet this is no small trouble—it's catastrophic disasters in

¹ Psalm 2:12; 5:11; 7:1; 11:1; 14:6; 16:1; 17:7; 18:2,30; 25:20; 28:8; 31:1–2,4,19; 34:8,22; 36:7, etc.

² Psalm 8:2; 10:17; 18:1,32,39; 21:1,13; 28:7–8; 29:1,11; 59:9,16–17; 65:6; 68:35; 73:26; 81:1, etc.

the natural world. Sometimes nature still wreaks havoc on human beings. We saw this on the Fourth of July in the Texas flooding. Despite all our knowledge, technology and wealth, when the forces of nature are unleashed, we creatures are so helpless. And we have no idea when it's coming. It can make us fearful. But even in the most intense trouble, we can turn to God as our refuge and strength and find courage. With God as our refuge and strength, all kinds of troubles and disasters combined cannot shake us into fear. It's not because we're strong; it's because our faith is in God, our refuge, strength, and very present help. Later, we'll see how this is real for us today.

Next, in contrast to mountains moving and trembling and waters roaring and foaming, God has done something. Look at verses 4–5. God has chosen to make his “habitation,” his dwelling, in this troubled world. It's amazing. It starts with the phrase, “There is a river...” It says this river's streams “make glad the city of God.” It's small and quiet, but this “river” is God's work in the world. It was fulfilled in history when the Assyrians surrounded Jerusalem, but the city had a water source to survive.³ This “river,” a source of life and gladness for people in God's city, is also a prophecy of the coming of the Holy Spirit. He's our life source. When we're surrounded by challenges and problems, he makes the living presence of God real to us.

Verse 4b adds, “the holy habitation of the Most High.” It isn't mentioned here, but there is a whole group of Psalms called “Songs of Zion” that mention God's dwelling place, his temple, in “the city of God.”⁴ Those who love God long to be with him in his dwelling place. Jerusalem came under God's judgment due to its people's sins. But the city of Jerusalem foreshadowed the new Jerusalem God has prepared for all those who believe in Jesus.⁵ Through Jesus we'll be able to dwell with God there forever.

Even now, God's dwelling in this troubled, chaotic world is holy. And he is “the Most High God,” the source of victory and blessing. What happens when this Holy God dwells with us? Read verse 5. When God is in our midst, we become immovable. Mountains may move, but we won't. After a long night of darkness, God is right there to help us when morning dawns; his presence changes everything. How does he help us? Read verse 6. For the Most High God, all the doom and gloom of this world is absolutely no problem. It's so simple. Nations rage. Kingdoms totter. But God just utters his voice, and the earth melts. It highlights the power of his words. It's how God created the world in the first place, and it looks forward to what he's going to do in the end, to make a new heaven and a new earth (Rev.21:1ff.).

³ 2 Kings 17–18.

⁴ Psalm 48:1–2,8; 87:3; 122:3–4; 132:13–14; cf. 2:6; 9:11; 76:2; 147:12.

⁵ Heb.11:10; 12:22; Rev.22:1–2.

Verse 7 says, “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” This is repeated in verse 11. The name “the LORD” means the God of love; and “hosts” means armies. So “the LORD of hosts” means the God of love who’s ready to fight for us. His other name, “the God of Jacob,” recalls how he visited Jacob when he was young and vulnerable and promised to be with him, protect him, and bring him back to himself. Jacob had many enemies, and maybe the worst of all his enemies was he himself. But God met him and changed him from a worldly man to a man who truly knew and loved God and could be a blessing. This God of Jacob is still the “fortress” of his people. He’s our defense, our refuge, our high tower, to protect us from all who would harm us.

But God is not a remote, isolated hiding place in the world. Look at verses 8–9. God is still working in this world. Through bringing desolations he strips us of all the impressive things we trust in for our defenses. And the words of verse 9 give us hope: “He makes wars cease to the end of the earth.” This tells us God wants to rule over all people, and he loves and wants to save them all. Many of us are praying for wars to end. This is what God plans to do in his own right time.

