

Rest and Roots Made for Presence Psalm 46

Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. It is great honor to stand behind this pulpit for the first time! We continue on today in our series called Rest and Roots, a look at what the Bible has to say about resting in Christ and rooting down deeply in him. Since we have officially made it halfway through this series, I thought it was time for a little recap:

- Made for Rest, Genesis 2:1-3 - made for a relationship with God wherein we lay down our work to earn his favor and trust in Jesus' work on the cross
- Made for Sabbath, Deuteronomy 5:12-15 - commanded to lay down our work and remember the God who has given us rest
- Made for Family, Ephesians 3:14-21 - made not only rest in God the Father's love but also with his family, the church; which also has meaning for our biological family
- Made for Celebration, Psalm 16 - made to celebrate of delight in the rest God has given us, even in the midst of life's difficulties
- Made for Peace, Jeremiah 29:1-14 - made to rest in our current circumstances and extend that rest to others by putting down roots

I hope you are finding, like me, that God's offer of rest is much deeper and wider than we tend to assume, and that his word has so many life-giving things to teach us about it. Today we are going to talk about how we have been made for presence: God's presence in the midst of chaos and our own presence in the midst of chaos.

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Today's passage is Psalm 46. You may follow along in your Bible or on the screen. Hear the word of the Lord:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, 3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah 4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. 5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her

when morning dawns. 6 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. 7 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah 8 Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. 10 "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" 11 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah Psalm 46

May the Word preached here today echo among the nations. You may be seated.

Exposition

As a new Christian in middle school I was given a kind of study Bible that God would use to change my life forever. It was published by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, the same organization who had helped me begin to follow Jesus in the first place. What was so great about it was that it was designed perfectly for a new believer, especially one in middle school or high school, and it had all these pages where you could look up certain topics or emotions and it would provide key Scripture passages for you to read. I grew like crazy because I could quickly find parts of the Bible that related to exactly what I was dealing with on any given day.

That is a similar concept to the book of Psalms. For God's Old Testament people, the Israelites, or the Jews, the Psalms were a collection of songs that covered almost every topic and emotion you could imagine. And because they are songs and poetry, it's important for us today to not only read them, but to *feel* them, let their message get our hearts pounding like one of our favorite songs.

If Psalm 46 was a modern day song, it would be a mixture of genres--you know, like how country music and hip hop are now trying to fuse together. The genres of Psalm 46, however, would be more like screamo and classical. It is a psalm of crazy intensity, the intensity of the most chaotic things that could ever happen in the world; and at the same time in the midst of that it is also a psalm of absolute stillness.

Honestly, we don't know what happened that led to the writing of this psalm; whether it was a natural disaster like an earthquake or the threat of an incoming army or something else.¹ But it doesn't really matter. The people of God both then and now

¹ Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms*, 714

need a song to sing in the midst of chaos so they can stand firmly present in the midst of chaos...and this is that song. It begins,

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Psalm 46:1

Notice the very first word of the psalm. What is it? “God”. The psalmist doesn’t begin by lifting our eyes onto the chaos, but the Creator, the source, the stability, the rock that will not move when everything in existence crumbles. And so the psalm begins with a lovely, quiet symphony--which is strange and important in a psalm about chaos, the worst that could possibly happen! Since the moment humanity turned our backs on the Creator, when sin and disobedience and raging against him became the way we chose, our theme song has been thrashing, heavy metal, head-banging, bloody-throat screamo. And in light of it all the world begs to completely implode upon us, but is held back by God’s mercy.

Jonathan Edwards said that “were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear [us] for one moment; for [we] are a burden to it...” and the care we take “to preserve [our] own lives, or the care of others to preserve [it], [does] not secure [us for one] moment.”² We may plug our ears with the false securities of American invincibility as an economic and military superpower, but the reality is that our world is crumbling, and, to make it quite personal, your body is crumbling. The odds are against you--100% of us will die. The only refuge in this world is God himself. And for those who run to him, not just because they want to escape the chaos but because they want *him*, they and they alone are given the right to say this: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” And so begins our first point of focus today: God is present to his people in chaos.

