

# ***“God: Our Refuge”***

**PSALM 46**

**Baxter T. Exum (#1131)  
Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
September 11, 2011**



This morning I would like for us to do something rather unusual, and that is, I would like for us to go back and look again at a passage that we studied together as a congregation almost exactly ten years ago. Some of you might remember that over Labor Day back in 2001, we looked at this building for the first time. We made an offer to purchase, and then our family immediately left to go visit Keola’s grandmother in Ohio. After a few days in Ohio, we kept on traveling east, and made our way to Niagara Falls, New York, to spend some time with Keola’s brother, who was preaching there at the time. On September 11, we got up very early and left New York at 5:30 in the morning local time (4:30 in the morning Wisconsin time), and we were hoping to spend the last night of our vacation at a hotel in Chicago on our way back home. But, as all of us know, plans have a way of changing. I have a bad habit of listening to news radio on long trips, and as we passed through Pennsylvania on I-90, the news broke that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. A short time later, of course, we learned that a second plane had hit one of the towers, and by the time we crossed into Ohio, we were hearing reports that a plane with a bomb on board was heading for Cleveland. I remember looking up and wondering whether we could see it. The air-conditioning was broken in our old van, and I remember making that drive with the windows open and sticking my head out looking up as we drove. By the time we made it through Cleveland, they had evacuated the airport and were evacuating the city. Later, we would find out that this was because of United Flight #93, which had made its U-turn right over Cleveland. By the time we made it to Chicago later in the afternoon, we were basically the only ones on the road that time. There were rumors of threats against the Sears Tower, and the loop had basically been evacuated. We have never made such good time through Chicago. We skipped those plans to stop at a hotel and just booked it back here to Madison.

The following Sunday as we met in the library at Elvehjem Elementary School, we looked together at Psalm 46. This morning, then, I would invite you to turn there with me again (p. 899). When I got here early this morning, I did something I have never done before, and that is, I connected an antenna to the TV in the back of the auditorium, and I did it to watch some of the ceremony that was going on at Ground Zero. I tuned in in time to see President Obama read the entire 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm, and we know why. We know that the psalms have been a comfort to God’s people for several thousand years now. That was true ten years ago, and it is still true this morning. As you might remember, Psalm 46 was written during a time of great national distress, roughly 700 years before the time of Christ. The Southern Kingdom of Israel was under attack by the Assyrians—Hezekiah was the king of the Southern Kingdom, and Sennacherib was the king of Assyria. There were 185,000

Assyrian soldiers surrounding the city of Jerusalem, and the Assyrian army was the largest and most destructive army in the world at that time. The Assyrian king, Sennacherib, sent a letter to king Hezekiah and told him that there was no way of escape. In response to the Assyrian threat, King Hezekiah took the letter, he laid it out before the Lord, and he asked God to save Jerusalem. The prophet Isaiah brought back word on God's behalf. God had heard Hezekiah's prayer, and the answer to that prayer is found in 2 Kings 19. God promised deliverance, and then God answered that promise by destroying all 185,000 enemy soldiers. The 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm was written to summarize what God's people learned from that experience.

In the Psalms, there is a rather strange word that is sometimes used. From time to time, we find the word "**SELAH.**" As I understand it, it is almost like a marking on a piece of music. When translated into English, it can mean "**a dramatic pause, or crescendo.**" As we look at Psalm 46, therefore, I will not read that word out loud, but I would like for us to pause where the word is found...

- 1 God is our refuge and strength,  
A very present help in trouble.***
- 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change  
And though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea;***
- 3 Though its waters roar and foam,  
Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. Selah.***
- 4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
The holy dwelling places of the Most High.***
- 5 God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved;  
God will help her when morning dawns.***
- 6 The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered;  
He raised His voice, the earth melted.***
- 7 The LORD of hosts is with us;  
The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah.***
- 8 Come, behold the works of the LORD,  
Who has wrought desolations in the earth.***
- 9 He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth;  
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;  
He burns the chariots with fire.***
- 10 "Cease striving and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."***
- 11 The LORD of hosts is with us;  
The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah.***

As we think back over the events of September 11, and as we think back over what our nation has gone through over the past ten years, I would like for us to review some things that we *can know* for certain. These are things we knew ten years ago, and these are things that we know today.

