

1. The song Israel forgot to sing

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[0 : 00] Well, perhaps you'd open your Bibles with me at Psalm 46, page 471 in the Visitor's Bibles. 471.

And the title in the text reads, to the choir master of the sons of Korah, according to the Alamo, presumably a tune, possibly the one played on the harps as David led the tabernacle into Jerusalem in 1 Chronicles.

Not a dirge, but a joyful tune, a song. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her.

[1 : 19] She shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage. The kingdoms totter.

He utters his voice. The earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us.

The God of Jacob is our fortress. Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariots with fire.

Be still. And know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth.

[2 : 18] The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Amen. Well, perhaps you turn back to Psalm 46, page 471.

I'm going to have a moment of prayer. Father God, we depend on your word for our very lives and endurance.

And yet it comes to us through stumbling lips and imperfect breaches. But we believe, Lord, in the power of your spirit.

And we pray that through the words of this psalm, you would show us our king and help us to trust him. We ask it, Father, as your children in Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, let me ask you a rather personal question as we turn to Psalm 46.

[3 : 31] Are you a courageous person? And before you commit to an answer, can you think of a time in the past few weeks where your courage has failed?

I'm sure we'd all like to think of ourselves as courageous. But the truth is that we all know better. Perhaps you're a leader. Perhaps you're a leader in the church. And you've had to face a meeting recently where you know that what you have to say will not go down well.

You know that if you stick to the cause of the gospel, you'll be outnumbered and misrepresented and attacked. And although you know what you have to do, you felt pretty small and weak and powerless.

Whatever your role within the church, all Christians need a bit of backbone. But my guess is that all of us recognize we often fall short.

[4 : 41] Perhaps you're an elderly believer whose strength and health seem to be slipping away. Time is ticking on and you're realizing what the young folks up in the gallery can't yet see.

That you are powerless to stop that relentless march of years. And you know that you should be prepared for what's to come.

But the truth is you simply feel afraid. Perhaps even guilty that you feel that way. Maybe you were part of a conversation recently where the gospel was sidelined or laughed at.

And you left it unchallenged. You didn't have the courage to speak up. Or perhaps you simply feel like you're losing the same old battle to the same old sin.

Week after week after week. And you're beginning to doubt whether the gospel has any power at all. I'm sure all of us can think of a brother or sister in this very room.

[5 : 59] Facing each one of those fears. Not to mention those kept away from us by poor health. Or serving the Lord overseas in dangerous regions.

The truth is. We could probably all admit. To one of the above. We are not as courageous. As we'd like to think.

Well, Psalm 46 is a song to sing when our courage fails. It's in our Bibles to give us the theology to see through the battles of the real Christian life.

The first two verses tell us that much. They're a brilliant model of Bible teaching. One of the first things we'll teach our students, whether it's at Tron Youth or Release the Word or Cornhill for that matter, is to sum up your text in two simple sentences.

And our psalmist is the model Cornhill student. He opens his psalm by doing just that. In verse one, he tells us the big idea. The theme of his passage.

[7 : 12] God is our refuge and strength. A very present help in trouble. And the very next sentence, the clue is the word therefore, is his application.

His so what sentence. Therefore, we will not fear. Even though the earth gives way beneath us and the seas rage about us.

The ground beneath our feet is surely the thing which seems to be the most firm and trustworthy. It's the thing we intuitively put all our weight on.

But there comes a time when even that gives way. And the purpose of this psalm is not simply to tell us, don't be scared as if we were unfeeling machines, but to arm us with sufficient confidence in the God of verse one that we can overcome our own fragility and terror.

And so when the earth gives way beneath us and all that we took for granted seems to be crumbling around us, we're prepared and not paralyzed.

[8 : 36] But this isn't simply a piece of take it or leave it advice for troubled times. If we ignore Psalm 46, then we do so at our own peril.

You see, this was a song which Israel forgot to sing. When the seas raged against ancient Israel and powerful enemies threatened her, she did not turn to her true refuge and strength.

When her courage failed, she turned to help in all the wrong places. She'd forgotten to sing and it was the end of her.

The psalmist's own people give us a real warning from history. But there is another example which history gives us of a man who loved to sing these words.

Possibly one of the most courageous monks who ever lived. A man named Martin Luther. And perhaps it's just coincidence, but when fear and darkness were closing in on Luther and his brothers, it was said that this song was always on their lips.

[9 : 55] Just a coincidence? Or might it be that Luther had a theology of God's sovereignty which worked in the real world, even when the enemy was raging and fear threatened to paralyze?

