

God is our Refuge and Strength – Psalm 46

Cold War Peacemakers

During the early days of the Cold War era, people were genuinely afraid of nuclear annihilation. Not just destruction but annihilation – to reduce everything to nothing, to completely and utterly destroy the world in which we live.¹ Some of those people had survived 2 world wars and the Great Depression. It was right for them to be afraid because they knew how fragile peace was and how quickly the world tipped into war and financial ruin. The great threat of the Cold War was all the nuclear missiles which were aimed at strategic places and cities. People knew that if one country shot their missiles at other countries, then those other countries would retaliate straight away, and within minutes the world would turn to ash. The one advantage we had was that nobody wanted to start a nuclear war. Those nuclear missiles were known as peacemakers, because the threat of using them kept the peace. But they were also known as peacemakers because if they were ever used they would bring peace. For, if the world was completely annihilated into ash and smoke, then there would be no one left to do the fighting, and there would be peace.

While there is still the threat of nuclear missiles, the Cold War is over, and most people have lived in relative peace for decades. Those who survived the First World War have all passed away, so have the majority of those who lived through the Great Depression. Those who survived the Second World War are coming to the end of their lives, which means that the majority of the Western World, and especially those who have been raised in Australia, have only known security, peace and prosperity. We have had the good life, but Covid-19 threatens everything we have known.

Refugees Seeking Refuge

Psalm 46 speaks about the security God's people can have when they put their trust in him.

Psalm 46:1 God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble.

A refugee is a person whose life is completely insecure. Refugees usually have to travel to another country in the hope that they might find shelter and protection from some kind of war or threat of life in their home country. This usually means that they are poor, have no home, have no way of making money, and are totally dependent on others. A refugee needs someone to give them security, shelter, protection and refuge. Refugees seek refuge! The writer of the psalm says that God is our refuge and strength. He says that God is our helper, who is always ready to help in times of trouble. Too often, we think that this means that when things are not going our way, when we don't get what we want, then we expect God to make life a little bit better. It is all about making life comfortable for us. We forget that we are the refugees in this psalm because life has been so good for us. We forget that we are totally dependent on God for everything, including life, and we get annoyed with God when we hit a bump in the road. So, we must not be proud and think that we are strong, we must remember that we are refugees in need of saving. Of course, a refugee's trust in the refuge

¹ "annihilate" 1. To reduce to nothing; destroy utterly: *the bombing annihilated the city*. Macquarie Encyclopedic Dictionary: The Signature Edition (Australia's Heritage Publishing Pty Ltd; Sydney, Australia), 2011.

he is using is only as strong and secure as the refuge is. Some places of refuge look strong, but they end up failing to be a place of safety. Those who boarded the Titanic thought it was unsinkable right up to the moment it went under the water. Some even refused to get on the lifeboats because they thought it was safer on the “unsinkable” ship. But those who got in the lifeboats found refuge and survived. We are told in this psalm that God is our refuge and strength. God is the only place where we can find eternal life, peace, and safety. So, it is best to turn to him for refuge, before it is too late.

Reversing Creation

Psalm 46:2-3 So we will not fear when earthquakes come and the mountains crumble into the sea.³ Let the oceans roar and foam. Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge!

In this translation (NLT), we see the waters surge at the end of verse 3. Most other translations talk about the mountains quaking and surging rather than the mountains quaking and the waters surging. Both translations are okay but the picture they are meant to paint for us is that of the world falling apart. During the creation story, God had made the dry land come up out of the waters of the sea.² Now, in Psalm 46, the dry land was trembling, surging, crumbling, and melting back into the sea. It was as if creation was being reversed as God brought judgement on his creation. This psalm is a psalm of judgement as God destroys the corrupt world he had created. So if God, the creator, reverses creation, then you either have to look for someone more powerful than God to protect you (whom you will never find), or you need to turn to God before Judgement Day to find protection in him. God is the only place to find refuge. So, what would God’s protection look like?

Defending God’s Holy City

Psalm 46:4-5 A river brings joy to the city of our God, the sacred home of the Most High.⁵ God dwells in that city; it cannot be destroyed. From the very break of day, God will protect it.

For the Old Testament people of God, God’s city was Jerusalem because God’s temple was there. The temple was the place where God’s name was said to dwell. It was the place where people came to meet with God. So, for the Old Testament people of God, they saw the City of God as an actual place on the map, which God would always protect. The armies of other nations could come and try to destroy it, but God dwelled there, and God would destroy those who fought to overthrow his city. Look at how he would protect his city and how he would annihilate those who opposed him.

Psalm 46:6-9 The nations are in chaos, and their kingdoms crumble! God's voice thunders, and the earth melts!⁷ The LORD of Heaven's Armies is here among us; the God of Israel is our fortress. Interlude⁸ Come, see the glorious works of the LORD: See how he brings destruction upon the world.⁹ He causes wars to end throughout the earth. He breaks the bow and snaps the spear; he burns the shields with fire.

