

Horsley Evangelical Church ([www.horsleyec.org.uk](http://www.horsleyec.org.uk))

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## Psalm 46 A Safe Stronghold

If Psalm 45 focuses on an earthly king on his wedding day, Psalm 46 puts our focus firmly back on God. Again, if Psalms 42-44 are laments where the Psalmist expresses *feelings* of being abandoned by God, Psalm 46 assures God's people that they will never abandon by the Lord, even if they are besieged by an enemy.

Psalm 46 has been described as a *defiant Psalm*, written at a time when Israel was under great pressure from an enemy. I find the suggestion that it was written during the time the Assyrian army laid siege to Jerusalem, quite convincing. It fits. This was the time in 701 BC when the Assyrian leader Sennacherib surrounded Jerusalem with his army and demanded of King Hezekiah that he should be let in (the story is told in 2 Kings 18, 19). Now we don't know for sure this was the occasion, but whatever it was, the Psalmist is rallying the Lord's people to put their trust in the living God.

It's the first of what are called *Psalms of Zion* where the faithful are called to remember that the Lord has made Jerusalem or Zion his capital city on earth. And because the Lord loves Zion and its people, it will not fall.

This was Martin Luther's favourite Psalm and on it he based his famous hymn, "A safe stronghold our God is still." It's said that when the daily pressures upon Luther from the Roman Catholic church and its allies became almost too much to bear, he would say to his friend Philip Melancthon, "Come, let us sing the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm and let the devil do his worse." For it's a Psalm that reminds us that our security is in God alone.

You will see that it divides quite neatly into three sections and there is a refrain in verses 7 and 11. "The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." Let's look at Psalm 46 this morning under three headings. In verses 1-3 we have **Fearless Trust**. **Read verses 1-3**. The background seems to be that something very serious is threatening the people of God. Disaster is staring them in the face. Perhaps the words were written as the armies of Sennacherib surrounded Jerusalem. The Assyrians had defeated several other nations by this time and no one had been able to stop their relentless march. They were infamous for their cruelty towards those they had defeated. And they were now knocking on Jerusalem's door.

But the Psalmist is rallying God's people. And he says, "Even if the worst happened – even 'though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea', even if Sennacherib does enter Jerusalem, we will not fear." But why? The answer is found in verse 1 and sets the tone for the whole Psalm. **Read verse 1 again**. The noun 'refuge' is related to the verb 'to trust'. Again and again, the Psalms and the whole Bible tell us of the importance of trusting in God. "Blessed or happy is the man whose trust is in the Lord."

There are many things and people we trust in. And some have their place - many of them are a gracious gift from God to help us in this world. But the bottom line is that we trust in God himself. He himself is his people's refuge. This word 'refuge' refers to a place we can run to and be completely safe.

God is our refuge, and our strength. We may have very little strength in ourselves - and sometimes the Lord helps us to understand that! But God is our strength. And that strength speaks of his protection over us. Then God is described here as an *ever-present help in trouble*. Psalm 46 seems

to be written during a time of serious trouble. But God will not abandon his people. He is with them and will help them. We may not work out *how* he will help us – but that doesn't matter. All the Psalmist is calling us to do is to trust him. Actually the words *ever-present* mean something like *greatly proved*. The Lord has proved many times his help in trouble. And his character does not change.

Therefore we will not fear. Because of the Lord's character, power and promises we will not fear - even if the worst happens. The imagery in verses 2 and 3 is that of creation being taken apart. It pictures the undoing of the created order. The earth with its stable foundation is crumbling. The mountains which symbolize that which is reliable and solid fall into the heart of the sea. The waters, limited by the boundaries God put in place for them, burst those boundaries. The imagery represents the worst you can imagine. Your worst nightmare is realised. [Read verses 2, 3 again.](#)

What would that be for you? What would be the top five things you dread most. Perhaps these are the things you secretly fear *will* happen. Ok, let's say they *do* happen. What then? The Bible is saying, it's still ok. You still do not need to fear. Why? [Read verse 1.](#) The Lord never promises us trouble free lives. In fact Jesus warned us that in this world you *will* have trouble. But God promises that he will be with us, to help and ultimately protect and deliver.

