

A Song for the New Year

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bibles and to God's Word to read together, and we're going to read Psalm 46. Somebody can shout out the page number in the church Bible, I've forgotten.

Oh, it's up there, 471. Okay. So Psalm 46, to the choir master of the sons of Korah. So it's a song to be sung according to Alamo, which is probably the name of the tune. It's a song. And this is the 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.

Behold, 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 : 12] 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 to 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.

The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Amen. May God bless to us his word.

[2 : 18] Well, would you turn with me to the psalm we read together, Psalm 46. And we're going to look at this this morning. I want to call this a song for the new year.

We're on the brink of a new year. And, of course, inevitably, our thoughts are looking to the future. And what's in our thoughts as we think about the turn of this year?

Well, I suspect perhaps quite a lot of uncertainty. We do live in troubled times. We live in tumultuous times. It's with dread, isn't it, that you look at the news headlines in the morning, especially after a big event, a big date in the calendar.

And you're just looking, aren't you, for that terrorist attack? Where is it going to be? And, of course, last night it was in Istanbul. There's a lot of uncertainty in the year ahead.

We've got a new American president at the end of January. Certainly for some people that makes them very fearful, although, of course, for others perhaps much more positive.

[3 : 25] We've got Brexit, and the same could be said. Fearful for some, bright hopes for others. Certainly, I think the media and the BBC want us to be fearful. We've got European elections coming in three countries, at least, that I can think of, in France, in Germany, and in Holland.

The results of these elections could change the face of Europe and the world within the scope of the next year. We've got the ascendancy, or it seems the re-ascendancy of Russia on the world stage, with its influence in Syria and the Middle East in general, and the fears that that brings to the Baltic countries, the countries of the former Soviet Union.

We've got China, increasingly belligerent in the South China Sea, and the relationship between the United States of America and China looking increasingly uncertain.

What is that going to bring in the coming year? We could go on and on, couldn't we? And very quickly, we could get ourselves really quite depressed. And I think we're aided in that by the instancy of the news that we have all around us today.

It really is quite oppressive, isn't it? Things that once upon a time would have taken days or weeks, maybe even months, to filter into our understanding, into our consciousness. Now, just take a few seconds. And we're bombarded with news all the time.

[4 : 54] And most of it is bad news, isn't it? And that is, I think, one of the things that's adding very much to the stress of life. Particularly in the Western world. I was reading an article in the newspaper a couple of days ago by somebody who said that they stopped watching all news eight years ago.

And that their life had been much, much less stressful since. And I think that is maybe not a bad New Year's resolution. Certainly a few months ago, I stopped listening to Radio 4 and the Today program in the morning and switched to Classic FM.

And I can tell you that my morning is much cheerier and happier than it was previously. Somewhat less stress at the beginning of the day.

There's enough stress later on in the day without having it at 7 o'clock in the morning with the alarm clock. But it's easy, isn't it, to look at the New Year with all of these things around us with great fear and with foreboding.

And that seems only natural. If you do read the newspapers, listen to the news, listen to the predictions for the coming year. But friends, let me say this this morning.

[6 : 04] On New Year's Day, God wants his people not to be floored by fears. He wants his people rather to be fortified by faith.

He wants his people not cowering and paralyzed by the world around us. But he wants us to be courageous and purposeful in the world that we inhabit with him and for him and for his purposes. And this Psalm 46 is a song whose chorus, I think, needs to be one that we sing to ourselves and sing to one another all throughout this coming year and indeed every year.

Singing it with thankfulness in our hearts to God, as Paul tells us we're to sing, so that this word of God will dwell richly in us. That's what Paul says he wants to the Colossian church, isn't it?

And so that we are, by doing that, constantly teaching and admonishing one another so that the peace of Christ will rule our hearts and minds, not the turbulence and the terrors of this world.

[7 : 17] This Psalm was the inspiration for that great hymn of Martin Luther's that we sang, A Safe Stronghold is Our God. And we need to sing that loudly to ourselves and loudly to one another all through this coming year.

We need to sing, verse 1, that God is our help and strength, a very present help in trouble. And therefore, we will not fear.

We will not fear. Because the Lord of hosts is with us. And because the God of Jacob is our fortress. That's the refrain in verse 7 and in verse 11.

And that is why the psalmist says in verse 5, We shall not be moved. Now that is the key recurring message of this psalm.