I. God is Present to His People in Chaos

When we hear this concept, especially for those of you who are already walking with Jesus, it might be like, ‘Yeah, duh, of course God is present to his people in the midst of chaos--he is *always* present to his people.’ And yes indeed, Jesus himself said, “Surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). But this psalm helps us to see that there is something that makes him *particularly* present in the middle of chaos and pain and need. It’s not that he increases his presence to us in such times, as though he is like, “I usually just give you the small order of me but right now you’re gonna get the large,” but the chaos opens us up to realize how much we need him, and

² Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”

in our needing and wanting him, we realize just how present he actually is.³ This is why verse one describes God as “a very present help in trouble,” which could also be translated “something like a help that ‘can be found *when you need it*’”.⁴ This echoes later in the New Testament when followers of Jesus are encouraged:

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Hebrews 4:16

This shows us that the top candidates for deeply coming to know God and his rest aren't those who have everything together, but those who are busted up enough to realize their need: their need for help, for strength, for a refuge, for a fortress. It isn't the mature follower of Jesus who has reached a point where they *sometimes* needs Jesus, but the one who is realizing they need him *all the time*. And when you see God's presence in this light, then you may begin to see the hardships in your life not as judgments from God, but gracious gifts and invitations into his presence.

And his presence, according the writer of Psalm 46, is the only refuge that can withstand the absolute worst kinds of chaos. The psalmist gives two examples: the end of the world as we know it and the threat of an incoming army. The first examples appears in verses two and three read,

2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, 3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Psalm 46:2-3

This chaos is no less than a poetic description of what one theologian calls “uncreation,” the undoing of everything God made stable during the creation of the world.⁵ At the very beginning of the Bible we get a tiny glimpse into the story before there was the story, before God created anything at all. It tells us,

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Genesis 1:2

It's like a watery nothingness without order or boundaries. It's the literal Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of chaos: “the confused unorganized state of primordial matter before the creation of distinct forms”. And yet the Spirit of God is there, ready at the word of God the Father to bring it all into order: dry land and mountain peaks and ocean boundaries, a place where people can actually live. So when the writer of Psalm 46 describes the earth giving way and the mountains falling

³ Willem A. Vangemeren, *Psalms*, 404

⁴ Wilson, 716

⁵ Wilson, 716

into the heart of the sea, it is “uncreation”. It is our worst nightmare. It is every end-of-the-world movie without a Will Smith or Arnold Schwarzenegger to save the day. It is precisely what happened in the day of Noah when God destroyed the whole world with a flood.

But it is not the psalmist’s way of saying, ‘We will not fear because we know that God won’t destroy the world again with a flood, that he surely will not let such harm come our way.’ No, no, this is written in such a way that it’s like he is sitting in a paddle boat while a mountain crumbles into the sea, creating a tidal wave that is going to devour him, and while he is being suctioned into the trough of that mile-high death wave, he says, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear” (v. 1). The stabilizing, securing power of God’s presence in the life of the Christian doesn’t come from the assumption that he won’t let anything bad happen to you, or even from the thought that he won’t let you go to hell, but that *he himself*, God Almighty, the king over chaos, the real person of Jesus Christ, is *with you in the midst of it*.