Actually, the New Testament warns us that the events in verses 2 and 3 will happen more literally than we might think one day. [Read 2 Peter 3:10, 12b, 13.](#) The 'undoing of creation' described in our Psalm will happen one day. But even then we will not fear. For Christ is our Saviour. Christ will help us. He will deliver us from the judgment to come upon the world. He died for our sins. In him we have redemption. In him we are safe. And so however you look at it, the Christian who remains in Christ is not to fear. As Luther's great hymn reminds us. "A safe stronghold our God is still".  
**Fearless Trust.**

Then in verse 4-7 we have **Mighty Presence**. [Read verse 4-7.](#) Jerusalem is different from most other cities ancient and modern, in that no river flows through it. So what is the Psalmist talking about in verse 4? [Read verse 4 again.](#) Some wonder if the Psalmist is referring to the channel which King Hezekiah had cut, taking water from the Gihon spring (outside Jerusalem) to the pool of Siloam (inside Jerusalem). This channel or tunnel was cut during Hezekiah's reign so that the people of Jerusalem would have fresh water. Is this what the Psalmist is referring to from verse 4?

It could be, and yet many scholars think that verse 4 should be interpreted symbolically to tell us that God's presence and blessing are always with the city. And if so, verse 5 confirms this. [Read verse 5 again.](#) The Lord had chosen Jerusalem to be the capital of his earthly kingdom. In the days of David and onwards the Lord's presence was there, in the *tabernacle* or the *tent of meeting* and later the *temple*.

God dwells within Jerusalem. His presence and blessing would not be taken from her. The army of Sennacherib camped outside Jerusalem and made terrible threats to the people inside. They said they would besiege the city until it ran out of water and food. They threatened that the people of Jerusalem would have to endure terrible sufferings before the gates were eventually opened to Assyria. Jerusalem would fall. Sennacherib boasted it was only a matter of time.

But the Psalmist is saying, "No, God is within Jerusalem." This word of the Lord came through the prophet Isaiah who was in the city when the Assyrians came. "She will not fall" was Isaiah's message from the Lord. God will help her at *break of day*. *Break of day* or *dawn* was the most likely time when an attack would begin. The aggressor would usually begin the campaign at break of day. Yet God would help his people at *break of day*. It was at *break of day* when the Lord caused the Red Sea to come crashing down upon the Egyptian army. It was also at *break of day* when it was discovered that the Lord had sent his angel to put 185 000 of Sennacherib's men around Jerusalem to death. [Read 2 Kings 19:32-37.](#)

So the river whose streams make glad the city of God is probably best understood as the presence of the Lord and his blessings upon his people. His presence and blessings were there in the garden of Eden since it was well watered. And the Lord's presence and blessings are pictured as a river in the book of Revelation, making glad the heavenly Zion. **Read Revelation 22:1-3.** God's presence and blessing will be with his people in heaven for evermore. And verse 4 of our Psalm looks forward to that.

Verse 6 then emphasises the Lord's control over all things. **Read verse 6 again.** Again, if this Psalm is linked with the time of Sennacherib and his siege of Jerusalem, then this could be a description of this fear and unrest the Assyrians caused at that time. Nations were in uproar and kingdoms were falling. But it only took the Lord to raise his voice for the aggressor to stop. The Lord gave one command, and a single angel went out and destroyed 185 000 soldiers. This is why we are not to fear. God is our refuge and our strength.

I remember speaking to a lady once who told me how, when she was a little girl, it took only a raised voice or even a look from her father, to bring tears to her eyes. That was because she loved her father and respected him. But we should understand that it only takes a word or even a look from our Father to change the whole situation.

If by a word, the heavens and the earth were created. If by a word, the Lord was able to bring order out of the initial chaos, then it takes only a word for the Lord to change any situation and bring order once again. This is surely the point of the miracle when our Lord calmed the storm on lake Galilee with a word. And this is why we continue to pray to the Lord in our difficulties. For it takes only a word from him to change the situation.