Because God is our God, and because he is the Lord of heaven's hosts, the armies of heaven, because he is with us, we shall not fear.

[8 : 19] Now that's the chorus. That's the assertion. But of course, the psalm gives us good reasons to back up this assertion of faith.

Because it's an assertion that is not based on fantasy. Not on wishful thinking. But it's based on real and solid, tangible reality.

There's all the difference in the world between real biblical faith and just blind fantasy. And the Bible never deals in fantasy. The Bible only deals in faith which is built on solid facts, on solid reality. And this psalm is utterly rooted in reality about this world. It doesn't deny it. But it is also deeply rooted in the reality about our God.

And that's why its message will help us in this coming year. To be people of courageous faith, not people of cowering fear. So I want to look at the psalm with you, and I want you to see that in between these assertions of faith, that God is our refuge and our fortress, in verses 1 and again in verses 7 and 11, in between these we have three pictures of reality that the psalmist paints for us.

[9 : 38] And we need to see each of these pictures clearly and honestly if we're to understand how to live with real faith in a world of real fear. The psalmist pictures first a raging sea, and then a reviving stream, and then he gives us the picture, doesn't he, of a reigning sovereign.

So first of all, look at verses 2 and 3. It pictures so vividly for us the perennial chaos of a raging sea. And the psalmist is saying, yes, we know the reality of the perils of this present world with all its storms, with all its threatenings.

The roaring waters, which foam, which swell, which threaten to engulf, as he says here, even the great mountains, even the things that we think of as immovable, as solid, as unshakable, are

threatened by the raging of this world under the curse, this world adrift from its moorings in the rule of God.

It's a very vivid picture, isn't it, the raging sea? It's a common one in the Bible. The sea is one of the Bible's common images for chaos, for darkness, for destruction in the world, for the forces that threaten mankind, that even threaten God's people, that even would seem to threaten God himself and his rule.

So in Genesis chapter 1, do you remember, it was out of the darkness of the great deep that God spoke and his voice brought order and beauty out of that chaos, banishing the sea to form dry land, dividing the waters, taming the waters.

[11 : 25] That's the picture. And yet, in a world that is under the curse of sin, the waters represent these forces of darkness, of chaos, of sorrow, of death, of grief, of all of the things that so easily engulf human life in this earthly world, flood our human lives with misery.

And that's why, by the way, John's vision in the book of Revelation, Revelation 21, when he has the vision of the new heavens and the earth, we're told, the sea is no more. That's not a threat to people who like beach holidays.

What it's saying is the chaos, the darkness, all of these forces of the raging seas, the storms that so embitter human life, they will be gone forever in the everlasting kingdom of Christ.

there'll be an end to the very real experience of human life, which so often makes us feel that we are drowning. That's the language we use, isn't it?

We say, oh, I'm battling to keep my head above water. We're talking about the stress, the anxieties, the terrors of life that we have to deal with.

[12 : 40] They will be gone. But they are all too real in our present world. And the psalmist doesn't pretend that that's not so. He says, yes, they're roaring waters, they can, and they do bring chaos to our human lives.

Chaos personally and indeed on a global scale. And that's the picture here. It's the picture of the perennial, persistent chaos of the raging sea of life with all its perils, with all its pain, with all the stress, with all the sorrows, all the things that we know are all too real here on planet Earth.

And it is reality, isn't it? Never mind, never mind the world situation. Many of us will have our minds full of all kinds of worries and fears, much, much closer to home as we think about the beginning of 2017.

Some maybe will be worrying about their job security if the economy does dip, as some are predicting. Some young folk will be worried, won't they, about exams, exam results, from exams just before Christmas or exams still to come afterwards, what comes in the spring and the hires and all of these sorts of things, university exams.

For some of us, our hearts will be full of personal pain due to family issues, due to troubles with our children perhaps, or with aging parents, or with stresses and strains in a marriage relationship.

[14 : 12] And no shortage of things are there if we're to start thinking about them that could fill us with fear and foreboding at the beginning of a new year. And that's why all throughout our society, all around the world, that's why people are looking for help, looking for refuge, something to strengthen them, to deal with all of these things in our lives.

And often, of course, that refuge is sought by trying to close your eyes to reality, to run away, to escape from these painful truths into drink or into drugs or into some kind of fantasy existence online that allows you to have a different life from the life that you really have, to escape from what seems to be so real.

