

On the Sunday following Tuesday, September 11, 2001, churches were crowded with people trying to cope with the worst terrorist attack in US history. The sheer magnitude of the disaster was overwhelming. The entire nation mourned the dreadful loss that Islamic terrorists had inflicted in a single hour. Churches were filled with people seeking solace for weeks following 9/11. The nation rallied. War was declared and more than a decade later we are still fighting terrorism. But the spiritual hunger and the longing for comfort has long since subsided. We returned to “normal,” but there remains a lingering sense that we would never feel as safe or secure as we once did.

Duane Litfin, president of Wheaton College at the time, wrote, “September 11th. A new date for the annals of infamy, one whose images were burned onto our hearts with searing pain, and branding-iron permanence. While we watched that day unfold, an abyss seemed to open at our feet, one that yawns before us still. *It is as if the world is holding its collective breath, waiting to see whom the chasm will swallow next.*”¹

A sense of pending doom has remained ever since, but the forces of distraction are strong. Doug Groothuis writes, “Although America is threatened by deadly terrorism, it refuses to get deadly serious about God, the soul, and matters of eternity. Many just want life to return to normal when ‘normal’ — designer religion, materialism, crass sensuality, and relentless entertainment — is precisely what God wants us to repent of.”²

Terror struck again on December 26th, 2004, when a 9.0 earthquake in the Indian Ocean, buckled the ocean floor and produced a devastating tsunami. This time instead of three thousand deaths, more than one hundred and twenty-six thousand people died. But there were no terrorists to blame. In a moment beautiful tropical beaches became scenes of absolute horror and destruction. Without warning the cataclysmic forces of nature governed by laws absolutely objective in application unleashed unimaginable destruction. Tropical coasts along the Indian Ocean became inescapable death traps. News of the disaster spread to the West faster than it did to some of the people in the path of the tsunami. Radiating waves obliterated villages killing poor fishermen and wealthy tourists, kids playing on the beach and the elderly looking on. Now, instead of an unimaginable act of man’s inhumanity to man, there was an unexpected natural disaster of apocalyptic proportions.

Psalm 46 is a psalm of confidence that bridges the “downcast” soul (Ps 42:5, 11; 43:5) and the “deep darkness” (Ps 44:19) with the royal wedding psalm (Ps 45) and the celebration of God’s sovereign rule over the nations (Ps 47). This is a psalm of hope, prayed by the people of God even though “the earth gives way” and the “mountains fall into the sea.” The three-part psalm is punctuated with a refrain: “The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (Ps 46:7, 11).

“The voice of this psalm is the voice of the Church, the holy city, which is the dwelling place of God. Hence the importance of the first person plural all through the psalm: ‘we,’ ‘us,’ and ‘our.’”

¹ Duane Litfin,

² Doug Groothuis, “The Church in Danger,” Moody, Feb. 2003, 36.

Patrick Reardon continues, “God is ‘our’ refuge and strength, ‘we’ shall not fear, The Lord of hosts is with ‘us,’ and so forth. This is the voice of God’s people, the same voice that prays, ‘Our Father.’”³

God is our Refuge

*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.*
Psalm 46:1-3

In a crisis, this is where we begin: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble.” The fact that God is with us is the single most important truth for overcoming our fears. When we are shaken to the core, we return to this bedrock truth. When we are painfully aware of our depravity and vulnerability, we begin here: God is our refuge and strength whether we are up against terrorists or natural disasters or are own depravity. Our souls are anchored in the enduring truth that God is our sure defense, our inner strength, and our means of salvation. Immanuel, God with us, changes everything, especially now that God has come in the person of Jesus Christ (Isa 7:14; 8:8, 10). “God is our refuge” takes on an even greater meaning in the light of Christ. Psalm 46 is prayed today in the light of the far reaching impact of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we sing *Joy to the World!* at Christmas, we can hardly imagine the great reversal described in the third stanza: “No more let sin and sorrow grow / Nor thorns infest the ground. / He comes to make his blessings flow / Far as the curse is found, Far as the curse is found, Far as the curse is found.”

To speak of Jesus Christ as “an ever present help in trouble” causes us to grasp the unique and specific ways that God helps us. We are helped through his Passion (his life, death, and resurrection), his Parousia (his second coming), his Paraclete (the gift of the Holy Spirit), and his abiding Presence (the gift of union with him in the Body of Christ). The help we need in this world and the next is salvation through Jesus Christ.

Psalm 46 and Psalm 2 are in agreement. The nations rage and plot in vain, but “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath...” (Ps 2:1-5). We do not “see everything subject to him” (Heb 2:8), but we look forward to the day when, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Rev 11:15).

The magnitude of the devastating Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami is hard for our minds to grasp. Throughout the history of the church extreme catastrophes have been perceived as a reminder of the ultimate spiritual struggle between God and his creation. The apostle Paul wrote, “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one

³ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 89.

who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:20-21). Christians through the ages have seen terrorism and tsunamis as a *wake-up call*, calling people to turn to God and receive his grace and mercy.

