



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina
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Our Strong Refuge Psalm 46

What a week and a half!

Hurricane Florence was one for the record books! She has taken her place alongside the big ones! And though she's gone now, what she left behind her is still wreaking havoc on large areas of North and South Carolina.

As important as what I had planned to address in our *Experiencing God* series last Sunday and today is, I think it's even more important at this point to step away from that series today and instead focus on acknowledging what we and our neighbors throughout the region have been through, and to offer a word of encouragement, hope, and confidence from the Scriptures.

Remembering . . .

When we've been through such a crisis, while we can't stay in that mode, it is important for us to take a moment to acknowledge and reflect on what has happened, what's been lost, and how things may now be different for our city, our county, our region, and ourselves.

Does doing that bring back memories for you? Matthew? Floyd? Fran? Bertha? Hugo? For some of you even Hazel?

If it does, that's okay. That's how grief works. New grief often resurfaces old griefs. New fear or anxiety often brings old ones back again.

We have to be honest about all that. Like those previous storms, Florence was a monster. While her winds may not have been as strong as those I just mentioned, her reach was much farther, her forward speed much slower, and her outcome even more devastating for many areas because of the record rainfall and flooding. We thought that couldn't be much worse than it was with Floyd or Matthew. But it is.

When our world is shaken, when it's turned upside down from what's going on around us, it can be easy to lose hope. In turbulent and troublesome times, we need somewhere—or better yet, *someone*—that we can turn to for refuge, for shelter from the storms of life.

And that's where our text, Psalm 46,¹ comes in. This beautiful hymn says it far better and more beautifully than I ever could. Listen to the word of the Lord!

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear,
Even though the earth be removed,

And though the mountains be carried
into the midst of the sea;
³ Though its waters roar and be troubled,
Though the mountains shake with its swelling. Selah

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad
the city of God,
The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.
⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God shall help her, just at the break of dawn.
⁶ The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved;
He uttered His voice, the earth melted.

⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD,
Who has made desolations in the earth.
⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;
He burns the chariot in the fire.

¹⁰ "Be still, 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 refuge. Selah

A moving confession . . .

What a tremendous, moving confession of faith in God! *The psalmist praised God as Israel's refuge, strength, and ever-present help in trouble.*

In the mountains of ancient Palestine, the Hebrews often found protection and refuge from sudden storms in the cracks and clefts and crevices of those towering rocks. When the psalmist penned this hymn of praise for the people to sing in worship, it was quite natural for him to use this vivid imagery to praise God for bringing them through their troubles and to express their confidence in Him, even in the worst and most difficult situations.

The psalm is composed of three stanzas, with the second and third ending with a refrain.

The first stanza (46:1-3) declares that God's people would not fear any cosmic cataclysm because of God's presence and help. Earthshaking, ocean-quaking events are no match for God, who is His people's refuge and strength, their **very present help in trouble**.

The second stanza (46:4-6) declares that they would not fear for the holy city (Jerusalem) in war because of God's presence there. The Jews of that day believed that so long as the temple was standing, God was present in Jerusalem, and that as long as He was present, Jerusalem could not fall. According to the prophet Ezekiel, when Jerusalem did fall, it was because God had withdrawn His presence from the temple and the city because of the people's sin and idolatry (Ezekiel 10-11).

Then the refrain in v. 7 affirms God's power, His presence, and His protection.

The final stanza (46:8-10) declares God's universal purpose—**He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth, and He will be exalted among the nations** (the Gentiles) **and in the earth**. This psalm carries significant implications about how God would work in the future, how

through the coming of Christ He would bring all nations under His rule.

The final refrain in v. 11 again affirms God's power, presence, and protection.

Our refuge and strength . . .

It's a beautiful psalm, isn't it? *The psalmist praised God as Israel's refuge, strength, and ever-present help in trouble.* It's an affirmation believers have drawn strength from down through the ages in all kinds of personal, national, religious, and other crises and disasters.

This psalm served as the basis for Martin Luther's majestic hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." During the troubles and persecutions of the Reformation, Luther indeed found God to be his mighty fortress where he could find refuge, strength, and help! And the saints have used this hymn that sets this psalm to music to declare it for nearly a half a millennium now. Listen to its words again . . .

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great,
And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us:
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure:
One little word shall fell him.

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.

Indeed, God is our mighty fortress, always strong, always with us! And like the psalmist, like Luther, and like untold hosts through the ages, *in troubled times, we can always find refuge, strength, and help in trusting our ever-present God.* We can look to Him in faith as *our strong refuge.*

We can find refuge, strength, and help in Him, whether it's in our personal crises and trials or a natural or man-made disaster. In the midst of illness or injury, death or devastation, we can take shelter in His presence and find strength and help in Him. In national and international crises, we can pray and seek His help for justice and right, not revenge, to prevail. We can pray and trust His help and strength for the victims of disaster and violence and injustice and their family and friends, and for those who seek to help and minister to them.

But how do we find this refuge, strength and help? Simply *by trusting our ever-present God, putting our faith in His Son Jesus Christ.* We must put our trust in Jesus, submitting to Him as Lord and depending on Him to save us.

We must put our trust in Him continually—*during* the crisis, and *beyond* the crisis!

During disasters and their aftermath, there is often an emphasis on prayer. Two poignant examples happened close by us in recent days, one of which got national attention. When Wilmington firefighters were unable to get a mother and her 8-month-old baby out of a house a tree had fallen on before they died, they huddled and prayed. And when firefighters in Whiteville were getting ready to go out on water rescue missions with the National Guard, they gathered and prayed. Both of these were most appropriate responses and powerful witnesses.

But faith and prayer aren't just for times of crisis, using them as a spare tire when things go wrong. Faith has to be a genuine commitment to Christ, and prayer a regular expression of that commitment.

When we truly trust God, we can be sure of the promise of His presence, even when we can't feel it!

We can be sure, according to His own promise, that He is with us. Like the little child whose fear of the dark is calmed by knowing that his or her daddy is there, we can find comfort, strength, and hope to face the days ahead, no matter what they hold.

I know of no better way to close this sermon on this beautiful affirmation of faith from Psalm 46 than with Paul's beautiful affirmation from Romans 8:35-39 . . .

²⁸ **And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.**

³⁵ **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?** ³⁶ **As it is written,**

**"For Your sake we are being killed all day long;
We are regarded as sheep for the slaughter."**

³⁷ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanks be to God! Amen!

†MEG

¹ Scripture taken from the New King James Version.