That's why so many folk are motivated by self-help therapies and schemes and books. Here's a list of books that I found in a magazine recently.

Here's a good one. Fear and do it anyway. You can face fear as a powerful enemy, but it will not hold you back. This astounding tape gives exercises that reverse the effects of fear and allow it to be used positively.

Well, that sounds good, doesn't it? Here's another one. End the struggle and dance with life. That promises a lot, doesn't it? This was my favorite, The Butterfly of Happiness.

[15 : 40] Has anybody read that? Happiness is like a butterfly. If you chase after it, it will always be just beyond your grasp. But if you become quiet and still, it will fly down and alight on you.

That sounds wonderful, doesn't it? The Bible is a book of a very different kind. It never promises things it can't deliver.

It certainly never, ever encourages us to hide from reality. It doesn't give us some sort of popular therapy. No, far from being a crutch or a cave to run into to hide from the truth about this world. Some people would want to think. The Bible teaches us to face up to reality. Reality as we see all around us, not to pretend it away, but to look it firmly in the eye and see it for what it actually is. The reality of a world of perennially raging storms and seas. That is life and we can't escape it. But the Bible also teaches us to face up to a far, far greater reality which the gospel of Jesus Christ alone can open our eyes to so that we can see with real clarity and with real perspective everything about this world.

[17 : 08] Because the Bible teaches us that towering over the undeniable reality of the raging sea in this world is the unseen, undeniable reality of a reigning sovereign, of a God who rules time and eternity.

And that's the picture at the end of the psalm if you look at verses 8 to 10. It pictures very clearly for us, doesn't it, the permanent conquest of a reigning sovereign.

Because you see, we know the reality of the promise of the future. Look at verse 8. Behold, look, see human history from the perspective of eternity.

That's what God's revelation in his word gives to us. Gives us eyes to see not less reality but more reality. And the reality is that this God, our God, is the Lord of the hosts of heaven and he towers over all earthly powers.

Verse 9. He makes wars to seethe to the very ends of the earth. This God has vindicated himself all through history. The psalmist can testify to that over all his enemies.

[18 : 24] Verse 8. Bringing destruction. Think of the Egyptians chasing the Israelites to the brink of the Red Sea. And they were the ones plunged into its furious depths.

Think of all Israel's enemies from Joshua's day onwards, all through their history. And the psalmist says this God will likewise vindicate himself to the very ends of the earth.

Not, by the way, as some sort of peace negotiator for the United Nations. not by compromising with terrorists, not by trading land for peace or anything like that.

Now, he will assert his peace as a result of total victory, permanent conquest over all of his foes.

Verse 9. He makes wars to cease to the very ends of the earth.

And he does that by outright victory. He breaks the weapons of his enemies. He burns their chariots. They're symbols of power. He burns them with fire, makes them as nothing.

[19 : 31] His firepower, you might say, is absolutely invincible. And that is because it is the power of the Lord of hosts.

And, verse 10 says, his voice simply says to the world, be quiet, be silenced, and know that I am God. I am the one with power over you.

Over everything that you say, everything that you do. And it will be me, not you, who is exalted all over the earth. God will bring peace because he brings at last to judgment every foe and every force that stands against him.

We like to think of the God of peace, don't we? We like to talk and sing of the Prince of Peace, especially at Christmas time. We don't like quite so much to think of God as a conquering warrior. But even in Isaiah's great prophecy about the Prince of Peace there in Isaiah chapter 9, it is there. He will be the Prince of Peace. Why? Because he is also the wonderful, that is the awe-inducing counselor.

[20 : 41] That is, in the council of war. He's the mighty God. It means he's a mighty warrior. He's the everlasting, he's the indestructible father, that is the great leader of his people who leads them out against the enemies.

That's why Isaiah says in the very next verse there that he will be like a warrior trampling underfoot his enemies, burning them like fire. That is how he will be the Prince of Peace.

That's the hope that the gospel of Jesus Christ promises. Peace through God's great judgment on all enemies, on all evil, on all darkness.

We saw it, didn't we, in our Christmas studies on Malachi. His coming will be a fire to set ablaze all enemies.

And it's the gospel that Jesus himself commanded that his apostles went out and preached to all the world. Peter tells us that himself in Acts chapter 10. Jesus commanded us, he says, to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead.

[21 : 53] To him all the prophets bear witness. And the great longing of the New Testament hope, therefore, is for that final victory at last to be revealed.

