

Psalm 46:1

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

The ideas of the German monk, theologian and church reformer, Martin Luther (1483-1546)

- Helped inspire the Protestant Reformation
- Changing the course of Western civilisation
- Luther maintained that the Bible, not the Pope, is the sole source of religious authority
- He translated the Bible into German, so ordinary people could read it or hear it read
- and taught that together the community of Christians is a priesthood of believers
- He also wrote hymns that inspired the development of congregational singing
- Perhaps his greatest hymn was based on Psalm 46
- *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* (A safe stronghold our God is sure)
- It was a hymn that he and his friend Philip Melancthon would sing together
- And from which they derived strength in times of discouragement

Psalm 46 is one of several Psalms described as a *Song of Zion* (cf. 76, 84, 87, 122)

- These songs proclaimed the victories and deliverances of the God of Israel
- And celebrated the presence of God with his people
- From the time of King David onwards the name Zion was applied to Jerusalem
- A stronghold that David captured from the Jebusites
- To Israel, Mount Zion stood for a vision of God's kingship
- For though his kingdom is greater than Jerusalem
- Its visible focus was the temple and palace of Jerusalem
- It was songs such as these that the Babylonian captors taunted the Israelites to sing
- During their years of captivity in exile (Psalm 137:3)

It is difficult to know exactly when the Psalm was written or to which context it refers

- It was undoubtedly to do with a notable deliverance of Jerusalem
- But Jerusalem was the scene of many such deliverances
- The Hebrew words used in the Psalm (for example the word we translate 'refuge')
- appear regularly in the first part of Isaiah (4:6; 25:4; 28:15-17)

Then the LORD will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over all the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding-place from the storm and rain.

(Isaiah 4:5-6)

This might mean that the Psalm writer is thinking of the miraculous deliverance from Assyria

- after the conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel
- the remaining part of the once great kingdom was the small nation of Judah
- with its capital at Jerusalem – under the godly king, Hezekiah
- when the city was besieged by the Assyrian hordes, Hezekiah appealed to the prophet
- Isaiah spoke the word of the Lord, to reassure the people
- God would defend the city and save it against its adversaries
- The Psalm is therefore a celebration of the presence and saving grace of God

I THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN OUR TROUBLES

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.
(Psalm 46:1)

This verse echoed by verses 7 and 11 teach us something important about worship

- When I was in ministerial training the theological buzz word of the day was baptism
- But not long after I emerged from college the theological buzz word was worship
- The trouble with these buzz words is how much nonsense is talked about them

In one of my previous congregations, a long time ago now, we had a truly great guitarist

- He was a sincere Christian and I liked him but he used to drive me mad
- It was the mid-1980s and we were already using a lot of contemporary songs
- But even if the service had been running for a little while
- He would often introduce a song-set but saying something like
- ‘we are going to move into a time of worship now’
- which made me wonder what we had been doing up until that point
- for some people, worship songs written since about 1975 (but the newer the better)
- are what ‘worship’ is really all about
- in fact, in the mind of many Christians today, the two are synonymous

On the other hand, there are those who think worship is about singing hymns

- again in one of my previous congregations we had an organist who would not play
- if he felt that anything was beneath his musical dignity, ‘that rubbish’ he called it
- he described anything in a more contemporary style as ‘entertainment’
- declaring that worship was not about entertainment or enjoying yourself
- He seemed rather perplexed when I asked him, as Welshman
- Whether or not he enjoyed singing, ‘Guide me, O thou great Jehovah’

In any event, worship is not what happens for an hour or two or Sunday

- But is the offering of the whole of life to God in thanksgiving and praise
- The Sunday service is simply a focal point in that life of thanksgiving and praise
- What is important is that in that focal point we maintain the balance that Psalm 46 has
- Between the grandeur and the closeness of God

‘God is our refuge and strength and ever-present help in trouble’

- Expresses both the grandeur and the closeness of God
- On the one hand, he is the almighty and all-powerful God
- On the other hand, he is with us, ‘our God’, an ever-present help in trouble

The word we translate ‘refuge’ carries the meaning of ‘place of refuge’, ‘shelter’, ‘hope’

- This relates to a people in need – there is a sense in which we always need God
- But there are other times when we feel in need of his special protection

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.

(Psalm 46:2-3)

We all meet people to whom rotten things have happened or are happening

- Christians are not insulated from the troubles of the world
- But the Psalm writer has picked up the most dramatic things that can happen
- Even if the earth give way, even in the mountains fall into the heart of the sea
- Even if the waters roar, foam and surge so as to make the mountains quake
- In these cataclysmic circumstances, the people of God will not fear
- The description sounds to me like the ‘end of the world’ with earthquakes and floods
- Even in these circumstances, the believer need not be afraid
- Because the believer, by a relationship of trust, can seek refuge in God

II THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN JUDGMENT (vv. 4-7)

Whatever else happens, the people of God are citizens of ‘the city of God’

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. Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts.

