

Exegesis and Sermon Study of Psalm 46

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Of all the hymns in our current hymnal there is perhaps none more cherished than “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” It is especially dear to us Lutheran Christians because it reminds us of our rich heritage in the Reformation. For that reason it is customarily sung on Reformation Day in our churches. This hymn traces its Biblical origins to Psalm 46, which may have occupied a similar position in the hearts and minds of God’s Old Testament people. The Psalm’s message like the Reformation hymn is security amid great turmoil because of God’s presence. “A Mighty Fortress” and Psalm 46 are precious to Lutherans because they capture the spirit of Martin Luther and the Reformation. Facing princes, popes and official inquiries Luther was able to exhibit a courage and steadfastness in the truth which we need to emulate. Luther’s courage was imparted by the Holy Spirit and rooted on the certain promises of God. Both hymn and psalm are valuable to Christians not only at the celebration of Reformation but at all times in our Christian lives, for we all must face troubles throughout our lives here on earth.

To approach Psalm 46 is a privilege for any preacher. To preach from any portion of the Psalms is a great opportunity. This hymnal of the Old Testament gives us Hebrew poetry that comes from those who faced the trials of life. The Psalms come from the hearts of those that have been beset with great problems and yet have experienced the fulfillment of God’s promises to his people. They are timeless because the difficulties of this world persist down to this age and through it until the end of time. They are timeless because the comfort of God’s promises persists through the ages; they are everlasting. Our hope amid tribulations is still the ageless promises of God.

Each generation has different troubles to confront. Each one sees the Lord’s promises fulfilled for them as they face those troubles. The difficulty and deliverance that was the original occasion for this Psalm is not known exactly. Some have speculated that it was the deliverance given during the reign of Jehoshaphat. (2 Ch 20) Others have suggested that it was written when the Assyrian army under Sennachrib was destroyed by God’s angel and was forced to withdraw from Jerusalem. (Isa 36,37) It would seem that this occasion would be the most logical, but we cannot be certain. I have speculated that the Psalm was written by exiles on their way to Babylon to steel their faith in the Lord’s ultimate deliverance. I admit that this opinion has nothing to commend it, but I mention it to point to an application for this Psalm which I think many have made and which we may yet have to make. In the midst of calamity we turn to this Psalm and other Portions of the Scripture to buoy our faith. If this Psalm were written during or after the siege and deliverance of Jerusalem, it is not too far fetched to say that Isaiah was the author. Again no clear identification is possible as to circumstance or authorship. We can be thankful to our God that he has included it in our Scripture. It has provided comfort for his people at many turns in many ages.

Luther’s summary of the Psalm is as follows:

The Forty-sixth Psalm is a Psalm of Thanksgiving (*Dankpsalm*). At the time it was sung by the people of Israel because of the wonderful works of God that he protects and preserves the city of Jerusalem, his dwelling place, from the raging and threatenings of all kings and Gentiles and preserves peace in the face of all wars and weapons. According to Scripture parlance he calls the strength of the city a river, a brook, which shall not dry up despite the mighty waters, seas and ocean of the Gentiles, namely their great kingdoms, principalities, and dominions, which must dry up and disappear.

We, however, sing this Psalm (perhaps implying “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”) in praise of God because he is with us and miraculously preserves his Word and Christendom over against the gates of hell, the raging of all devils, of the rabid spirits, the world, the flesh, sins, and death

etc. We also sing it in praise of God because our river remains a fountain of living water, while their swamps, pools, and puddles become putrid and fetid and dry up. —Reformation Festival (also twentieth Sunday after Trinity and sixth Sunday after Christmas) —*WLQ*, July, 1952 p. 207

PSALM 46 (The NIV translation is reproduced throughout.)

For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. According to *alamoth*. A song.

לְמַנְצִיחַ לְבָנֵי־קֹרַח עַל־עֲלָמוֹת שִׁיר:

The title of this Psalm gives us no clues as to the circumstances of its writing or the author. It does indicate that it was intended for a musical setting of some kind. It was handed over to “the director of music. It seems that the Psalms were often handed over to the director who would rehearse it for presentation to Israel in some fashion. 1 Chronicles 15:16ff refers to the musical preparations and leaders. עֲלָמוֹת is mentioned in this passage in verse 20. Beck translates: “...with lutes in a high key.”

There is no definite clue to the meaning of עַל־עֲלָמוֹת. It was a musical direction of some kind, perhaps referring to the tenors, falsetto voices, a boy’s choir or to a musical instrument of “high pitch” designated for accompaniment. Some have suggested it refers to female voices, but it would be difficult to imagine them in the temple choir. At any rate the Psalm was intended for musical treatment.

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

אֱלֹהִים לְנוּ מִחֹסֶה וְעֹז עֲזָרָה בְּצָרוֹת נִמְצָא מְאֹד:

Here is the truth of the Psalm. God provides a refuge to which his people can flee. He is their firm and secure strength. He is ours, לְנוּ. This is the believer’s confidence, but it is a confidence shared with other believers. The psalmist says “our” not mine. This is an indication that the Psalm will be used in public worship at the assembly of the congregation. On another level the Church is the assembly of believers. The Church therefore sings with confidence throughout each and every age that God is a refuge and strength. This Psalm can properly be understood as the Church’s great Psalm of thanksgiving through the tribulations of world history and persecution.