Maranatha, come Lord Jesus, come and judge the world in righteousness. Make all wars at last to cease. And what a great hope that is, friends, to know this eternal reality and therefore to be able to face all earthly reality that would otherwise floor us and fill us with fear.

To know that one day he will come, he will make all wars to cease. Just think about that. All wars.

All the wars within. All the battles that you face so incessantly, so constantly against sin.

All the urges, all the great battles of your life will cease because we have a reigning sovereign. And his permanent conquest will at last be seen, will be asserted all throughout his kingdom.

[23 : 14] That will be when we receive our final salvation. That's what our hope is. So don't despair. All those wars within will cease. And don't fear because all wars without will cease.

Likewise, we don't need to fear any power in this whole world that sets itself against Christ and his everlasting kingdom. He will be exalted among all the nations.

Verse 10, even among all enemies, all mockers, all haters of Christ and his church. In the end, willingly or unwillingly, will exalt our Lord Jesus Christ.

every militant Islamist, every scornful politician, every snide and cynical journalist, every TV pundit, every hostile power will bow low and exalt the Lord Jesus Christ.

So when they're raging, so often seems to be causing the world as we know it and all that we hold precious to quake, to crumble, to fall away, we need not fear.

[24 : 30] We must not fear. Nor do we need to compromise to try and broker some sort of uneasy peace with the hostile forces of this world against the gospel.

No! We know the reality of a future that is promised by our Lord Jesus Christ. So we are not to be those who surrender to the thinking of this world.

Rather, we are to be those who call this world to surrender to the sovereign who has conquered through his great victory over death and the grave. We are to call this world to bow the knee now while there is still time before, at last, every person in this world stands before his judgment seat and will be bowed low willingly or unwillingly.

The Christian gospel is not a hopeless pleading from a hostile world to please give Jesus the time of day. Please consider. Please be a bit more generous in your thinking about Jesus and his church.

No, no, no. The Christian gospel is a command from an all-conquering sovereign. He calls all men everywhere to repent, says the apostle Paul, to the wisdom and the aristocracy of Athens.

[25 : 54] The times of ignorance God has overlooked, but now, in raising Jesus from the dead, he has made clear to all flesh and you must buy a liar before him.

Because, verse 9, do not forget, he burns with fire every chariot of man that is arrayed against him. So we offer peace in the gospel.

Of course we do. We offer mercy. We offer grace in abundance. But we must never, ever do so forgetting that we do so as ambassadors of a reigning sovereign.

And you see, friends, it's when our eyes are open to that much greater truth about a reigning sovereign that even the raging waters of this world are transformed and they're transformed into reviving streams.

That's a picture in verses 4 to 6. It describes the present comfort of a reviving stream. Look at the sudden change in tone from verse 3 to verse 4.

[26 : 59] The roaring waters suddenly become reviving waters. A river to gladden our hearts, not scaring us, not submerging us, but serving us, sustaining us because we know the reality of God's presence with us.

The beginning of verse 4, there's actually no word there is as it is in our translation. It's just abruptly, a river. And the implication is that these same waters, these raging waters, the realities of life in a fallen world, in a hostile world, when seen through eyes that are opened by faith and the truth of the gospel with the ultimate perspective of eternity, these same waters are actually seen to be quite, quite different.

It's not that the hostile forces, the enemy forces, disappear, but it is that God's voice and God's command of power utterly outranks theirs, verse 6.

He utters his voice and the earth melts and their kingdoms totter. There's a lovely play on words there. It's the same word translated moved in verse 2.

The mountains are moved into the sea and the same word here in verse 6, totter. And it's the same word in verse 5 about us not being moved. You could probably translate all of them as shaken.

[28 : 31] The roar of evil and opposition to God in this world seems to shake the very foundations of everything and even the foundations of faith. But no, God opens his mouth and all opposition is shaken to the core.

It melts away and therefore, verse 5, because God is in the midst of his people, we will never be shaken.

In fact, the raging of these stormy waters in God's controlling hand, in his gracious providence, instead, they become for us not raging, but they bring us verse 4, rejoicing, making us glad. They bring us verse 5, resilience, we shall not be moved. And verse 10, they bring us rest, they bring us the stillness and the deep peace of knowing that our God will be exalted and that therefore we, his people, shall share in his exalted glory.