This is a bit like the peacemaker missiles of the Cold War. The world rallies against God and they even pick on his people and threaten his city. The problem is that when God decides to finally intervene and protect his kingdom, then it will be total annihilation for those who oppose him. Wars will cease throughout the world, because there will be no one left to oppose him, and the instruments of war will be destroyed. The psalmist was so sure that this would happen that he spoke about it in a way that sounds like it has already happened,

² Genesis 1:9

but as I said before, I think this looks forward to Judgement Day. So, how should have God's Old Testament people responded to this psalm?

Judgement on the City

Psalm 46:10-11 "Be still, and know that I am God! I will be honored by every nation. I will be honored throughout the world." ¹¹ The LORD of Heaven's Armies is here among us; the God of Israel is our fortress. Interlude

Be still! Stop your fighting! Act as if you already have peace because God is here among you. God is your fortress in whom you can find refuge on the day when God defends his Kingdom and all wars cease! But there is one big problem with this psalm. God's city, Jerusalem, was destroyed by the Babylonians. Sure, it was rebuilt, but it was destroyed again by the Romans. Why would God not protect his city when he said he was going to? Is there another meaning to this psalm?

Well, there are 2 things worth noting. Firstly, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians because God chose to use the Babylonians to bring his judgement against Jerusalem and its people. You see, God's people were no longer God's people. They had turned away from God, they had corrupted the temple, they were worshipping false gods. Imagine a marriage with God as the husband and his Old Testament people as his wife. Worshipping false gods in the temple was like having an extra marital affair in God's bed and saying, "So, what are you going to do about that then?" God's Spirit left the temple and he allowed it to be destroyed by the Babylonians.

Jesus Brings Peace

The second thing worth noting is that God returned to Jerusalem in the person of Jesus and Jesus came to bring people into God's eternal Kingdom.

John 1:10-12 He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. ¹¹ He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. ¹² But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.

The belief that John talks about here is that Jesus is God and is the king of God's Kingdom. As the King, he gives people the right to become children of God, to become part of God's family, part of God's Kingdom. Later in John's Gospel, Jesus had been arrested and was standing before the Roman Governor Pilate, who was deciding whether Jesus was a threat to Rome and deserved crucifixion.

John 18:33-36 Then Pilate went back into his headquarters and called for Jesus to be brought to him. "Are you the king of the Jews?" he asked him. ³⁴ Jesus replied, "Is this your own question, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵ "Am I a Jew?" Pilate retorted. "Your own people and their leading priests brought you to me for trial. Why? What have you done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world."

The Kingdom of God is no longer an actual city. You cannot find it on a map anymore. One of the mistakes people made was that they thought that the bricks and stones of the temple and the city walls would protect them. But their protection was never found in the objects and structures of a building. It was always found in the person of God, it was always found in a relationship with God. Some people think that church buildings, crosses, and holy water will save a person from spiritual threats, but again, protection is found in the person

of Jesus, in a relationship with Jesus. The amazing thing that Jesus did was not to break the bow, snap the spear, burn the shields so that war would cease and bring peace with God. No, the amazing thing that Jesus did was to allow the enemy to think it had victory over him and he died on the cross. But Jesus did not stay dead, he rose victoriously from death so that we could have peace with God. The peace that Jesus brings is against our greatest enemies: sin and death. Jesus totally destroyed them and they have no effect anymore. If sin and death were spears, bows and arrows, and shields, then Jesus has destroyed them. Our refuge is found in Jesus, our Saviour and our God, and we find peace with him through a personal relationship with him.

Eternal Refuge

Now, there are times when we might feel insecure in this world and living right now, with the threat of Covid-19, is one of those times. Anyone of us could catch this virus, anyone of us could die from this virus, that is why we are taking such precautions as not meeting in the church building right now. We do not want anyone to die when it could have been prevented. So, how is it that Jesus is our refuge and strength if we die from Covid-19?

The simplest way of understanding that is that physical death does not stop us from being part of God's Kingdom. God can protect us from disease and viruses if he chooses to, but that doesn't prove that he has kept us for his eternal Kingdom. That just proves that we get to be here on earth a short time longer. Part of our trust in Jesus is that God will protect us through eternity, not just for our time on earth. And if we are thinking about how God will protect us through eternity, then we need to think about what threatens that eternity. Covid-19 doesn't threaten that eternity, being God's enemy threatens that eternity. For while Jesus has destroyed the power of death, there is still the final Judgement Day to come, where every knee shall bow and honour God.

Romans 14:9-11 *Christ died and rose again for this very purpose-- to be Lord both of the living and of the dead. ¹⁰ So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For the Scriptures say, "'As surely as I live,' says the LORD, 'every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will confess and give praise to God.'"*

God's might and power will be seen at the end of time. For those who oppose God, it will be like the peacemaker missiles, which annihilate everything. But for those who find refuge in God, in their relationship with Jesus, it will bring in a time of joy and tranquillity. There will be peace, it will be glorious and terrible depending on which side you stand on Judgement Day.