

“Be Still, and Know That I Am God”

A Sermon on Psalm 46

Texts: Psalm 46:1-11; Luke 21:25-28

Most people cannot recite Psalm 46 from memory. But many are so familiar with the words to Martin Luther’s famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” that they can sing it without looking at the bulletin. “*Ein Feste Burg ist unser Gott*” is actually Luther’s paraphrase of Psalm 46. This Psalm has several very familiar lines, has been cited by American presidents (most recently by Barak Obama), and portions of it appear in well-known Jewish prayers. Found in Book Two of the Psalter and attributed to the Sons of Korah, it is classified as a “Psalm of Zion” and contains loud echoes from Psalm 2, where that divine protection promised to the king, is extended to include his capital city (Jerusalem). Charles Spurgeon aptly speaks of the 46th Psalm as “the song of faith in troubled times.”¹ Martin Luther thought this Psalm of such comfort, he put it to verse.

As we continue with our series on select Psalms, I thought it appropriate to turn our attention to Psalm 46, because we sing this particular Psalm as often as any other—often in the form of Luther’s famous paraphrase. Before we turn to the text of the Psalm itself—where we will find much deep and rich biblical theology—I think it appropriate to consider Luther’s use of this Psalm, then debunk one of the persistent myths surrounding the version of the Psalm which appears in the KJV, and then look at the context in which the Psalm was originally composed. Then, we will look at the text of the Psalm while making various points of application as we go.

As for Luther and “A Mighty Fortress,” although there are many theories about when it was written and for what occasion, Luther’s hymn first appears in a 1531 hymnal which would indicate that Luther wrote it several years earlier, likely in 1527-29. This was ten years or so after his 95 theses were circulated throughout Europe, igniting the theological fire which became the Protestant Reformation. The black plague was especially virulent throughout much of Europe in the winter of 1527, nearly killing Luther’s son. Luther was also a physical wreck during this time (from exhaustion). He began spending much time reading and reflecting upon Psalm 46, especially its promise that God is the bulwark (fortress) who never fails. From Luther’s reflection on that word of comfort, the famous hymn was born.

According to one church historian, “many times during this dark and tumultuous period, when terribly discouraged, [Luther] would turn to his co-worker, Philipp Melanchthon, and say, ‘Come, Philipp, let us sing the forty-sixth Psalm.’”² Luther said of this particular Psalm, “we sing this psalm to the praise of God, because He is with us and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends His church and His word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, and against all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and sin.”³ Because our fathers in the faith were sustained

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 350.

² Steven Lawson, “Luther and the Psalms” in TableTalk, (Ligonier: Orlando, Oct. 15, 2012), <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/luther-and-psalms-his-solace-and-strength/>

³ Ibid.

throughout their trials by their knowledge and love of the psalter, we would be foolish to ignore their wise counsel, and the faithful example they have set before us.

One persistent rumor which needs to be debunked is that William Shakespeare helped prepare the translation of this Psalm which appears in the King James Version of the Bible. As the theory goes, the 46th word of the Psalm is “shake,” while the 46th word from the end of the Psalm is “spear.” Furthermore, the bard was forty-six years old in 1611 when the translation of the KJV was completed. Unfortunately, the only way this will work is if you do not count the word “*selah*” which appears in three places in the Psalm. *Selah* is an indication to the musicians that this is a place to pause. No doubt, there are some interesting coincidences here. But then, it is a shame that people are so preoccupied with interesting coincidences, because, apparently, coincidences are far more intriguing than making an effort to understand how this particular Psalm speaks of Jesus Christ.

As for the background to the Psalm itself, this Psalm (along with a number others) is usually classified as a “Song of Zion.” The Zion Songs are identified as such because these Psalms proclaim the excellencies of Zion (the mountain upon which Jerusalem and the temple are located), which is the apple of YHWH’s eye. In these Psalms YHWH is depicted as the great warrior-king who protects his own as he advances his kingdom. These Psalms are also polemical—they are a response to Canaanite polytheism. In contrast, the Songs of Zion proclaim that YHWH alone is God, and it is he who made the mountains where the Canaanites foolishly believed their “gods” dwelt.