The waters which seem to rage are actually reviving and leading us to rejoicing. That's a great biblical principle, isn't it? All through the scriptures.

[29 : 54] Joseph, in Genesis chapter 50, put it this way, what man meant for evil, God intended for good, for the saving of many lives.

Or Paul, in Romans 8, puts it this way, all things, that is, all the present groanings he's speaking about, the groanings of life in a still fallen world full of raging and roaring and threatenings, all these things, he says, the very things that seem to oppose us.

All these things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose. That is, for those who love the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, his roar overwhelms and silences even the greatest roaring of this world against those who call upon God, the God of Jacob.

We have a reigning sovereign. And he turns all the raging waters that we will ever face in this life, he turns them into reviving streams that will not only rejoice our hearts now, but are actually refining our souls, testing our faith, so that our faith will be found to result in praise and honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

That's how Peter puts it, isn't it, in the first chapter of his letter? And James says the same things. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of all kinds, when you meet the perennial raging seas of life.

[31 : 29] Count it all joy because it is working in you, the very crown of life. See these things for what they really are.

They are the reviving streams of God that can't possibly harm your life. But will certainly, if you see these things through the eyes of humble faith, will hone your life in God's good hand, shaping you into the person he has called you to be for all eternity.

Even the terrors, the trials, the tragedies, the tears of a frightening world, when you view them with eyes that see the triumph of our Lord Jesus Christ, they will for us work tenacity and triumph in our faith.

It will work in us the faith that can never be shaken. But only if we do believe and trust God, only if we do view life from his perspective, not just from our own, even if, only if we really do trust that he is with us, that he's not against us, that he's not absent from us, when it may seem that all the raging and the roaring of the waters round about us are signs of his absence and his abandonment of us.

That's why all through the psalm is that refrain, God is with us, he's in the midst of us, he is a very present help, because it can be so hard to see that, it can be so hard to think that, can't it, when you're in the midst of darkness and trials, when your mind is flooded with fears and anxieties, when all that surrounds you, you feel, God must have abandoned me, God must have deserted us, just as it surely seemed to all the world, that God could not possibly be with the Lord Jesus Christ as a naked man, beaten and flogged and hanging upon a cross, in the face of all scorn and mockery and deep shame, but God was there with him, in Christ himself, he was reconciling the world to himself, crucified at the hand of wicked men, yes, said the apostle Peter, absolutely, but doing only what

[34 : 00] God's sovereign power and will had purposed, to bring not the raging of his judgment, but the reviving, redeeming stream of God's forgiveness to us, so that we might be his forever, his people, his children, and so what was a place of bitterness and hatred and shame and scorn became the place of beauty and honor, to those who gladly receive his gift, who trust in his mercy, and friends, that division, two completely different ways of seeing reality, it's also there in the way that we look at the ebb and flow, at the tides and the currents of all that we will face in our lives in

this coming year of 2017 and throughout all of our lives.

If we see only the raging seas, then these things will very likely just fill us with fear and the things that happen to us and surround us may well fill us only with bitterness in our lives.

But if we see it in the light of our reigning sovereign, then instead of fear, we'll find faith and instead of a legacy of bitterness in our souls for what's been done to us, we'll find a growing beauty in our spirit as we long for the fullness of what God is working in us through all these things by which he is making us into more than conquerors through him who loved us.

so which way are we going to look and see the waters of 2017? Let's help one another throughout this coming year to remember that we have a reigning sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Lord of the armies of heaven, and that he is willing to stick with us even as he stuck with that twisted Jacob. Isn't that such a wonderful comfort that he who could stick with a man like Jacob, well surely he can stick with someone like me. We have a reigning sovereign.

[36 : 32] And so in his hands, even the wildest raging seas we face, they will be seen certainly, ultimately, to be nothing other than reviving streams, streams of mercy, never ceasing, which should call forth from us songs of loudest praise.

That's what it means to belong to the household of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is in the midst of us. We shall not be moved.

God will help us when the 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. Amen. Let's pray. O God, merciful Father, who despises not the sighing of a contrite heart, nor the desire of such as be sorrowful, mercifully assist our prayers which we make before thee in all our troubles and adversities, whensoever they oppress us, and graciously hear us, that those evils which the craft and subtlety of the devil or man work against us be brought to naught, and by the providence of thy goodness they may be dispersed, that we, thy servants, being hurt by no persecutions, may evermore give thanks unto thee in thy holy church, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.