

Songs of life

GOD IN A CRISIS

Psalm 46 is the first of a group of three Psalms, 46 – 48. The author is not identified, neither are the exact circumstances in which it is written but commentators agree that a very likely situation is that of the great deliverance of Israel from the siege of the Jerusalem by Sennacherib the King of Assyria, which was prevented by the terrible destruction that God brought upon the army of Sennacherib,
(2 Kings 19:35.)

35 And it came to pass that night, that the angel of Jehovah went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.

36 So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh.

That is 185,000 soldiers smitten in one blow! It is conjectured that it might have been by an earthquake or even a plague. Whatever it was, the people of Israel saw in it the hand of God protecting and keeping them safe, indeed delivering them from their enemies.

If we are to get any help from this type of psalm we need to travel back in time and see what they saw through their eyes, and feel what they felt about God and then bring it to life in our time and in our circumstances.

The key thought as this psalm opens up is that God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

A refuge – a place of safety; it literally translates as "a place of trust"

Psalm 2 picks up the same thought:

11 Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling.

*12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take **refuge** in him.*

Our refuge. We might think of this as the external aspect of their salvation from God, or God's protection.

But the psalmist says that God is more than just our refuge; he is also our strength – Psalm 2 again uses the same theme:

1 I love you, O LORD, my strength.

2 The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

3 I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.

Our Strength. This is the dynamic aspect of salvation. One commentator refers to it as: 'God within to empower the weak for action'. And the testimony of the psalmist was that God was an 'ever-present help in trouble'. It literally means: exceedingly present, very readily found.

All of this is built around a very powerful word picture comprising the two things that are most impregnable and unchanging - the earth and the mountains, and the symbol of what is most menacing and restless – the

sea. And the contemplation is that the permanent and unchanging structure of **their** world might just come crashing down into the menacing sea and quake in the roaring, foaming, surging waters. A dark glimpse possibly of the end of all things as they knew it but still God is near, and can be trusted.

Here's an interesting thought. Although this psalm is thought to have been written to celebrate a great intervention by God against one of their enemies – nowhere does the psalmist consider that God might just step in and stop the mountains and earth being engulfed in the surging and destructive seas. You see, God doesn't stop bad things happening; but he is exceedingly present and readily found when bad things do happen. Does this challenge your view of God? God is our refuge: our protector, our keeper, our shield. So does that mean that we will be insulated, somehow immune from cataclysmic events?

Here's the truth: good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. Does that make you feel a sense of injustice in the way God works? If it does, Jeremiah had a similar complaint against God, recorded in Jer. 12:1. He said this to God:

“Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all of the faithless live at ease?”

Surely, if God is a God of justice the wicked would have a hard time and the godly would have a life of ease! If God was our refuge, wouldn't he protect us when calamity comes our way? After all Psalm 46 was a psalm written after a time of great deliverance.

Ian gave us a very challenging question a few weeks ago when we looked at Psalm 37. What is our understanding of who God is and what he does, because that will define our relationship of faith in him?

Where was the God of refuge on Boxing Day 2004 when the Tsunami in the Indian Ocean engulfed the west coast of Sumatra killing 230,000 people in 11 countries? Where was the God of refuge a month ago when earthquakes struck Sumatra again, destroying homes and hospitals and schools and lives? God is our refuge – how could *they* say that?

My friend Eric was a model Christian. After Bible College he served many years as a London City Missioner, in later life he was an elder of a local Sussex Christian church. One day he was riding his bike over Vauxhall Bridge when a ready-mix concrete lorry knocked him off and crushed him to death.

God is our refuge; but bad things happen to good people.

What is God doing when the waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging?

Does the New Testament give us any better insight? Towards the end of Jesus' earthly ministry he prays an important prayer for the church that he was about to leave behind.

John 17:11 *Holy Father, **protect** them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one.*

12 *While I was with them, I **protected** them and **kept them safe** by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.*

Jesus was asking his Father to continue protecting his disciples, just as Jesus himself had done. Peter was amongst those Jesus asked his heavenly Father to protect – so what happened to Peter?

The historian Jowett, writing of the final days of the apostle Peter in Rome, says that ‘Peter was cast into a horrible prison called the Mamertine and for nine months, in absolute darkness, he endured monstrous torture manacled to a post. In spite of all the suffering Peter was subjected to, he converted his jailers, Processus, Martinianus, and forty-seven others. Peter met his death at the hand of the Romans in Nero's circus in 67AD.’ That would have been a barbarous, bloody death.

But Jesus had asked his father to protect them – surely this shouldn't have happened to Peter? A deeper insight is found a few verses on in that prayer.

John 17:15 My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

So Jesus wasn't actually asking his father to keep the disciples safe from physical danger and harm at all! He was asking for protection from the evil one. He didn't want Satan to be able to snatch them from the loving arms of God his father. Jesus wasn't actually making any point about their earthly well-being, he was focussing on their eternal salvation.