The psalmist does not dwell on evil. He deftly describes the cataclysmic and apocalyptic extent of evil, but he refuses to be overwhelmed by it. French philosopher, Francois Voltaire used the devastating Lisbon earthquake of 1755 to refute the existence of a good and just God. According to Voltaire all is not well with the world and he defied biblical revelation to make sense of it. His poem was a *tour de force* against the biblical world-view. It reads in part:

Unhappy mortals! Dark and mourning earth!
Affrighted gathering of human kind!
Eternal lingering of useless pain!
Come, ye philosophers, who cry, “All’s well,”
And contemplate this ruin of a world.

Behold these shreds and cinders of your race,
This child and mother heaped in common wreck,
These scattered limbs beneath the marble shafts—
A hundred thousand whom the earth devours,
Who, torn and bloody, palpitating yet,
Entombed beneath their hospitable roofs,
In racking torment end their stricken lives.

Voltaire questioned the moral order of the universe, “Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice / Than London, Paris, or sunlit Madrid?” He challenged the idea that there was a sovereign God in control of the universe. Voltaire reasoned that if, “A God came down to lift our stricken race,” he left it in the same mess that he found it. “He visited the earth, and changed it not!” Voltaire was right, we do not live in *the best of all possible worlds*, but he was wrong to think that the Bible claimed we did. His moral indignation against evil was right, and a sign that he himself was made in God’s image, but he was wrong to reject God’s “ever-present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1).

In 1755 John Wesley also wrote about the Lisbon earthquake. Unlike Voltaire, he saw the devastating tragedy as an event that ought to drive men and women to God, because it proved that we have no defenses sufficient to withstand the forces of evil or the judgment of God. Wesley saw all humanity inherently fallen and subject to the judgment of God. “The earth threatens to swallow you up. Where is your protection now?” Money offers no defense and you cannot fly away. Wisdom and titles offer no protection. And if an earthquake doesn’t threaten you, maybe a comet will!”

Wesley cut through the philosophy of blame and the psychology of despair and concluded that if “our own wisdom and strength be not sufficient to defend us, let us not be ashamed to seek farther help. Let us even dare to own that we believe there is a God” an all-knowing, all-powerful God. “Let us secure him on our side; let us make this wise, this powerful, this gracious God our

friend. Then need we not fear, *though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea*; no, not even if the heavens being on fire are dissolved, and the very elements melt with fervent heat. It is enough that the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of love is our everlasting refuge.”

Wesley used the Lisbon earthquake to demonstrate that we cannot protect ourselves. Suppose you are not crushed in an earthquake, he reasoned, or swept away in a flood, or struck by a comet, the sad truth is that we all must face death. The consequence of sin is death and there is no avoiding it, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus (Rom 6:23). For Wesley the question was this: “How shall we secure the favor of this great God?”

“If you love God, then you are happy in God; if you love God, riches, honors, and the pleasures of sense are no more to you than bubbles on the water. . . .If you love God, God is in all your thoughts, and your whole life is a sacrifice to him. And if you love humankind, it is your one design, desire, and endeavor, to spread virtue and happiness all around you, to lessen the present sorrows, and increase the joys, of every child of humanity; and if possible to bring them with you to the rivers of pleasure that are at God’s right hand for evermore.”

Voltaire’s poem on the Lisbon earthquake ends in resignation and despair. Wesley’s conclusion is a benediction.

“May the Father of your spirit, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, make you such a Christian! May He work in your soul a divine conviction of things not discerned by eyes of flesh and blood! May He give you to see Him that is invisible, and to taste of the powers of the world to come! May He fill you with all peace and joy in believing, that you may be happy in life, in death, in eternity!”⁴

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;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.
Psalm 46:4-8*

The stability and security of the City of God are set in contrast to the earth giving way and the mountains falling into the heart of the sea. Psalm 46 insists that no matter what happens on earth, the Lord is Sovereign. In a violent and chaotic world, “the city of God is set down as a simple matter of fact.”⁵ Violence in all its forms: in nature (46:2-3), in politics (46:6), and in war (46:9) is no match for indwelling presence of God, the promise of God’s help, and proclamation of God’s voice.

⁴ Wesley, vol. 11, 1-13.

⁵ Peterson, *Earth & Altar: The Community of Prayer in a Self-Bound Society*, 73.

The river running through the City of God is symbolic of God's sustaining help. Instead of chaotic seas that menace and threaten, there is a life-giving river that runs as clear as crystal "down the middle of the great street of the city."⁶ This river flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb with the fruit-bearing tree of life on either side of the river and always in season (Rev 22:1-2). We sing the hymn:

"Like a river glorious is God's perfect peace, over all victorious in its bright increase: perfect, yet it floweth fuller everyday, perfect, yet it groweth deeper all the way. Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest, finding as he promised, perfect peace and rest."