The first time I experienced a panic attack was while serving as a missionary. During a holiday visit back to the US, I proposed to Katie the day before flying back to Africa. The emotional trip back overseas began with this nauseating goodbye to my brand new fiancée, then four continents in 36 hours, including a layover in Istanbul, Turkey, where I made a special trip to the Grand Bazaar and bought a big bag full of special gifts for Katie. I arrived jetlagged and late at night in Africa, and was so overcharged by a taxi driver that I nearly fought him before finally giving him all the money I had just so he would give me my luggage without driving off. I checked into a hotel, promising I would pay them the next day, then settled into my room. That’s when it hit me: I had left the bag of gifts from Turkey in the trunk of the taxi. Now, looking back on it today, I can laugh at the whole situation. But in the moment, the emotion and exhaustion ignited with the scenario and I completely fell apart. I literally fell face down on the filthy floor and wailed uncontrollably with this strange mixture of despair and panic. I couldn’t calm myself down, so I began to try many of the different means by which I had often experienced God’s presence: listening to worship music, journaling, reading my Bible, praying--but nothing helped. And for the first time in my Christian life, I could not *do something* to make myself feel secure.

In the days that followed, as I physically and emotionally got back my footing, I sensed that God was speaking something into my life that would take the rest of my life to work out. It was, “The means to Me aren’t Me.” For years I had only known *of* God’s presence through the means of good Christian disciplines; and as good and necessary as those things are, they in themselves had become refuges into which I ran. And yet it was in a single moment of painful, confusing helplessness that I experienced the raw presence

of the God himself, the refuge who says, “Child, I won’t take away the pain, but I will lie down beside you.” And he was enough.

The psalmist doesn’t stop highlighting the security of God’s presence with his end-of-the-world example. He goes on to his second example: the chaotic, terrifying threat of an incoming army. The scene is set beginning in verse four:

4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. 5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. 6 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.

The image created here is like a city on a mountaintop surrounded by an attacking army. We don’t know for sure, but it could well be describing a situation during the reign of a king over Israel named Hezekiah, wherein the Assyrian army, an army that was destroying everyone, surrounded Jerusalem and taunted both Hezekiah and God himself. Hezekiah cried out to God in desperate need and when morning dawned an angel of the Lord had gone out and slaughtered 185,000 Assyrian soldiers (Isaiah 36-37).⁶ In light of an experience like that, it would certainly make sense to write, “The nations rage [and] kingdoms totter; [but God] utters his voice, [and] the earth melts” (v. 6).

And again, the security for the people of God here doesn’t come from the water supply or the fortifications. And if this city is meant to represent Jerusalem, which it most certainly is because of the emphasis on Jerusalem, or Zion, throughout the Old Testament, then we can even say the security doesn’t come from the Jewish temple, the holiest place God dwelled among his people.⁷ God himself is the river! He is the fortifications! “God is in the midst of her--she shall not be moved” (v. 5)!

And this is where the psalm moves so far beyond its time. Eventually God allowed the city of Jerusalem and the temple to be conquered and destroyed, but not before he made a new promise to his people to give them the security of his presence not in a temporary city called Jerusalem, but an eternal city called New Jerusalem.⁸ Listen to the invitation to look beyond Jerusalem:

8 Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the

⁶ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 1-72*, 168

⁷ Vangemeren, 408

⁸ Wilson, 720

spear; he burns the chariots with fire. 10 “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” Psalm 46:8-10

This is not our God just annihilating the threat of the Assyrian army; this is our God desolating every kingdom and army and power that does not *fall on its face* before him. And this is not just the angel of the Lord dealing death to all enemies, but conducting the ancient practice of snatching away their instruments of war and piling them in a heap to burn.⁹

And as they stand there like children who have had their favorite toy taken away, a shout rings out, the likes of which the world has never known. It is not a shout for the people of God, because they already know it to be true. It is for God’s enemies who lay horrified and weaponless: “Be still, and know that I am God” (v. 10). The language here does not mean ‘Be still’ in the way of ‘Keep calm and carry on,’ but there is a violence to it in the way of ‘Cease and desist,’ or in more familiar terms, when a policeman might shout, ‘Freeze, put your hands up!’¹⁰

At the true end of the world when all this actually takes place, there is something for which every knee must bow to hear and every tongue agree to be true: that Jesus Christ is God, and he will be exalted above all powers, and he will be exalted above all creation.