Well, there comes a time when all of us need some spine. If not for the persecution and hardship in this life, then for the seas which batter us as it ends.

So Psalm 46 paints us two sets of pictures to ground us in reality when our courage fails. Firstly, in verses 1 to 7, a raging sea and a rippling stream.

And the important thing to realize here is that the Bible does not belittle the problems God's people face. The psalm opens to the sound of crashing waves and a roaring, terrifying swell.

Time and again, this is the poetic way that the Bible often pictures the forces of darkness and chaos and grief.

[11 : 18] A sea, seemingly so unstoppable that in verse 2, even the mountains crumble before it like sandcastles.

Think perhaps of the hills we can see around Glasgow. Ben Lomond maybe. They seem like the most unchanging and dependable things we can imagine.

And yet sometimes even the most firm and immovable things seem to buckle under the assault of darkness.

the life of someone we've loved and depended on and who's always been there snatched away by the last enemy, death itself.

the faith of a brother or sister who's been instrumental in our own trust and discipleship or the church leader we've always counted on washed away by the waves of sin.

[12 : 26] The ancient towers of our national denominations caving in to the pressure to deny Christ and conform to this world our own health, our own independence.

Therefore we will not fear though the ground gives way beneath us, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam so menacingly that even the hills tremble at its swelling.

At times like that, it really can feel the way the psalm describes, can't it? We even use the same sort of language. We say things like, my world is falling apart.

I feel like everything I love is collapsing around me. We're battered by those waves of depression and fear. And we'll say to a friend something like, brother, brother, I can barely keep my head above the water.

I just feel like I'm drowning. And that is the world this psalm opens to. A world of desperate stress and anxiety.

[13 : 49] So we're not simply given a trite pep talk. The sea is real and it's scary. But in verse 4, there's a very sudden change.

The water is still there, but now it's serving and sustaining God's people. And instead of a raging sea, we're given a picture of the river Shiloh, the small canal which served Jerusalem.

The sea has been tamed. It's as if God is leading it through the streets of the city like a bull with a ring in its nose.

It's become a little trickling river. The jugular vein, the lifeblood of an ancient city. Why? Because, verse 4, it's his city, the city of God.

And these are his people, those whom he has set apart to belong to himself. And who is any enemy to stand against them?

[15 : 09] Amidst all the raging chaos and darkness? We're given a little picture of creation serving the creator's people.

A raging sea replaced with the peaceful ripples of a stream. It's a lovely picture, isn't it? Isaiah draws on this very same image in chapter 8.

God had given his people a beautiful, tranquil stream. He calls it the gently flowing waters of Shiloh. It was everything they had ever needed.

And in Isaiah's mind, the people of Judah were simply crazy to turn their backs on it. And so he warns them that it's one or the other, the river or the sea.

And because they've rejected, refused those lovely gentle waters that God had provided, they'll soon face the waves of Babylon.

[16 : 19] And surely there's a similar message in this psalm for us, is there not? If we belong to this God, if we've dipped our toes in these beautiful sheltered waters of verse 4, surely we'd be crazy to turn back and face that raging storm on our own.

Now notice that it's not that the waves don't batter God's people, not that the enemy simply leaves them alone, not yet, anyway.

But the point is that there is one whose roar is louder than that of the sea. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter, he utters his voice, the earth melts.

And this God stands by his people. He has bound himself to them so intimately that his honour is tied to theirs.

In fact, five times in this psalm we're told that this God is with his people. In verse 1, he is very present. In verse 4, it's his city in which they dwell.

[17 : 45] In verse 5, he is in the midst of her. And two times, verses 7 and 11, we have that chorus. the Lord of hosts is with us.

The God of Jacob is our refuge. He's the Lord of hosts with all the armies of heaven at his beck and core.

And he's the God of Jacob the cheat. The gracious God who takes worthless people and makes them his own.

love. And that's the point. This city, Zion, is special for the same reason as Jacob and the same reason as God's church today.

Not because she was strong or tough or powerful, but because God had made his home with her for no other reason than his gracious blessing.

[18 : 53] And you see, his roar is loudest. This is the lion who roars in Judah, the creator God. And those who stand in his way are playing a dangerous game.

This roaring lion is Emmanuel, the God who dwells with his people. And to defeat them, you have to get past him.

Mountains might fall like sand castles, kingdoms totter and crash like spinning tops. But so long as he is with them, his people shall not be moved.

well, that's well and good, isn't it, when we're sitting comfortably in a church. But what about in the real world, when the sea is raging and fear is creeping up on us?

