

The Song Israel Forgot to Sing

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[0 : 00] We're going to be reading Psalm 46 today, as a little one-off. So perhaps you turn there, that's on page 471 in the Blue Visitor's Bibles.

Psalm 46, to the choir master of the sons of Korah, according to Alamo, 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.

She shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage. The kingdoms totter. He utters his voice.

[1 : 20] The earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge. 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 in the fire. 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 refuge. Well, let's pray for our Father's help. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your grace and kindness to us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We thank you for the beautiful sunshine outside, for the chance to pause in the middle of a busy week, and for another opportunity now to come under your word together.

[2 : 39] We pray, dear Father, that however we've come here today, whatever our fears and our struggles and doubts, we pray that you would meet us now and strengthen our trust in your Son, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Well, let me ask you each a rather personal question as we turn to this psalm. Are you a courageous person?

And before you commit to an answer, just try to remember the last time that your courage failed. I'm sure we'd all like to think of ourselves as brave, wouldn't we?

But the truth is that most of us know better. Life, for most of us, involves moments of feeling pretty small and weak and fearful.

There are those frightening moments where you see what so often us younger folks here never can see, that time is beginning to slip through your fingers.

[3 : 48] You just don't have the energy to do all the things you once did. The doctor doesn't seem to have a real answer. You begin to dread that gradual narrowing of independence.

And although you know you ought to be prepared for what's to come, the truth is you're too afraid to even think about it. Perhaps even guilty that that's how you feel.

Every so often there are those terrifying moments of real danger. The near miss with another car. The lapse once again into a struggle you've battled with for years.

Or perhaps not too long ago, you're involved in a moment where there was no real danger at all.

Just a conversation at work where the gospel was laughed at in passing.

And yet for some reason, as so often happens in those moments, you are too ashamed to name the Lord Jesus. The truth is, almost all of us could admit to those fears.

[4 : 59] We're simply not as bold, 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 teach us enough about God to see through those battles of the real Christian life. And the psalmist makes his message nice and clear for us.

In verse 1, he puts his big idea in one simple sentence. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

And then in the very next verse, he tells us just how he wants us to respond. Verse 2 begins with a therefore, doesn't it? It's the so what of this psalm. Therefore, we will not fear, even though the earth gives way and the seas rage around us.

There's nothing we trust more than the ground beneath our feet, is there? If we didn't intuitively trust it to hold our weight, well, we'd never take a step.

[6 : 10] We'd never leave our beds, would we? But there comes a time when even the ground beneath your feet gives way. And the purpose of this psalm is not simply to tell us, don't be scared, as if we were unfeeling machines.

It's to arm us with sufficient confidence in the God of verse 1 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, not paralyzed.

So this is a psalm we ignore at our peril. It isn't simply a piece of take it or leave it advice for troubled times. You see, this is a song which Israel forgot to sing.

When the seas raged against ancient Israel and powerful enemies threatened, she turned for help in all the wrong places.

[7 : 15] And in the end, that proved fatal. So let's listen in to the message then. This psalm works by painting us two pairs of pictures.

Pictures meant to ground us in reality when our courage fails. Firstly, in verses 1 to 7, there's a raging sea and a rippling stream.

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 terrifying roar. It's the way so often the Bible pictures darkness and chaos and grief.

As a sea. So unstoppable that in verse 2, even the mountains crumble before it like little sandcastles.

[8 : 15] Think of those ancient hills around Glasgow. Ben Lomond, perhaps. They seem like the most immovable things in the world, don't they? And yet sometimes even those things buckle under the assault of darkness.

The life of someone we've loved and always depended on and who's been there for us no matter what, taken away by the last enemy.

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

At times like that, it really can feel like the world of verse 2, can't it? We even use the same sort of language. It feels like my world is falling apart.

We're battered by waves of fear and depression and we'll say, I can barely keep my head above the water. Well, that's the world this psalm opens to. So we're not simply given a trite pep talk.

[9 : 25] The sea here is real and it's scary. But in verse 4, there's a sudden change. The water is still there, but now it's serving and sustaining God's people.

And instead of the raging sea, we're given a picture of the river Shiloh, the small canal which served Jerusalem. It was the jugular vein that kept an ancient city alive.

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

Why? Well, because verse 4, this is God's city. These are his people. And who is any enemy to stand against them?

So amid all those pictures of raging chaos and darkness, we're given a small picture of creation serving the creator's people.

[10 : 33] A raging sea replaced with the peaceful ripples of a stream. It's a lovely picture, isn't it? But it's not simply in our Bibles to look pretty.

It's here because there's a choice to be made. When the storm hits our lives, we have to decide how to face it. Will we panic?

Or will we commit ourselves to a God who tames the sea? Now notice it's not that the waves don't batter God's people.

It's not that the enemy simply leaves them alone. But the point is that they have one whose roar is louder than that of the sea. Look at verse 6.

The nations rage. The kingdoms totter. He utters his voice and the earth melts. And this God stands by his people.

[11:34] He's bound himself to them so intimately that his honor is tied to theirs. In fact, five times in this psalm, we're told that God is with his people.

In verse 1, he's very present. In verse 4, it's his city in which they dwell. In verse 5, he's 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, our fortress. So he's the Lord of hosts with all the armies of heaven at his beck and call.