Nations are in an uproar and kingdoms fall. The earth gives way and mountains fall into the sea, but the City of God is secure, stable, and immovable. Its safety and permanency comes from God's holiness. His holy presence establishes her. God's help is constant day to day and from beginning to end. The world is filled with disorder and confusion but in God's presence we find peace and righteousness. The praying poet used the word *earth* to link the bedrock reality of God to our lives:

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

"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*..."

"I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the *earth*."

Psalm 46:6, 8, 10

The psalmist insists on a vantage point that can only be experienced in the presence of God. The psalmist does not dwell on evil. He deftly describes the cataclysmic and apocalyptic extent of evil, but he refuses to be overwhelmed by it. The earth can give way and the nations can rage, but God is stronger than the evil. The psalmist calls for real world, real time confidence and trust in Yahweh. "The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress" (Ps 46:7). John Wesley speaks of the "unspeakable advantage" a believer has over an unbeliever: "a continual serenity of mind, a constant evenness and composure of temper, 'a peace which passes all understanding,' contentment with life, a continual attitude of gratitude to the living God, and tender compassion toward all people."⁷

"Cease and Desist"

*Come and see what the Lord has done,
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;*

⁶ See Ezekiel 47:1-9; Zechariah 14:8; Joel 3:18.

⁷ Wesley, vol. 11, 1-13.

*he burns the shields with fire.
He says, "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 46:8-11

Four imperatives bring Psalm 46 to a powerful conclusion: "Come and See," and "Stop, and Know that I am God." In worship the people of God are projected into the future to see the desolations wrought by God upon the earth. These "desolutions" are good news because they bring evil to a decisive and definitive end.⁸ The global mission of the gospel could not be more political, but it is political in way entirely different from the politics of the world. The psalmist offers to the world the first word of the gospel, "Come and see." The announcement of the kingdom of God is open to all. The gospel is inviting, not intimidating. But the day will come when the war to end all wars will be waged by the Lamb of God, the Heavenly Warrior who is Faithful and True (Rev 19:11-21). No literal military battle will be fought, because as Luther said in his famous hymn, "one little word shall fell him."

Through the metaphoric broken bow and shattered spear the psalmist announces the end of evil. The wars, killings, rapes, and abortions must come to an end. The gang violence, the school massacres, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and the trading in human cargo must end. The adultery, abandonment, abuse, and divorce must end. The plagues, epidemics, malignancies, and deformities, must end. The earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, and famines must end. The volcanos, tornadoes, hurricanes, and droughts must end. The lies, slander, deception, manipulation, must end. The fraud, greed, bribes, and kickbacks must end. The addictions, obsessions, fixations, and perversions must end. The gluttony and starvation must end. If we itemize every sin, every crime, every disease, every form of deviancy and perversion would there ever be an end to evil? But all evil will end one day. The apostle John joins the psalmist in announcing this end and plays it out live on the stage of our praying imagination so we can feel the drama of the cataclysmic end of evil.⁹

The second imperative couplet, Stop and Know, is addressed to the nations. It "is not in the first place comfort for the harassed but a rebuke to a restless and turbulent world: 'Quiet!' – in fact, 'Leave off!'" Derek Kidner adds, "It resembles the command to another sea: 'Peace! Be still!' (Mark 4:39)."¹⁰ The Sovereign Lord announces, "Cease and Desist," to the world's superpowers and rebel factions. The nations are exhorted to "be still" and know that the Lord is God. The verb, "be still" conveys the idea of "stand down" or "relax." God is commanding the nations: "Stop fighting," "Cease your resistance." "The imperative is a warning for the turbulent world to stop what they are trying to do."¹¹

"Be still and know that I am God" is a familiar challenge to the restless believer who needs to

⁸ Goldingay, Psalms, 71.

⁹ Webster, Follow the Lamb, 222-223.

¹⁰ Kidner, Psalms, 176.

¹¹ Ross, Psalms, 98.

learn to trust the Lord and rest in his sovereign care. The Lord's rebuke to the nations is taken personally and transposed as a sought after discipline of Christian spirituality. Although the psalmist did not have this specific meaning in mind, Goldingay offers the following insight: "Spirit-inspired interpretation often works by making the words of Scripture mean something quite different from what they actually meant, because new situations make it necessary for God to say new things."¹²

The psalm ends by repeating the refrain and emphasizing the abiding truth of the Lord's presence. Those who resonate with the fearless hope of Psalm 46 share John Wesley's last words, "The best of all is, God is with us." Psalm 46 inspired Martin Luther's famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." The hymn like the psalm testifies to the sovereign strength of God: "our helper he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing." Luther boldly proclaimed "God is our refuge" because "the right man" was on our side, "the man of God's own choosing . . . Christ Jesus it is he." Luther wrote the hymn in 1527 after learning that Leonhard Kaiser, a close friend, had been burned at the stake in the Netherlands for refusing to recant. A resilient Luther wrote the fourth stanza in tears of faith:

*That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth:
let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still, his kingdom is forever.*

¹² Goldingay, Psalms, 73. Goldingay comments, "At the same time, we have to be wary of missing what the text actually did say. Here it issues an important challenge to the superpower to stand still and recognize that God is God and that the superpower is not."