I think the root of our problem then is that we forget that the ground we stand on is much firmer than we think.

[20 : 10] when we're lying on our sick bed or facing that confrontation we've been dreading for so long, we feel frail and small and weak.

Well, here's some encouragement from the Bible. Just the sort of thing you want to hear when you're lying on a hospital bed. If you feel that way, you're right. We feel weak and small and frail because we are small and weak and frail.

We're little, sinful people in a big world facing a dangerous sea. But if that worries us, and it often worries me, then we're looking for help in the wrong place.

the truth is that God's church is not standing on the ground of her own strength. You see, it's likely that the psalmist had a particular crisis in mind when he wrote this.

In fact, if you look at the footnotes to verse one in your Bibles, you'll see it could read that God is a well-proved help in trouble. In other words, he is tried and tested, and his works in history have demonstrated his trustworthiness.

[21 : 43] Possibly the psalmist is singing about Jerusalem's salvation from the Assyrian army. Jerusalem was surrounded by an unstoppable force to whom the whole world seemed to have fallen, and little declining Zion was left to stand alone.

The nations raged, and kingdoms had tottered, but the Lord uttered his voice, and the enemy literally melted away.

Morning dawned, and Sennacherib's army lay in tatters. Perhaps he's even thinking further back than that, to another great taming of the sea.

It was as morning dawned back in the Exodus that the waves of the Red Sea swept away those terrifying armies of Egypt.

You see, time and again, God's people were delivered, and the enemy had been destroyed. God will help her as morning dawns.

[22 : 59] And history is littered with times like verse one and two, is it not? Times when the pictures of devastation seem to pile up against God's people, when the sea is at its most menacing, and the mountains we thought of as utterly dependable simply crumble away.

Christians must have felt that way when fascism reared its head on the continent, or when Mao's cultural revolution was sweeping China, when the early church was faced down by the Roman Empire itself, and when we, individual believers, feel isolated and let down by Christian brothers and sisters, it's hard to believe verse five at times like that, isn't it?

When fear has us in its grip, and it's especially hard if we're looking in the wrong direction, if we're only weighing our own strength, or cunning, or impressive record in the balance.

There's a lot of that in church, is there not? The trendy word now seems to be nested. We're told that we're nested in our proud heritage, or history.

Friends, if that is true, then we are in deep, deep trouble. But so long as we are nested in the covenant promises of God, then we are safe and sound.

[24 : 48] Has he not been well proven in preserving his people right the way down through the ages? He is in the midst of those who love his son, and they shall not be moved.

the ground we stand on is firmer than we think. So yes, we Christians are frail, but the rule of the enemy is no match for his.

So the question is this, do we want to stand on the sandcastles of our own reputation as a church, our own health, our own status, amongst other Christians, or on the God whose voice melts the ground itself?

Well, I think the second set of images makes our answer pretty clear. verses 8 to 11 show us a ruined army and a reigning king.

Verse 8 is inviting us to view all of history from the day the Lord winds it up in victory.

[26 : 23] Imagine sitting from the perspective of eternity and seeing the reels of footage of everything God has ever achieved.

We're shown the salvation of his people. Pictures flash past of Abraham, of the Israelites rushing away from Egypt, of the women at the empty tomb, of the first believers in Britain or North Korea or Somalia.

Pictures of tyrants overthrown from Belshazzar to Mussolini to Gaddafi. Pictures of oppressors brought to justice, of persecutors called to account, false prophets and gospel peddlers exposed. And above every image like the rolling banner on a news channel, read the words, come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth.

That's what verses 9 and 10 go on to show us, a world where God's gospel has triumphed and peace reigns. Now a long time ago, when I was a good little choir boy, these were the sorts of verses they used to love to have us sing, because at first glance, they seem to be looking forward to a time of joy and harmony and world peace.

[28 : 01] Perfect for a fat-cheeked little English boy to sing, aren't they? Especially when he's wearing a silly robe. They seem to celebrate the sort of God a sappy pacifist would love to worship.

But that misses something very, very important. You see, the world we see a taste of in verse nine is not a result of peace talks and political summits, but of a total sweeping victory.

This is Nuremberg, not Northern Ireland. the enemy has been forcibly disarmed, thrown into the cells and put on trial for their crimes and their lives.

The picture is of an army lying in ruins, strewn across the battlefield amid all the carnage of twisted armor and smoldering remains of their chariots.

actually, as a boy, I didn't have a clue what these verses meant, but I certainly knew that the words in the old prayer book were serious stuff.

