

With God in the Storm

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[0 : 00] Now we're going to turn in our Bibles to page 471 and our reading today is Psalm 46. Great psalm of praise and of confidence and our subject today is the subject with God in the storm. So we're going to read this chapter together, Psalm 46, page 471. Psalm 46, verse 47 of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her. 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 end of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariots with fire.

[1 : 34] Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us.

The God of Jacob is our fortress. Amen. That is the word of God. May he bless it to our hearts and to our minds. Looking around the room, I can hazard a guess that many of you, not all of you, will remember the 1960s.

But as I say, looking around the room, it would not surprise me if many of you can remember that decade. There's just one particular thing about that decade I want to mention as an introduction to what I want to say.

Those were years when the world was gripped in what is sometimes called the Cold War, the arms race, the threat of a nuclear holocaust. And I do remember the 1960s, a school teacher, yes, I was at school in those days, saying that he didn't think that my generation would live beyond our 20s because of the threat of a nuclear holocaust.

That clearly did not happen. But the point about that is this, that life, whether we are threatened by a nuclear holocaust or not, is always uncertain and always has been uncertain.

[3 : 00] Human beings always have been vulnerable. Go back a few centuries, people were afraid of Viking invasions, people were afraid of the Black Death, people were afraid of the violence in the streets and so on.

And today, we still live in an uncertain, in a threatening world in which very often the gospel message seems to strike a hollow note. Is there a God we can trust?

Is there a God who is big enough to handle these problems? The distinguished Bible translator J.B. Phillips wrote a book in the middle of the 20th century called *Your God is Too Small*.

And the point of that title was that many of us believe in a God in our personal affairs, but we don't believe in a God who is big enough to handle the giant ills of the world.

Now, the faith of the psalmist rests on the fact that the Lord is the creator. My hope is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

[4 : 02] And that's what this psalm is about. What is it like to be with God in the storm? What's it like to be with God in a vulnerable world? And in Psalm 46, everything is shaken.

The world itself is shaken. The nations are in turmoil. The psalmist faith totters. So, is there a God who is big enough to deal with that? And the psalm really falls very obviously into three parts.

And if I can point out to you the way the psalm develops, beginning somewhat oddly in the middle rather than at the beginning, in verses 4 to 7, we have the psalmist in the city of God as he looks out in two directions.

The psalmist is in the city of God, surrounded by these storms, and he looks out first of all at God's power over creation in verses 1 to 3, and then he looks out at God's power over the nations in verses 8 to 11.

That's the structure of the psalm. The psalmist is in this beleaguered city, feeling trapped. Then he looks out. He sees God in the nations, God in creation, and then God amidst the turmoils of the world.

[5 : 24] So, first of all then, God's power in creation, verses 1 to 3. When we're in a crisis, when the storms are battering us, whether they're physical storms or the storms of daily living, where do we begin?

If we begin with the storms, we're going to get discouraged. We're going to be fearful. We're going to look at these gigantic clouds threatening us, and we're going to say we can't handle them.

That's absolutely right. We can't. But the psalmist doesn't begin with the storms. He begins with God. He begins with God himself. God is our refuge.

That's to say God is around us. Between us and the storms stands God. God is our strength. Let us say God is inside us. And he is a very present help in trouble.

In other words, when we need him, he's there. Therefore, he says, we will not fear, though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea.

[6 : 27] When the contemporary world fears disaster coming on the earth, tends to think about it coming from space. Many science fiction films depict that.

Alien powers coming from space. When the ancient world, when the writers of scripture thought in those terms, they thought of the danger not coming from space, but coming from the sea.

The sea, the raging sea, was the enemy, full of hostile powers, the haunt of evil spirits. And throughout the Old Testament, you get this kind of picture.

The enemies of God, the enemies of humanity, are concentrated in the sea, the raging sea. And this explains the awestruck question of the disciples on the Lake of Galilee, when Jesus stilled the storm, who then is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?

He's heard of nothing like this before. So, the Samist, the Samist thinks about the worst case scenario. Though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, even if the sea itself overwhelms us, is God able to deal with this?

[7 : 49] Now, sometimes, of course, it may seem that the sea has won. Sometimes there are circumstances that are totally overwhelming, whether they are great earthquakes, tidal waves, the tsunami that devastated the Pacific a year or two ago.