And suddenly there’s a word from God. Read verse 10. God is God. All of us, even with our wretched weaknesses, try to make ourselves in some way look “great.” Some are on a self-promotion campaign. But God alone is God. Before him we all need to become quiet and start listening. In verse 3, the waters “roar.” In verse 6, the nations “rage.” In Hebrew, “roar” and “rage” are the same word. This word can mean to murmur, growl, be boisterous, noisy, or to talk too much. In today’s language, “rage” can also mean to be party animals. Sometimes, we’re raging and roaring inside, in our thought world. God says to us, “Be still.” In Hebrew this word literally means, “Relax.” In today’s word, it means, “Chill.” How can we relax and be chill when we get so worked up and upset by so many troubles? God says, “...and know that I am God.” No matter what’s going on, “God still rules above.” He’s above all. He can solve any problem, even the most hopeless ones. He can change any person. When we know this great and living God, problems shrink, and we can have peace.

Read verse 10b again. “I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” God wants all nations and all nature to exalt him. God is reigning and working in all kinds of ways to get people to really turn to him. But he doesn’t do it by force or intimidation. “Exalt” literally means to be lifted up. All of this is also looking forward to something.

To tell us that God is our refuge, strength and fortress, Psalm 46 stresses that he dwells with us. Verse 4 says God made his “habitation” among us. Verse 5a says, “God

is in the midst of her..." Verses 7 and 11 repeat that God is "with us." How does God dwell with us? He is Most High, and holy. And we are sinful, fearful, and so easily get upset and overwhelmed. But God came and dwelt among us when he sent his Son Jesus into this troubled world. John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." As he dwelt on earth, God's only Son Jesus was full of grace toward weak and broken people and helped them with his truth. He demonstrated the glory of God in his life-giving miraculous signs. Yet he was despised as a nobody from Nazareth, slandered and dishonored. His dwelling among us had an ultimate purpose. Hebrews 1:3 explains. Let's read it: "He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high..." After dwelling among us and taking away our sins by his blood, Jesus is now dwelling with the Father in glory. And yet he still dwells among us. How so?

Just before his arrest, he told his disciples, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). He said this in the context of promising to send another Helper, the Holy Spirit (John 14:16–17,23). God the Father sends us the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus. So, because of what Jesus has accomplished for us through his death and resurrection, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit all dwell within us. It's astounding. This is the gospel. When we believe in Jesus and obey him, he promises, "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38–39). It's like that river in the city of God (4). Rivers of living water flowing out of our heart means being aware of God's living presence in my life. It's being aware of the love of our Father God for us in Jesus his Son as he pours the Holy Spirit into our hearts (Rom.5:6).

The Father with us in Jesus through the Spirit helps us experience that he really is a very present help in trouble (1). The Father with us in Jesus through the Spirit takes away our fear (2). The Father with us in Jesus through the Spirit makes us glad (4). The Father with us in Jesus through the Spirit makes us immovable even in overwhelming circumstances (5). The Father with us in Jesus through the Spirit makes us still, giving us his peace (10a) in this noisy, chaotic world. The Father with us in Jesus through the Spirit helps us know that Jesus is God (10b), reigning over this troubled world with his word. The Father with us in Jesus through the Spirit makes us spiritually strong. The Father with us in Jesus through the Spirit helps people of all nations to see Jesus exalted (10c) because he was lifted up on the cross (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32). The Father with us in Jesus through the Spirit makes wars cease to the end of the earth (9a). The Father with us in Jesus through the Spirit makes us a Spirit-filled church, where God himself dwells and draws people to himself. We need to turn to him for

refuge and strength, both personally and as a community. Our Lord Jesus told his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27). So Apostle Paul could say to the Colossian church, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful" (Col.3:15). His peace in our hearts may be the best help of all. Being confrontational with people doesn't make us strong; having the peace of Christ within us and among us makes us strong. Praise our Father God who made Jesus his Son our true refuge, strength, and very present help in trouble through his Holy Spirit.

We all experience trouble to varying degrees. How do we respond to our troubles? Do we try to escape? Deny them? Try to solve them by ourselves? Or, do we believe in our Lord Jesus? Read verse 1 again. May God help each of us believe Jesus dwelling with us is our true refuge, strength, and very present help in trouble, and make us immovable in his gospel work in the world.