- I. **First of all, I would like for us to look back at the first three verses, and I would like for us to notice that GOD HAS OFFERED TO BE OUR HELP IN TIMES OF TROUBLE. As it says in verse 1, "GOD IS OUR REFUGE."**

We know that trouble will always come to us. On a national level, we have seen this very clearly—over and over again—September 11, and then the anthrax, and then Katrina, and then various droughts, and fires, and floods, and earthquakes, and then all of the various financial crises, along with shootings and crime, and on and on and on. Something bad always seems to happen. We can be badly shaken in this life, but as we read in verses 2-3, ***“though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride...”*** through all of these things, we will not be afraid, because ***“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”*** Regardless of what happens to us, God is still God. God is always there. God is always aware of our suffering and has offered to be with us.

Another way of saying this would be to say that God is our security. I am reminded of Psalm 20:7, where David said that, ***“Some boast in chariots and some in horses, but we will boast in the name of the Lord, our God.”*** In other words, in a world that is turned upside down, we as God’s people can put our faith in God. There are times when our national security will break down. There are times when our military will be defeated. There are times when our intelligence network will let us down. There are times when a metal detector may miss something. And yet, through all of these situations, our trust in God remains. God is still God. And He is not some far-off, distant God, but He is ***“a very present help in trouble.”***

The Children of Israel, therefore, had just gone through a national crisis. As the capital city was under siege, and as the army of Assyria made preparations to attack, the people of Jerusalem were terrified of what was about to happen—the Assyrians were known as the most brutal fighters in the ancient world. But God became a refuge for his people—they did not trust in their own strength, but as we can see from 2 Kings 19, they turned Sennacherib’s letter over to God to deal with, and God dealt with it. So, first of all, we can know that God is our refuge and our strength—a very present help in trouble.

**SONG: “Psalm 46” (Samuel A. Ward, to the tune of “America the Beautiful”)**

This morning we know that God is our help in times of trouble. According to Psalm 46:1, ***“God is our refuge and strength.”***

**II. As we look down at verses 4-7, we see a second lesson, and that is, GOD WILL ALWAYS BE WITH US.**

Verse 4 is very strange. It says, ***“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.”*** But in reality, there is no river going through Jerusalem. Have you thought about the fact that just about every major city in the world is built along a river? In fact, try to think of a major city that does not have a river. I cannot think of one. New York has the Hudson, DC has the Potomac, even Madison has a river, but Jerusalem did not have a river. Water was very scarce there. In fact, it was Hezekiah who later went on to build a tunnel to take spring water from outside the city to the people living inside the walls [2 Kings 20:20].

So, instead of this being some kind of contradiction, it appears from verse 5 that God was the river! God was the river that ran through Jerusalem. That is, he would supply the city with what they needed. They did not have to worry about needing anything, because God was their river. As Paul said in Philippians 4:19, ***“...my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”*** Their needs were supplied, because God was with them. As David said earlier in Psalm 23:4, ***“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.”***

In verse 5, therefore, God ran through the middle of the city. He was always present with his people, and it didn’t matter what was happening outside the city. In verse 6, we see that various nations may cause trouble

from time to time, and yet the words of verse 7 are still very true—***“The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our stronghold.”*** I am reminded of the fact that one of the names of Jesus was Immanuel. The name Immanuel literally means, ***“God with us.”*** Even today, therefore, God is with us. The people, then were secure, not because of those city walls, not because of the heavy gates, not because of a strong military, not because of any secret weapons or special plans, but they were secure because God was with them.

In the New Testament, Jesus said that his Father in heaven knows the number of hairs that I have on my head. That is pretty personal. If God knows how many hairs are on my head, then he also knows everything else that may be going on in my life. God is with us. He is always here in our lives, and this is the second lesson we can learn from the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm.

### **SONG: “Anywhere With Jesus”**

Again, there are many things that we may not know, we live in a very uncertain world, and yet we do know that God will always be with us.

### **III. Not only will God always be our help in times of trouble, and not only will he always be with us, but we learn in verses 8-11 that we also have something to do with how we survive times of trouble. We learn here that WE ARE TO CALM DOWN AND ALLOW GOD TO HELP US AND COMFORT US DURING DIFFICULT TIMES.**

In verses 8-9, we see that God had defeated the Assyrian army. Archaeologists have found some very detailed records of the reign of Sennacherib that were written by the king himself. In fact, since the last time we studied this psalm, I have seen the Sennacherib prism with my own eyes, down at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. It is right there in a glass case and dates to 689 BC. It is basically a small clay pillar describing some of Sennacherib’s military victories. It was a way for the king to brag, and in one of those records, he gives some details about his siege on Jerusalem. Please remember, this is Sennacherib’s own account, “As for Hezekiah the Judean who did not submit to my yoke, forty-six of his strong, walled cities, as well as the small cities in their neighborhood, which were without number, by escalade and by bringing up siege engines, by attacking and storming on foot, by mines, tunnels, and breaches, I besieged and took.” And then he refers to King Hezekiah and says, “...Himself like a caged bird I shut up in Jerusalem.”