[29 : 22] He breaketh the bow and nappeth the spear asunder. He burneth the chariots in the fire. Whatever it meant, napping things asunder, sounds like the sort of behavior that could get a good choir boy into a lot of trouble.

But the point is deadly serious. With one brush of his hand, and in his good time, God has swept aside all those who stood against his people.

It's as if the plug at the bottom of that ocean has been pulled, and the raging sea, all those who opposed God and his gospel, have drained away like old bathwater.

God's purpose is peace. Peace for Emmanuel city, and for all who have bowed the knee to its king. That's his purpose. But the process by which it's reached is judgment. He will be exalted, even by those who stand in his way.

[30 : 44] Now, when your courage is called on, that is something well worth remembering. When you seem small and outnumbered, and when what you have to say seems laughable, even ridiculously outdated, it is so tempting to slink away with your tail between your legs.

But verses 8 to 10 hand us a key piece of intelligence. They show us something that those who oppose Christ simply cannot see.

You see, they think that they are in the strong position. it seems as if our hand is weak and those battering waves of progress and secularization will soon beat us down.

But the truth is that our king holds all the cards. The hosts of heaven are simply waiting for his word God.

So in that conversation at work where your trust and hope is scorned, or that meeting with the influential people who seem so powerful, or that sneering intellectual on your course who seems so intelligent and so confident, or before the impressive guy at school who just thinks a trust in Jesus is absolutely pathetic.

[32 : 34] Before any of those people, we have no need to be ashamed. We are not suing for peace talks.

We're not here to negotiate for a compromise. instead, we are sent as the last chance of mercy that sneering opponent of Christ may ever receive.

However strong he or she feels their hand is, ours is stronger. Our God is the king who reigns over his world with effortless might, and the time will come when he makes all conflict cease.

He will break the bow of the intellectual snob here in Glasgow and shatter the spear of the Islamist thug terrorizing God's people in Nigeria.

and those who threaten the church he died to build have a simple choice to exalt him now and seek his mercy or exalt him on that last battlefield when the game is up.

[34 : 03] Now that doesn't mean that the fighting will be any easier when someone bullies you or your children because they belong to Jesus, it really does hurt.

Their words hurt and their actions hurt and they seem like the powerful ones. But I hope this psalm does at least arm us with the theology to stand up to it.

We have a God whose roar is mightier than the things we most fear, mightier than kings, and armies, mightier even than sin and death itself.

The question is, will we trust him to finish the battle? When Israel forgot to sing this psalm and the waves came crashing, they ran about like headless chickens.

One minute they ran to their own strength and cunning for help. The next to some powerful friends and finally into blind panic. But here's the psalmist's advice, verse 10.

[35 : 19] Shut up and know that I am God. that's the tone here. It's not a verse to stick on a calendar next to a soft focus picture of a sunrise.

No, it's keep calm and carry on. Trust me, says the Lord. Stick with me and get on with the job I've given you.

Keep your heads down and know that I will finish it. can he do it? Will he do it?

Well, look at verse 11 again. He is the Lord of hosts, the reigning king before whom armies fall, and he's the God who called and stuck by, twisting Jacob, the God of people like us.

So he is a God with more than enough gun power, and a God with more than enough grace. As we finish, perhaps you'd let me propose an answer to the question we started with.

[36 : 33] Are you a courageous person? What if I were in the position of our leaders just now? Would I have the courage to take a stand?

What if I were publicly shamed and misrepresented? What if the respectable Christians turned their backs, or the family home was taken away from me?

Would I be courageous then? Well, like you, I'm sure I'd like to think I'd take a stand.

But right now, it doesn't cost me anything to say that. To me, it's just a simple question of orthodoxy, of right and wrong. And we all know what's right.

But the truth is that when it costs, my choice would probably hang on whether or not I believe the message of this psalm.

[37 : 38] do I believe, like Luther, that though the ground gives way beneath me, though I live in fear of the knock on the door, though my closest friends are dragged away, that these things are not where my true security lies.

Do I believe that our king reigns and that he dwells with his people? Or is the truth that really I just think of these as nice words for a good reformed Christian to turn up to church and sing?

When the waves batter, each one of us will stand or fall on our answer to that question.

Let's pray. Father God, we recognize that we are small and weak and helpless, but that you are strong and mighty and powerful to save.

Thank you, Lord, that you are a God who commits himself in love and honor to his people, even people like us. So help us, Lord, to carry this psalm on our lips as we go out into your world.

[39 : 18] you will be exalted among the nations. And our prayer, Father, is that you are exalted through our trust in your Son.

For we ask it in his name. Amen.