These raise the question, is God actually in control? And our Samist is saying, even when all this happens, he says, we will not fear.

And why won't he fear? Not because he's trying to be brave and whistling in the dark. Since God is the creator, even if creation is dissolved, he can recreate it.

That is the, you see the importance of God being the creator. He made creation. Therefore, he can remake it. And indeed, that is the biblical hope, that one day, God is going to introduce a glorious new creation, where there are no tsunamis, there are no storms, no desolation, because he is in control.

So God is powerful over the created order, even when it seems that the created order has got out of control. But let's reflect for a moment this phrase, we will not fear.

[9 : 04] Now, if these kind of things happen, we would be terribly afraid, wouldn't we? We wouldn't be human if we weren't. When some disaster comes into our lives, a bereavement, an accident, a serious illness, of course we are afraid.

And the psalmist isn't saying, when these things happen, don't pretend that you're not afraid. What the psalmist is saying is, that in the last analysis, there is nothing ultimately to fear, because God is in control.

And what we must do in these circumstances is keep on believing that he is God, keep on believing that he is working for our good and for the good of the world.

So the psalmist, as it were, looking out through the porthole, as it were, in a ship in the midst of the sea, looks at the world, looks at its turmoil, looks at the storms, and then says, God is our refuge and strength.

I think we need to apply that to our own circumstances. Everyone here is vulnerable. Everyone here is fragile in the face of the great powers of nature and the face of the, in face of all the uncertainty.

[10 : 19] That's why we need a God who is big enough to handle that. A God who is in control. It's not much good of a God who is only around when the sun is shining. Not much good of a God who is only around when we're happy.

This God is the creator. He is our refuge and strength. And so from that we come to God in his city. Verses 4 to 7. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

Why are we secure in the midst of the storms? Notice verse 5. God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved. In other words, the mountains may be moved, but God's city will not be moved. That's the point that's being made. Now what is the city of God? Well first of all, the city of God is paradise. The dwelling of God in heaven.

There is a river. There is no river in Jerusalem. Apart from the muddy sewer that Victorian romanticism called Cool Siloam, Shady Rill.

[11 : 26] Jerusalem unusually for an ancient city does not stand on a river. This is the river we read about at the beginning of the Bible in the Garden of Eden. The river that Ezekiel the prophet talks about coming from the temple and irrigating the lands around the Dead Sea.

And Jesus himself says the river is the spirit of God who indwells the believer. So first of all, what the psalmist is saying is that if we are citizens of Zion, of the city of God, then we are secure. Now that's all very well. But it also does refer to the earthly city. Verse 6, the nations rage, the kingdoms totter.

He utters his voice, the earth melts. Others said there is no river in Jerusalem. But this psalm's background may be an incident of great danger and great turmoil in the history of God's people, which you can read about in 2 Kings 18 and 19, when the great Assyrian Empire came against them.

And King Hezekiah had the so-called Siloam Tunnel built to bring water into the city so that it could withstand a siege. And the river, whose streams make glad the city of God, may refer to that as well.

[12 : 44] Because it's all very well saying we are secure in the city of God. But we are human. We live in this world. We live in the real world. You see, that's what the sounds are always forcing us to ask the question, do we live in the real world?

Do we have a true view of reality? So, and if you read that story in 2 Kings 18 and 19 or in Isaiah or in Chronicles, you'll find that the city was kept safe because God saved it.

God rescued it. God will help her when morning dawns. Read in 2 Kings 19 of how when the people got up in the morning and looked out, the Assyrian army was dead.

God had destroyed them. The instability of earthly regimes, the kingdoms totter. The powers that be are ordained by God.

All earthly regimes are subject to a higher authority, to a higher kingdom. They are judged by God. The Lord of hosts is with us.

[13 : 48] The God of Jacob is our fortress. Who was Jacob? Jacob was a liar and a cheat. Not particularly good material to work on and yet God transformed him into Israel.

So, God and in creation. God in his city. And then the psalmist looks out again and of course the nations raging, the kingdoms totter, leads us on to the third point.

God and the nations 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.

The point is, first of all, we must take the long term view. Crisis come and crisis go. But there will be others. We've seen this.

We've seen this in recent history. It was wonderful when the Berlin Wall came down at the end of 1989 and Soviet communism largely came to an end.