(Psalm 46:4-6)

The writer to the Hebrews has a similar theme in mind

- When writing about the believer approaching Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem
- The writer to the Hebrews contrasts Mount Zion with Mount Sinai
- At Mount Sinai, the Law was given through Moses
- The believer has come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, city of the living God
- This city is inhabited by thousands of angels in joyful assembly
- By the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven
- ‘Church’ or ‘assembly’ of the ‘firstborn’ refers to Jesus – the ‘firstborn’ of the dead
- Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant
- Not in the sense that all that had gone before was irrelevant
- But that the covenant anticipated in the temple had been newly fulfilled at the cross

So then, when God acts in judgment, his people do not find refuge by hiding *from* God

- As Adam had tried and failed to do in his sin
- When God acts in judgment, his people find refuge by hiding *in* God
- The image of the river and the streams now evokes the memory of Eden
- With the four rivers
- In Eden, the man and the woman lived with God and walked and talked with him
- Until they fell into sin, occasioned by their doubt and disobedience
- But Psalm 46 holds out the hope of restoration to the presence of God
- Through the very fulfilment of all that the temple had anticipated
- Not the blood of the sacrifices offered day after day and year after year
- But by the blood of the one perfect sacrificial Lamb of God, our Lord and Saviour
- By the blood of Jesus, the sinner can now seek refuge with God
- And know his blessing and restoration – when all around is crumbling
- The believer is safe in the dwelling-place of God
- Whose acts of unfailing love are renewed each morning (Lam. 3:22-23)

Here and in v. 11, the Psalmist adds a refrain

The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress
Selah
(Psalm 46:7)

The little word ‘Selah’ probably has something to do with the music of the Psalm

- It is a difficult word to translate and therefore left untranslated
- One suggestion is that it means something like ‘stop and listen’
- And that can often be a good suggestion when we are being swept along in song
- Here God is ‘the LORD Almighty’ sometimes rendered ‘LORD of Hosts’
- In Hebrew, ‘Jehovah Sabaoth’, in the Luther’s hymn, the ‘Lord Sabaoth’
- The LORD Almighty is with us – an amazing truth so easily taken for granted
- The mighty God, but also the covenant God, who made promises to his people
- A people that he first called Israel when he gave a new name to Jacob
- And a mighty God who is known as ‘Immanuel’ (God with us) in Jesus

III THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN ALL THE EARTH

The Psalm concludes with a prophetic oracle as the writer looks ahead to the work of God

Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire.

(Psalm 46:8-9)

‘Come and see’ does not mean to look in the sense that a tourist would look at the sights

- Rather it means ‘consider’, ‘think about’
- The works of the LORD include all the things he has done in saving his people
- To Israel this meant the Exodus, the Conquest of Canaan, the era of the Judges
- And the time of the Kingdom and of the monarchy, particularly of King David
- The Israelites would celebrate victory over hostile nations
- For the Christian believer the focus must be on Jesus
- It is in the incarnation, birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus
- That we find salvation, refuge and hope
- God will have the final word in the world
- The God of peace will make wars to cease
- not just in Jerusalem but to the very ends of the earth
- the very instruments of warfare, symbolised by the bow, the spear and the shield
- will be rendered useless

The Psalmist does not look on the results of this from the perspective of the ungodly

- rather he views it all with the eyes of the godly believer
- here is hope for God’s people – hope that wars will cease
- and the benefits of peace, prosperity and the blessing of God will come
- even in distress people find hope in God, but greater still when distress has gone

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

(Psalm 46:10-11)

Many people that I know are tired; they lead busy lives and fill every moment with activity

- when they awake in the morning they have the radio on to absorb the news
- they do the same while having breakfast or maybe they try to read the newspaper
- on the way to work or to school they listen to music on their car stereo or headset
- from all sides they are being bombarded with information, advertisements, news
- they carry their mobile telephone with them everywhere
- so they are never more than a phone call away from the family or friends or work
- every odd minute seems to be filled with activity
- when they are at a loss to know what to do they start texting people
- at the desk they must deal not only with post and phone calls but also with e-mails
- everything demanding to be answered – not even in the next day but in the next hour
- when do they ever take the opportunity to ‘Be still and know that I am God’

‘Be still and know that I am God’

- the busy believer can reply, ‘of course I know that God is God’
- but that is not what this prophetic passage of the Psalm is commanding us to do
- it is not know in theory that God is God
- I know that light travels at 186,000 miles per second
- But there are many people who don’t know that and they seem to cope all right

‘Be still and know that I am God’

- Knowing God includes what might be termed factual knowledge
- There are plenty of things to know about God – his past acts, his promises
- But God, through the Psalm writer, is not exhorting us to know a lot about him
- But to know him

People have an inbuilt desire to find security – but where do you find your security?

- An obvious place might be in possessions, such as your home, your car, possessions
- No doubt some people look for security in money or relationships or education
- Still others find their security in what other people say about them
- They need constant affirmation in order to feel secure

But here we are called upon to know God, the God who will be exalted in all the earth

- To commit ourselves to the Lord and seeks his refuge, strength and fortress
- To live a life of faith, committed to God’s sovereignty, rule and exaltation
- For the Christian, God is best known in Jesus, and Jesus is known at his cross
- For it is the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross, that cries out to God for mercy
- This is by no means a fair-weather faith – quite the opposite
- When the foundations of the earth melt, even if the raging torrent should cover us
- Even if everything should be swept away and the earth descend into chaos
- God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in trouble