But the Zion motif is not just limited to the physical mountain upon which the city of Jerusalem happens to sit. Zion is the very symbol of God’s kingdom on earth, a kingdom which has a visible expression in the city of Jerusalem and in its temple. Yet the people of Israel also know that YHWH’s kingdom extends beyond Zion to the ends of the earth. In the Zion Songs, it is YHWH who protects the earthly Zion, and its people, and its ruler. It is YHWH who provides for his people—especially during their trials. It is YHWH who blesses them, when (in faith), they obey his covenant. And it is YHWH who will bring down the covenant curses upon Israel when they disobey him. The citizens of spiritual Zion trust in YHWH’s promise. They delight in his presence. They seek to honor him through living lives of gratitude—loving him and neighbor. And they believe that YHWH will see them through the worst of times and trials, which is why they both praise him and call upon his name in these songs.⁴

It is in this sense then that Zion is the center of Israelite life, and why the earthly mount Zion and city of Jerusalem, points beyond the city and the temple to the new Jerusalem and the heavenly city. At this point in redemptive history, Zion is the holy mount where YHWH chooses to be present with his people. He delights when his people acknowledge him as the true and living God. All of this points ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ who is the true temple, and the true Israel, and in whom and through whom the kingdom of God is realized in the new covenant era.

As the author of Hebrews tells Christian worshipers in Hebrews 12:22-24, “*but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*” When we assemble for worship, we

⁴ See the discussion of “Zion Theology,” in: VanGemeran, Psalms (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), EBC.5.408-410.

do so as citizens of the heavenly Zion, the city of the living God, whose inhabitants have been made perfect by the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. We too sing the “Songs of Zion,” but we sing them in reference to God’s kingdom, and to the covenant mediator, Jesus.

The historical situation behind the composition of this Psalm is likely the events recounted in 2 Chronicles 20, when YHWH defeats the tribe of Judah’s enemies while the people uncharacteristically pray and wait for YHWH to act on their behalf—which he does.⁵ According to verses 4 and following of 2 Chronicles 20, “*and Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD. And Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, and said, ‘O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? And they have lived in it and have built for you in it a sanctuary for your name, saying, ‘If disaster comes upon us, the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house and before you—for your name is in this house—and cry out to you in our affliction, and you will hear and save.’*”

In verse 22, the Chronicler tells us that YHWH brought about Judah’s successful ambush of their enemies and as a consequence, “*Judah came to the watchtower of the wilderness, they looked toward the horde, and behold, there were dead bodies lying on the ground; none had escaped. When Jehoshaphat and his people came to take their spoil, they found among them, in great numbers, goods, clothing, and precious things, which they took for themselves until they could carry no more. They were three days in taking the spoil, it was so much.*” Having witnessed YHWH thoroughly defeat their vastly superior enemy and protect his city, the Sons of Korah composed this song of triumphal victory. They directed the choirmaster to use the 46th Psalm on a special occasion—most likely during any time of crisis.⁶

The 46th Psalm is divided into three stanzas, each marked off by “*selah*” (pause). The first stanza (vv. 1-3) reminds us of God’s power over nature, while the second stanza (vv. 4-7) describes YHWH’s power in defending his holy city from all attackers. The third stanza (vv. 8-11) speaks of God’s power over all the warriors of the earth. One commentator speaks of the Psalm’s “robust, defiant tone,” while another speaks of the Psalm’s focus upon the presence of God.⁷ Using language typical of the prophets, YHWH (unlike the false Gods of the Canaanites), is said to come down into the midst of his people. Whenever he does so, he throws Israel’s enemies into confusion. Only the Israelites are in covenant relationship with YHWH. They alone can declare, “*The LORD of hosts is with us.*” The very realization that YHWH dwells in the midst of Israel on Zion gives occasion for the Sons of Korah to compose this Psalm.

As we turn to the text of Psalm 46, we should notice a three-fold repetition found in verse 1, and then again in verses 7 and 11. The Psalm opens with the declaration in verse 1, “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*” Likewise in verse 7, “*The LORD of hosts is with us,*” a phrase which is repeated again verse 11. The God of Israel, is a personal God who is “for us,” and “with us.”

⁵ Geoffrey W. Grogan, Psalms (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 100.

⁶ Kidner, Psalms 1-72 (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 40.

