

Study Notes: Psalm 46
Reformation Sunday: November 1, 2020: “A Mighty Fortress”
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Introduction: In the title attached to this Psalm, it is written for the director of music and set to a specific tune (alamoth). The Psalms are sometimes called the hymnbook of Israel, and most Psalms were set to specific tunes. The title also attributes this Psalm to the “sons of Korah.” This Psalm is identified as a “Song of Zion” (along with Psalms 48, 76, 84, 87, and 122) which celebrates God’s Presence within the city and His protection of it. Though they are not listed in these notes, the Psalm includes three *selahs*, or a break or a pause, which divide the Psalm into three sections.

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

- Psalm 46 began with a statement about who God is. God is called our refuge and strength, which can also be translated as “strong refuge,” as well as our “ever-present helper.” Both these descriptions of God relate to how God can provide for us in the time of our trouble. Later in verses 7 and 10, the Psalmist called God our fortress, which is a variation on this same theme, of God’s strength and ability to provide us with protection and help in all kinds of trouble.
- Biblical Scholar, James Boice, says of this verse, “Verse 1 looks to God for two kinds of help, indicating that he is: (1) a stronghold into which we can flee and (2) a source of inner strength by which we can face calamities. Sometimes God shields us from what is going on around us...In such times God is our fortress. At other times we are afflicted and do suffer. Then we find that God is our help. We are able to say, ‘God is my strength, my ever-present help in trouble.’”

***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.***

- Because of who God is, we do not need to fear any kind of calamity, even the destruction of the earth, which is described in these verses in graphic detail as the earth giving way, mountains crumbling, and violent, turbulent seas.
- This picture of calamity is a picture of God’s judgment on the world as the Expositor’s Bible commentary explains, “She will not fear even when God’s coming (theophany) in judgment is preceded by radical cosmic phenomena — earthquakes and floods (cf. 18:7–15). The world catastrophes are the ‘woes’ of the day of the Lord heralding the messianic age (cf. Isa 24:18–23; Jer 4:24; Na 1:5). Every substantial change in the balance of power was interpreted as God’s direct intervention in the form of judgment — an expression of the day of the Lord. This psalm expresses Israel’s confidence in the Lord’s protection when he shakes the world so as to effect significant political, cultural, and economic changes.”

***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.

- In the midst of chaos, the people of God are safe within the city of God. The river is reminiscent of the river within the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 2:10-14) and is meant to represent restoration, healing, and blessing.
- Rather than fear, the people can be glad and rejoice because God will help them through whatever happens in this world. Nothing can destroy the people who live in the Presence of God, the Most High. This name indicates that God is supreme ruler over all the earth. The Expositor's Bible Commentary explains, "God's people will never fall. They will always be assured of his readiness to help them (v. 5). The help of God 'at break of day' (cf. Ex 14:27) suggests that in the darkness of distress the people of God know that the Lord will not let them suffer unduly long (cf. 30:6-7; 90:14). His acts of unfailing love are renewed each morning (cf. La 3:22-23)."
- Though the nations and kingdoms of this world are chaotically rising and falling, God has the ability to control them all. With a word, God can destroy the very earth. This speaks to the power of God in comparison to anything or anyone who would be an enemy to the people of God. The image of the earth melting is also used in Amos 9:5 to describe the final judgment on the earth.

The Lord Almighty is with us;

the God of Jacob is our fortress.

- The Lord Almighty is with His people, and is a refuge or fortress who protects them from trouble. God's title, *Lord Almighty*, relates to His command of the heavenly armies. This is the second time this sentiment is expressed in the Psalm. It is also expressed in verse 1 and verse 10, which closes the Psalm.

***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;

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."

- In this third section of the Psalm, a call was issued for people to see what the Lord accomplished and to recognize His power. God's power is revealed in the judgment that comes to the earth, the control He has over nations and wars, and the ability he has to bring peace. The image of breaking the bow and spear shows that God has the ability to break the strength of even the strongest person.

- After seeing what God has done, God commands the people to be still and recognize who He is. The Hebrew verb, *raphah*, translated as “be still,” means “to release and let go.” The people must stop their striving, and understand that no matter what happens, the Lord is God and He will be exalted among the nations and peoples of the earth. They must come to know God. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary explains what this part of the command means, “The knowledge of God includes factual knowledge about him, his past acts, and his promises. But in this context, the psalmist calls on them to commit themselves to the Lord and to seek his ‘refuge,’ ‘strength,’ and ‘fortress’ (vv. 1, 7, 11). The life of faith is lived continually in commitment to God’s sovereignty, rule, and ultimate exaltation over all the nations (cf. Hab 2:13–14).”
- James Boice further explains, “In this setting, ‘be still, and know that I am God’ is not advice to us to lead a contemplative life, however important that may be. Elisabeth Elliot was not wrong to say that this should be our goal in times of emotional turmoil. It means rather, ‘Lay down your arms. Surrender, and acknowledge that I am the one and only victorious God.’”

***The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.***

- The Psalm ended with the same statement of trust, which also began and was found in the middle of the chapter. The Lord Almighty is with His people, and provides a fortress where they can find refuge from whatever is happening around them.