II. Therefore His People are Also Present in Chaos

And this brings us to our concluding point for the day. The first point was this: God is present to his people in chaos; the second point then builds on that: therefore his people are also present in chaos. Because our God is fully present and near to us in the worst life has to offer, we too can have the ridiculously strong confidence of the psalmist who looks at a tsunami and armageddon and says, “Bring it.” We can stand firm. This is what Paul is referring to when he says,

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Ephesians 6:13

Putting on the armor of God isn’t a certain way of praying or acting, but remembering the good news that because of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, God has proven that he is with me and he is for me! This allows me to not lose my mind in a chaotic moment, but to remain present in the situation because I am present to God. And

⁹ W.S. Plumer, *Psalms*, 525

¹⁰ Wilcock, 169

because I am present and maintained by God, I can be present to others instead of retreating.

Now, you may be hearing these words today and saying, 'Great, I'll keep this in mind when World War IV hits or when the end of the world happens.' But I think there's a deeper application to our lives here. Listen to the final words of the psalm, a line that is repeated twice:

11 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

"The Lord of hosts" we get--it's like "the God of angel armies," but what's up with the term "the God of Jacob"? "The Bible gives us no indication that Jacob ever in all his 147 years experienced either flood or earthquake. His whole lifestyle was, outwardly at least, a quiet [farm life]...But though he may never have gone up a mountain or down to the sea, his story is full of ups and downs of another kind. Genesis 25-50 depicts a family life seething with crises and dramas, deceptions and feuds, rebellion and heartache and colliding personalities that roar and foam. Condense it into 147 half-hour episodes, and you have the mother of all soap operas."¹¹ Jacob was real, and the struggle was real. And he is the example given here. Can you relate? Church, the *God of Jacob* is your fortress.

Conclusion

The greatest gift that God could give you is himself, his presence. Likewise, the greatest gift you can give to him and to others is yourself, your presence:

- To God, not your hard work, but your presence.
- To your spouse, not all your worldly goods, but your presence.
- To your children, not making their hopes and dreams come true, but your presence.
- To your parents, not being a good kid, but your presence.
- To your neighbors, not staying out of their way, but your presence.
- To your church, not your service or money, but your presence.

And so I ask, what are the distractions that keep you from giving your undivided presence to God and others? It may not be a death wave, but is it the death scroll on your phone? Is it fear, shame, or guilt that you won't be accepted for who you are?

¹¹ Wilcock, 166

Do you have a lack of boundaries that keep you from being fully present in any given moment? Have you become so important in your own eyes that you can't turn off your phone or stop checking your email? Can you fully take in a moment without posting it on social media?

What are the refuges into which you run when the chaos of life happens? Is it God? Is it things we would consider obviously bad refuges like pornography, overeating, drugs or alcohol, gossip, apathy, overworking, disengaging relationally? Is it good things that still aren't God himself, such as ministry, missions, reading, quiet time, or hanging out with people?

These are critical questions because what we've seen in Psalm 46 is that for those who will not cease and desist in light of God's presence and slow down and unplug and be still and present with God others, there is a coming violence that will tear our distractions away. For the one who does not follow Jesus, God loves you enough to give you what you chose: a refuge other than God forever. For the one who does follow Jesus, God loves you enough to ruin your refuges and lead you back to him.

That is why week in and week out we remind ourselves of our one refuge. On the night he was betrayed, when he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said to them, "This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me." He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, "This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord's death until he returns." **We are announcing that Jesus Christ is the only refuge in which we can be welcomed into the presence of God.** Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to my left, your right. If you're not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back and people to pray with you on the sides. Let's pray.

Bibliography

Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 1-72*

Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*

Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms*

Willem A. Vangemeren, *Psalms*

W.S. Plumer, *Psalms*

Alan Fadling, *The Unhurried Life: Following Jesus' Rhythms of Work and Rest*

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*

Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,"

https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/edwards_jonathan/Sermons/Sinners.cfm

Gospel Transformation Bible