⁷ Kidner, Psalms 1-72 (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 174; VanGemeren, Psalms (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), EBC.5.403.

The names of God are very important—they are explained in the forward of every English translation of the Bible. YHWH (KJV—Jehovah) is all powerful, and the creator and sustainer of all things. He also draws near to us, and is ever-present. The Israelites also know him as *ē'lo·hîm* (God), and as YHWH *sebā'ôt* (Luther's "Lord Sabaoth"), the LORD of the Hosts of heaven. He is the great king over all the earth, yet for the Israelites, he is personal—he is also "the God of Jacob."⁸

The Psalmist uses three metaphors to describe God in the opening verse. He is a *refuge*—a safe place to hide in times of trouble. He is *strength*—he can do all things, as the people of Israel had just witnessed with the victory of Judah over the Moabites and Amorites as recounted in 2 Chronicles 20. But he is also an ever-present help whenever trouble comes. Unlike the Canaanite deities, YHWH may be "found" in times of trial. He is with us, not far away. He is active, not indifferent. He is the fortress for his people, keeping us safe no matter what the circumstances may be. Although we always need him, he is "found" ("with us") when we need him most.

Because the LORD of Hosts is all of these things, in verses 2-3 the Psalmist affirms, "*therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.*" As creatures, the most permanent things we encounter are the earth and the sea. We cannot move them, nor direct them—only the LORD can. But when the ground shakes beneath us, and the sea rages in times of storm, we know that we are safe in the impenetrable and strong fortress—YHWH, our refuge in times of trouble.

An important redemptive-historical theme found throughout the Old and New Testaments surfaces here. In many places, the Bible affirms that when YHWH comes in judgment, the earth shakes, the mountains disappear, as does the ocean. This is why—back in the day in which people still believed in God's providence—natural disasters were described as "acts of God." The Israelites knew it was YHWH who shook the earth, and caused the storm—these things were part of the providential order of things, and a fact of life in a fallen world. Yet, there were also occasions when these acts are God's judgment in response to specific human sins. Therefore, YHWH is to be feared apart from a mediator and a covenant, in which God promises blessings to his people and deliverances from their enemies and his wrath.

In Isaiah 24:17-23, the prophet speaks of the woes which herald the day of the Lord (judgment). Isaiah's description is much like that of verses 2-3 of Psalm 46. The prophet tells us "*terror and the pit and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth! He who flees at the sound of the terror shall fall into the pit, and he who climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the snare. For the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth tremble. The earth is utterly broken, the earth is split apart, the earth is violently shaken. The earth staggers like a drunken man; it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again. On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven [i.e., the fallen angels], and the kings of the earth, on the earth. They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished. Then the moon will be confounded and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and his glory will be before his elders.*"

The image of the complete disruption of the natural order as part of the judgment of God who reigns from Zion—with a very loud echo from verses 2-3 of Psalm 46—also appears in the Gospel of Luke in connection with the second coming of Jesus Christ. As we read in Luke 21:25-28 (our New Testament

⁸ VanGemeren, Psalms (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), EBC.5.404

lesson), “*and there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*” On the day when Jesus returns (the day of the Lord), even the earth itself will give way. The mountains will move into the sea. The waters will foam and disappear. YHWH has come in judgment. He is Lord over all the earth. When he draws near, he strikes terror into the hearts those who renounce his son.

Therefore, YHWH is to be feared—that is, of course, unless through faith in his covenant promises, we confess him to be “*our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*” His people (Israel) know that in him (the unshakable fortress) they are safe from his approach on the day of battle when he comes to deliver his beloved city (Zion). In fact, safe in his refuge, we need never fear his approach—for we know that his anger toward us has been turned aside from us by the death of his son Jesus upon the cross. Because of Christ, YHWH draws near to hide us, protect us, and to deliver us from the storms and trials of life. Jesus Christ is our refuge, strength, and helper in times of trouble

But while the world about us trembles and quakes, while the seas rise up in anger, God’s people are safe in Zion, the city of YHWH. The Psalmist recounts in the second stanza, (vv.4-6) that “*there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.*” Although the roaring waters will threaten the earth, here they are depicted as a blessing from God, and the source of spiritual refreshment.⁹