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

Stands by them. And that's the point. God's people are special for the same reason as old, twisting Jacob. Not because they were strong or tough or powerful.

[12:40] But because in his grace, God has made his home with them. This is Emmanuel, isn't it? The God who stood in the midst of his disciples and silenced the storm with nothing but his voice.

So darkness might rage. Mountains might fall like sandcastles. Kingdoms totter and crash like spinning tops.

But the people of the Lord Jesus shall not be moved. Because to lay a finger on them, you first have to get past him.

Well, that's well and good, isn't it? When we're sitting comfortably in church. But what about when the sea is threatening 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.

When we're lying in our sickbed or facing that confrontation we've been dreading for so long, we feel frail and small and weak.

[13:51] Well, here's some encouragements. Just the sort of thing you want to hear. When you're lying in a hospital bed. If you feel that way, you're right. We feel frail and small and weak because we are frail and small and weak.

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

Just have a look again at verse one. You might see there's a little footnote in your Bibles, another translation. And what it tells us is that probably the psalmist had a particular storm in mind when he wrote this song.

A time when God's protection had been tried and tested. And so what he writes more literally is that God's help had been found in times of trouble.

It's him that we're to look for in those situations. Because as the footnote puts it, he is a well-proved helper. Well, the clues will point to a day when Jerusalem was surrounded by an Assyrian king and his army.

[15:07] An army the whole world seemed to have fallen to already. And so little, declining Zion was left to stand alone. The nations raged.

Kingdoms had tottered. But the Lord uttered his voice. And that enemy literally melted away. Morning dawned.

And they saw the Assyrian army lying in ruins. So all God's people had to do when trouble came again was to remember that morning and look to him for their help.

And history is littered with times like that, isn't it? When the sea is at its most menacing and everything that we've depended on seems to crumble. Christians must have felt that way when they heard the news in Kenya last week.

Or when Mao's revolution was sweeping China. When the early church was faced down by the Roman Empire itself. Or when we feel isolated and let down by Christian brothers and sisters.

[16:17] It's hard to believe verse 5 at times like those, 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 up our own strength or cunning or the size of our congregation in the balance. But has the Lord not been well proven in preserving his people?

He is in the midst of those who love his son and they shall not be moved. You see, the ground we stand on is much firmer than we think. Yes, we Christians are frail.

But the roar of the enemy is no match for his. So do we want to stand on those sandcastles of our own reputation, our own health, our own charm?

Or on the God whose voice melts the ground itself? Well, the second set of images makes our answer pretty clear. Verses 8 to 11 show us a ruined army and a reigning king.

[17:28] Verse 8, you see, is inviting us to view all of history from the day the Lord winds it up in victory. Imagine sitting there from the perspective of eternity and seeing the reels of footage, footage of everything God has ever achieved.

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

Pictures flashed past of tyrants overthrown, Belshazzar, Mussolini, Gaddafi. Pictures of oppressors brought to justice, of persecutors called to account.

And above every image, like the rolling banner on a news channel, read these 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 finally 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 they seemed to be looking forward to a time of joy and harmony and world peace, perfect for a fat-cheeked little English boy in a silly robe.

[19:04] They seemed to celebrate the sort of God who a sappy pacifist would love to worship. But that misses something very important.

You see, the world of verse 9 did not come through peace talks and political summits, but through a total sweeping victory.

This is Nuremberg, not Northern Ireland. The enemy here has been thrown into the cells and put on trial for his life. And so the pictures we're looking at is his army lying in ruins across the battlefield. It's the carnage of corpses and twisted armor and smoldering chariots. The language of the old prayer book I used to sing sounded pretty quaint, but even little boys could tell it was serious stuff. He breaketh the bow and nappeth the spear in sunder. He burneth the chariots in the fire. Whatever that meant, a God who could nappeth things asunder was not a God to mess with, was he?

[20:20] The point is that in one brush of his hand, 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 that raging sea, all who stood against him and his gospel has drained away like old bath water.

It's easy for him, isn't it? God's purpose is peace. Peace for Emmanuel's city, for all those who've bowed the knee to his king. That's his purpose, but the process by which it's reached is judgment. He will be exalted, verse 10, even by those who stand in his way. Now, when your courage is called on, that is something well worth remembering.

When you're small and outnumbered and what you have to say seems ludicrously outdated, it is so tempting to slink away with your tail between your legs.

[21:34] But verses 8 to 10 show us something that those who oppose Christ simply cannot see. You see, they think that they're in the strong position, don't they?

It seems like our hand as Christians is weak and those waves of progress will soon batter us down. But the truth is that our king holds all the cards.

The hosts of heaven are just waiting for his word. So what about that conversation where to speak up about the Bible sounds utterly weak and pathetic?

What about the sneering intellectual on the radio who talks about what you believe as if it's a story for halfwits and fundamentalists?

What about the school kids who make your children squirm with shame because they belong to Jesus? Well, the message of this psalm is that we have no need to hide because we are not here to sue for peace talks.

[22:48] We're not here to negotiate for a compromise. No, we're sent as the last chance of mercy that enemy of Jesus may ever receive.

So however weak we feel, our hand is stronger. Our God reigns over his world and one day he will make all conflict cease.

He'll break the bow of that confident atheist here in Glasgow and he'll shatter the spear of the Islamist thug raging against his people in Kenya.