It is very interesting that Sennacherib says he had Hezekiah shut up like a bird in a cage, and then the record abruptly ends. He never says that he conquered Hezekiah, and from the Bible record, we know why! In verse 8, we see that the evidence from the Lord’s victory could be clearly seen. From 2 Kings 19, we find that 185,000 of Sennacherib’s soldiers were destroyed by the Lord.

The Lord had helped Hezekiah, and yet in verse 10, we see our part, or what we are to do when we face difficult times. The NASB says, ***“cease striving.”*** The NIV says, ***“be still.”*** One translation says, ***“pause a while.”*** Another one says, ***“desist.”*** The footnote in the NASB says, ***“let go or relax.”***

It means that we are to slow down our lives to the point where we are not overwhelmed with activity. In times when we are sad, or angry, or facing some family struggle, or when someone really lets us down, we are to start by being still. We are to ***“cease striving,”*** because even when God tells us to be still, he is busy at work. He is our refuge and our strength, and he is with us. To appreciate what God is doing, we need to slow down from time to time. We need to look at things from an eternal perspective. As Christians, we can ***“cease striving,”*** because we know that no matter what happens here on this earth, there is nothing that can harm

the relationship we have with God. The last I heard, officials in New York are worried about a “dirty bomb,” a conventional bomb mixed in with radioactive material. And oh, how terrible that would be; but you know, even the worst that might happen does not have the power to separate us from God! The author of the Psalm, therefore, tells us to calm down.

Of course, we know it is hard to slow down. Life moves so quickly. There is so much to do. There are so many meetings. There are so many school activities. There is such a temptation to be constantly busy. Verse 10, however, tells us that when we are suffering, when our hearts are breaking from bad news, what we need to do most is have some quiet time with God—some serious prayer time—time when we ask God to be with us and help us through the current crisis. God’s answer to our prayers is, “Don’t worry about these things. I am on your side, and I will work something out that will help you get through this time.”

### **SONG: “Be Still and Know”**

This morning we have learned from Psalm 46 that God is our refuge, he is always with us, and we need to calm down to truly appreciate the care of God in our lives.

### **Conclusion:**

As we close our thoughts on this psalm, I think we will agree that the world has not really changed very much over the past ten years. However, there are still some very important things that we do know for certain. God is our refuge. He is with us. We need to slow down and thank God for his care in our lives.

For several days after the attacks, we saw something very interesting. For at least a few days, we saw the name of God mentioned with respect. We saw prayers offered in public places. We saw Scriptures being read by public officials. What we really need in this nation, however, is long-term repentance, or heartfelt change. When we studied this psalm ten years ago, I told you about something that happened on our way back to Madison from my sister’s wedding, which would have been on September 15, 2001, the Saturday right after 9-11. We were on our way home from the wedding, and we drove by a strip club off of Highway 14 down near Janesville. Just a few days after 9-11, the top line on their marquee sign said, **“Pray for our nation.”** Right under that, though, it said, **“10 new girls tonight.”** How does God look at our nation? Ten years later, I think we can agree that we as a nation still need to repent.

Did you know that Jesus talked about the collapse of a tower nearly 2000 years ago? In Luke 13, some people ran up to the Lord wanting His opinion on a terrible tragedy. In Luke 13:1-6, the Bible says,

***<sup>1</sup> Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> And Jesus said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? <sup>3</sup> I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. <sup>4</sup> Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”***

In other words, Jesus took two current events, He dispelled the myth that the victims in any way deserved what had taken place, and then He taught a lesson: If those of us who remain do not repent, then we also will perish. Two-thousand years later, I believe the Lord would remind us as well that we must also repent. And

then, as Christians, we are go out from there and teach the gospel to one person at a time. Maybe you are here this morning and you have been touched by the words in Psalm 46—the idea that God is our refuge in a time of trouble, the reminder that God is with us. Maybe you are ready to take advantage of God as your refuge. The Bible teaches that Jesus died for our sins. His death was the most unjust death to ever take place, but He allowed it to happen for us. We respond to that sacrifice by believing in Jesus, by turning away from sin, and by allowing ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you are ready to obey this good news, you can let us know as we stand and sing together...

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