The city of God is the earthly Zion, Jerusalem, that place where God chose to dwell in the midst of his people. The river is a metaphor for blessing and restoration. In Psalm 65:7, the Psalmist speaks of the river of God watering the earth. In his prophecy, two times Isaiah speaks of such a river (Isaiah 33:21; 43:19-20). In Ezekiel 47:1-12, the prophet speaks of living water flowing out from the temple of YHWH, which in Revelation 22:1-5, John interprets as the water of life which nourishes the tree of life.¹⁰ In watering his people, God provides his people with joy and blessing. He causes his people and his city to stand, even in times of trial. God does not threaten his people, he helps them. The earth may shake, the sea may roar, but God’s holy city and his people stand firm. Even when the nations rage against one another—one earthly kingdom after another coming and going—all God need do is speak one word and the world melts, just as God brought it into existence by that same word.

His people can say of him, “*the LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.*” YHWH Sabaoth leads the armies of heaven into battle. His is our God, demonstrating his grace and mercy toward his people by covenanting with Jacob (descendant of Abraham and Isaac). No doubt, this is a militaristic and triumphant note—our God is greater than any “god” the pagans may conjure up. Our God commands the armies of heaven. Our God creates and destroys with but a word. He dwells in our midst, just as he did with Jacob, with Isaac, and with Abraham. He is our fortress—a term which refers specifically to a high mountain stronghold, not merely a shelter, as the word refuge does in verse 1.

⁹ Kidner, Psalms 1-72 (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 175.

¹⁰ VanGemeran, Psalms (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), EBC.5.404

The closing stanza (vv. 8-11) points the people of God ahead to the time of the end, in light of the victories they have already witnessed. *“Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. ‘Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!’ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”*

When the Psalmist tells the people to “behold” the works of the Lord, he is using the language of a prophet who sees the future. In the midst of trial and trouble, God’s people often lose their perspective. They develop tunnel vision, fixate on the current trial or circumstance, and we lose sight of the bigger picture. The citizens of Zion have just witnessed YHWH rise to their defense and destroy their vastly superior foe. They sing a “Song of Zion” rejoicing in their victory. Yet, their struggles are not over—not even close to being over. The Psalmist directs us ahead to the end of the age when all struggles will finally cease, and wars will end. As one writer puts it, “the outcome is peace, the process is judgment.”¹¹

YHWH has laid waste to the Moabites and Amorites—*“behold his works.”* He not only defeated them, he also defeated the Pharaoh and led this people through the sea on dry ground. He has raised up a king for his people and protected his holy city when his people sought his protection. The defeat of God’s enemies in the wilderness of Judah points his people ahead to a day when all of God’s enemies will be defeated. As he brings desolations upon the earth, he will also bring them on the armies of the earth. He will destroy the implements and weapons of war and establishes a peace which never ends. There can be no earthly utopia, but there will be a new Jerusalem where war will cease, never to be remembered again. God will be exalted over all the earth.

This will come to pass on the day when Jesus returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. As Peter puts it in verses 8-11, 13 of the third chapter of his second epistle, *“but do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. . . . But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”* The new heaven and earth are the home of righteousness.

But until that day when righteousness reigns, and the earth and sea no longer convulse, and all war ceases—when there is a new heaven and earth—the Psalmist instructs us *“be still, and know that I am God.”* YHWH Sabaoth is our refuge, our strength, and our high fortress. We are to be still (this does not mean to be silent, but to rest), as we look to God to deliver us from the storm and from the shaking ground. After all, his track record of keeping his promises is pretty good. Therefore, we know that YHWH is the true and living God. And this is why we should take him his word, when he says, *“I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”* Indeed, every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

Safe in the arms of Jesus—who will lose none of those given him by the Father and who is the fortress of which the Psalmist speaks—we too sing the victor’s song, *“The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”* Unlike the people of Israel in the days of Jehoshaphat, we sing the “Songs of Zion”

¹¹ Kidner, Psalms 1-72 (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 176.

looking not to a small mountain near Jerusalem and to the city and temple built there. Instead, we sing the Sons of Zion knowing that we “*have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.*” We come to a better mountain and a better mediator—and there we are safe, resting in the covenant promises of Jesus who is our refuge, strength, and our *very present help in [times of] trouble.*