When Ian spoke a month ago about Psalm 37 he talked about the massive paradigm shifts that have gone on in people's understanding of who God is and what he does. The psalmist was writing back then about God who had delivered them in a mighty way in battle and preserved them from great destruction. This was a reality to them. This was their

experience of God. This influenced how they thought about God, how they understood God. We could say it conditioned their paradigm of God.

As we read this psalm, what is our paradigm of God. How do we see him working in our own lives or in the church or in the world around us? Do we see a God who makes everything right for us? I'm sorry if I'm going to upset anyone, but I have heard Christians giving testimony and saying things like "I was having such a hard time but God really came through for me and sorted things out, now I know I can trust him" – and it makes me cringe. It's like saying "I was trying my hardest to achieve 'such and such' and then God proved himself by making it all work out as I had intended" Of course, God is interested in every detail of our lives but we must not view him as a God that always fixes it for us – a kind of cosmic version of Jimmy Saville! Because what does that say about our almighty loving father when things don't go right – at least from how we see things. God actually is always there, as the psalmist says *exceedingly present, very readily found* – often working in the mess of our lives. If you want to see this visually, go into the Rainbow Lounge and look at Ian's painting on the wall called 'In the Mess' – because that's where God is. (I mean God is in the mess, not God is in the Rainbow Lounge!) If you're listening to this recording on the internet click on our website go to Family and then Brushstrokes and you can see this picture along with a couple of dozen other worship paintings.

So, should we shift our paradigm, our view of God from that of the ancient psalmist? Imagine for a moment that you were the Apostle Paul, and that you were writing to a fledgling early church, struggling under the dominating, cruel government of the Roman Empire – what might you pray for **them** on a daily basis, what big thing would you want for them?

Safety from persecution; deliverance from oppression in their personal lives; security in their worship and church life?

Well, we've got the real answer in Ephesians chapter 1

15 For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints,

16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

*17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of **wisdom** and **revelation**, so that you may **know him better**.*

*18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be **enlightened** in order that you **may know the hope to which he has called you**, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,*

19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

So, what's Paul asking for them to have? Wisdom, revelation, enlightenment – that sounds to me very much like asking them for a 'paradigm shift'! And why – so they might know Jesus better and the hope to which he has called them to. I find that these verses challenge me to core of who I am! Wisdom, revelation, enlightenment – this is not just a general agreement or understanding about who God is and what he is doing. It's a complete mind blowing realisation of the hope to which he has called us! Elsewhere in his letter to the Philippians, Paul tells them *'your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus'*

That is an eternal perspective on life. This ultimately is the refuge that God provides, the refuge in which we can trust. We have heard many times from this platform that the Kingdom of God is among us now – and so it is. As Christians we are saved, we are also being saved and one day

we will be saved. What are we saved from, certainly not hardship, or pain, or illness, or tragedy. But our lives are 'hidden in Christ'. As Steve Hembery often put it – it's the Now and Not Yet!

God is our refuge; we can trust him for eternity. But sometimes that is not enough to get us through the day. Along with the Ephesians we might *know the hope to which he has called us* – our refuge, but we also need to know his strength to cope with our lives now. Maybe along with the psalmist we feel that the permanent and unchanging structure of **our** world might just come crashing down into the menacing sea and quake in the roaring, foaming, surging waters. God is our ever-present help in times of trouble. But do we always see that, feel that, know that? What is our paradigm of who God is and what God does?

Do we see God being our refuge and strength or do we see the crashing waves of destruction. Sometimes the noise, the distraction the frantic activity of life makes us oblivious of who God really is. The psalmist turns to this theme towards the end of the psalm – verse 10: *Be still, and know that I am God.* Or as Paul put it centuries later writing to the Ephesians: *'I keep asking God ... that you may know him better.'*

Let's get a feel for how this injunction is written. It is not like this – the writer is some kind of therapist or counsellor, saying: "right now please sit down over here and make yourself comfortable, close your eyes and breath slowly and deeply, calm your thoughts and make you whole body from your toes to your head nice and still, okay ... now let's try and know God." Of course not! We've got a near disaster going on around us. Our world is about to come crashing down into the menacing sea and quake in the roaring, foaming, surging waters. There is noise and confusion, the

things we things we had hoped for have just vanished, the people we relied on have just deserted us, we are facing ruin and all we can hear is a cacophony around us. And in the midst of that unbearable noise God says **SHUT UP! QUIET! BE STILL!** Okay, now you need to *know that I am God.*

Does this make you think of another occasion when God needed to say something like this to his people? Do you remember when Jesus was in a boat on the lake Galilee, Luke tells the story like this:

Luke 8:22 One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out.

23 As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger.

24 The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!"

He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm.

25 "Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."

Jesus often quoted the psalms when he spoke, he might have equally well said to the storm: *'Be still, and know that I am God'*, because that's what it amounted to.

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

God is our refuge when things are going well and our refuge when things are going awfully. God is our strength when we are on top of life and feel okay about ourselves and what's going on around us. God is also our strength when we when we feel at our weakest and are just about ready to chuck it all in.

When we are facing disaster in the eyes and are just about at the end of our own resources, that is when we need to shout and rage at the things confronting us and say BE STILL, and then to hear God say: 'know that I am God'.

Amen