Then we have the refrain. **Read verse 7.** Sennacherib boasted that his gods were with him and would defeat Yahweh. But the God of Israel is the Lord Almighty. He is all powerful. He is over all and there is nothing too difficult for him. Now have you forgotten that? But listen again to what the verse is saying. *The Lord Almighty is with us.* Just as he dwelt within Jerusalem and protected his people, so he dwells within the Church and the individual Christian. Therefore we will not fear.

The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. This same Lord Almighty is the one who *reveals himself* to far from perfect individuals -like Jacob. He is the one who can be *known* by individuals like Jacob - and you and me. **Mighty presence.**

We know his presence through our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is *God with us*. This is one of the themes running through Matthew's Gospel. In the opening chapter, we are told about the birth of Jesus who is Immanuel, God *with us*. Then in the middle of the Gospel we are told that even when two of three gather in his name, the Lord Jesus is *with them*. And at the end of the Gospel in the great commission, Jesus promises that as we tell others the good news, he is *with us* always. We know God's mighty presence through Jesus Christ. **Fearless trust. Mighty presence.** And then finally in verses 8-11 we have **Gracious Invitation.** **Read verses 8-11.**

The gracious invitation is made in verse 8. It is gracious because it is made primarily to those who are the Lord's enemies. Yes, it is also said to those of his people who are fearful and panicking, but it is said primarily to the enemies of God who deserve, like the Assyrians, to be destroyed.

"Come and see the works of the Lord, the desolations he has brought on the earth." This is said to those, like Assyria, who doubt the power of the Lord and think they can take advantage of his people. It is said to those who do not trust him or take refuge in him.

But the Lord invites those who doubt to consider his works and in particular how he has dealt with those who oppose him. The Psalmist is thinking primarily about the deliverance of God's people out of Egypt. He may also be thinking of the peoples defeated as the Israelites entered the Promised Land. And yes, he may be thinking about the Lord's defeat of the Assyrians outside Jerusalem.

“Come and see. Let me tell you about those whom the Lord has defeated.” And yet in verse 9 the Lord is pictured not as a God of war, but as a God of peace. **Read verse 9.** He makes wars cease. He doesn’t begin conflict. But after he defeats his enemies, he makes sure that the enemy is not able to fight again. So he breaks their bows and shatters their spears and burns their shields.

They are defeated and disabled because the Lord establishes *peace* not *war*. The new heavens and earth will be a place of eternal peace where all who have rebelled against the Lord will be forever prevented from attacking his people. And then the famous verse 10. **Read verse 10.** Again, it’s said primarily to his enemies. And the meaning is “Enough. Stop fighting against me. You cannot win. It is impossible.” This gracious warning is similar to the one we find back in Psalm 2. **Read Psalm 2:10-12.** “The Lord will be exalted among the nations. The Lord will be exalted in the earth. Therefore stop fighting a battle you cannot win.”

And the invitation of the gospel is similar to these latter verses. The gospel message is that those who live in opposition to God should stop and cease from their efforts to rule their own lives and live as if there was no God. For there is but one God, Yahweh, and there is but one King, God’s Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. And the gospel invites enemies to consider the works of the Lord. Consider the creation account. Consider the rescuing of God’s people from Egypt. Consider the way the Lord settled his people into the Promised Land. Consider all the victories he gave his people over their enemies. But most of all, the invitation is to consider the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ where God defeated his great enemy the devil. Consider how a way was made for sinners to be forgiven and reconciled to God. Consider him who is the prince of peace and the kingdom of peace he is building. **Read Isaiah 2:4, 5.**

Lay down your arms. Stop fighting against God. It is futile and very wrong. Instead receive his mercy and reconciliation through Jesus Christ. **Read verse 11.** The words of this refrain in verses 11 and 7 were a great comfort to John Wesley when he approached death. Apparently, he repeated them to himself over and over again. **Read verse 11 again.** Do you know the truth of them for yourself? Psalm 46 is for times of national crises. If a nation will cry out to the Lord and trust in him, the Lord will hear. O that our own nation would cry out to God in this present crisis.

But Psalm 46 is for times of personal crisis too. This Psalm meant such a lot to Martin Luther and John Wesley personally. For it reminds New Testament believers of the security and comfort we have in Jesus Christ. Paul says, “If God is for us who can be against us? Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”