[14 : 50] But that did not lead to the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, did it? It was good in itself. But one of the consequences was the terrible wars and what used to be called the Balkans and Bosnia and so on.

You see, no change of human regime brings about the kingdom of God. Now, changes of regime may bring good things in their wake.

But since all human regimes are fallible and sinful, there's also bad things come as well. And it's true that the Lord makes wars to cease to the end of the earth.

He breaks the bow, burns the chariots with fire. But at the same time, other wars, other wars spring out. And that's why he says, be still and know that I am God.

Now, this word, be still and know that I am God is not really about being silent and praying silently. The word means throw down your weapons and surrender.

[15 : 55] That's what God is saying to the nations. Be still. Stop your fighting and find out who is really in charge. That's what the phrase means.

I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. Now, it's characteristic of human power that it becomes arrogant after a while, isn't it?

As Lord Acton said in the 19th century, all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. As I said, we cannot depend on any human regime, on any change of regime to bring about the kingdom of God.

And when God says, be still and know that I am God, basically he's saying, don't look for your security in the nations. Don't look for your security in governments.

Don't look for your security in rulers or anything like that. Look for your security in me. And taking the long view, I will be exalted in the earth.

[16 : 54] In many ways, that doesn't seem very convincing at the moment. You go down to Cannon Street and talk to people. Ask them how many of them believe that the Lord is God and he is exalted among the nations.

You get a strange look, of course, if you ask that. But in any case, it doesn't seem to be true. But this is taking the long view. One day, this will be true. One day, Jesus Christ will reign and be acknowledged.

So there must be a message for now as well. And there is. The psalm is not saying that during our lives we will enjoy peace and prosperity under governments which are benevolent.

Sometimes, in his grace, he allows that to happen. And frankly, for all we complain about our governments in Britain, just ask, think to yourself this question. Would you rather be living here or in Zimbabwe?

When you think of it, we do enjoy in this country and in the West a great deal of blessings from God. That's not a political point. It's just a point about the reality in which we live.

[18 : 03] And yet, we know that none of these regimes, whether they're democratic or autocratic, will bring about the kingdom of God. So what's it saying about now? I think it's saying two things.

First of all, it's saying that in the rise and fall of nations, in the rise and fall of governments, whatever the secondary causes may be, it is God who raises up and brings down.

It doesn't mean we don't need to vote at the next election, because that's the way God uses in a democratic system. But it does mean that while we don't depend on any government for our security, we also don't fear ultimately any government's power to harm because they're temporary. And secondly, in our personal circumstances, we don't depend on happiness, nor do we depend, nor do we, are we terribly depressed by sad circumstances.

Poet Kipling in his poem *If* wrote, if you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat these two imposters just the same. They're imposters in the sense they're not the whole truth about reality.

[19 : 16] So this psalm is saying that God is our refuge and our security. It's saying it to us all. I don't know what's going on in people's lives and people's hearts and minds here.

Whatever situation you be, if you come in here and you're exploring the Christian faith, if you're wondering whether to take the risk and become a disciple to follow Christ, then this psalm is saying to you it won't be plain sailing, it won't be easy, but the destination is secure.

Christ will be with you every step of the way and bring you safely to the end. If you're a young Christian and your faith is beginning to wilt a bit under the circumstances both of your own life and the circumstances of the world, this psalm is saying to you hold on because God is in charge.

If you're a mature believer, a busy person, struggling with the pressures of living, wondering how you can cope, wondering if you can cope at all, this psalm is a great message for us as well, saying that it's not you, it's God.

And if you're an older Christian, looking back over your life, wondering if it's been worth it, then once again this psalm is speaking to us. You see, this is an ancient psalm, written long ago by an unknown author, but it's the living word of God.

[20 : 41] And that word is saying, God is good, God is to be trusted. And that's what this psalm is summing to us today. Trust God.

Don't trust circumstances. Trust in the Lord, for he is the maker of heaven and earth. Amen. Let's pray. Father, from our different circumstances, from our vulnerability, we ask that you will take us from this place, assured of your protection, rejoicing in your care, and triumphantly trusting in the Lord of hosts, the God of Jacob, who is our refuge and strength.

We give you thanks and ask your blessing on all of us. In Jesus' name. Amen.