God is the assistance for his believers. The Hebrew has been translated “an ever present help in trouble.” נִמְצָא is a niph'al participle which could be translated “being found.” Believers have found the Lord to be a refuge, strength and help in times of troubles. The Holy Spirit opens their understanding to see that God is ever present and ever an aid. The מְאֹד means “very, exceedingly, greatly.” It is a term of emphasis to bring our attention upon God and the strength, refuge and help he so freely and abundantly supplies to his people. “He is a help being readily found.” The comfort found by a troubled heart in God is a great comfort. If we would only turn more to him, we would find his help exceedingly abundant.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,

עַל־כֵּן לֹא־נִירָא בְּהִמְרֵי אָרֶץ וּבְמוֹט הָרִים בְּלֵב יַמַּיִם:

עַל־כֵּן is “therefore.” Because God is such a great refuge because his people have found him to be so by the power of the Holy Spirit, fear is dispelled. The believer cannot simply dispel fear by making up his or her mind to do so. There must be a reason. The reason is God’s abundant and exceeding help. The eyes of faith have been opened to see it, therefore we do not fear. The absence of fear in the heart of a believer is not an easy task. The sinful flesh causes us to fear again and again. God understood this sinful human trait and repeated the

exhortation not to fear throughout the Scriptures. “Fear not!” Jesus is born. “Fear not!” Jesus is arisen. “Fear not!” You are of more value than many sparrows.

We need fear nothing. The Psalm reminds us of this blessed comfort. The surest and most stable part of our world is the earth upon which we stand. Even if the earth itself should tremble and be changed and the great mountains shake and fall into the sea, God remains a refuge, strength and aid. Whether we translate כִּי with the word “though” or the word “when” may be subject to some debate. On one hand it is not necessarily a distinction of great concern. On the other hand it could mean the reality of these catastrophes opposed to their potential. If we translate “though” these great catastrophes could be viewed as possibly happening without any reference to their reality. As a New Testament Christian I know that they will occur. When they do, God is my refuge. When the world crumbles before the power of our returning Lord, I am secure in the grace and mercy of God. The mountains of this first world and the heavenly bodies of this first universe will all pass away. It is for this reason that I prefer to think of the כִּי as “when.” Dr. Stoeckhardt makes a similar observation.

though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. *Selah*

יְהִמּוּ יַחְמְרוּ מִיַּמּוֹ יַרְעֲשׂוּ-הָרִים בְּגִאֲוֹתוֹ סֵלָה:

The description of these great catastrophes continues. One cannot imagine such great events taking place without noise. The writer conveys this great roar with the verb יְהִמּוּ that is onomatopoeic.

סֵלָה is very likely a musical direction. Its meaning is hidden from us. It may have been the place at which the instrumental interlude was given. It may have another meaning that is altogether different, however. In this Psalm it is an appropriate break in the thought and serves as a logical cleavage for the development of a sermon outline.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.

נָהָר פְּלִגְיוֹ יִשְׂמְחוּ עִיר-אֱלֹהִים קֹדֶשׁ מִשְׁכַּנֵּי עֲלִיוֹן:

The scene changes. We are encouraged to see the city of God—his Church in the midst of these great disasters. The Lord dwells with his people. One is reminded of the last two chapters of the book of Revelation, especially these verses: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them... Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...” (Rev 21:2,3 and 22:1) We anxiously await our entrance into this blessed eternal city of joy and bliss.

Yet in the Church today a blessed river does flow. God’s grace and mercy to the sinful world are communicated to us in the Scriptures. In that Word God tells us of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins and his blessed promises of continued help each day of our turbulent lives. The Church will be refreshed by the revelation of his free and certain grace. She has always been “made glad” by the grace of this glorious God even in the midst of her trials. The Savior offered these waters to the woman at Jacob’s well, and one might easily be reminded of God’s invitation to drink of these waters which he extended through the prophet Isaiah. (Isa 55)

With this in mind it is not difficult to imagine Luther before the Diet of Worms making his familiar speech. He had been refreshed by the waters of God’s grace. He was not afraid. He was bold and confident. In the great danger he faced yet he was secure. We may draw this picture on Reformation Day, but it can be altered to suit the many and varied situations of God’s people. The Church is secure despite the outward circumstances. God’s grace has refreshed all those within her.

God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.

אֱלֹהִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ בְּלִי־תַמוּט יַעֲזֹרֶהָ אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֹת בְּקָר:

Just briefly note that the Church will not be moved or tottered. The verb used here, תַּמוּט, is the same verb used in verse 3 to describe the mountains. Here is a beautiful comfort! Although nature itself will be thrown into convulsions, the Church is secure. “The gates of hell” will not subvert the Church (Mt 16:16ff)

The reason for this stability amid turbulence and this security amid the loss of all earthly foundations is simply “God is within her.” Ordinarily the presence of God would be a terrifying thought for sinful humans. Because of God’s grace and mercy in Christ we are not terrified. God loves us. He has forgiven us. His presence is a great comfort. Because of Jesus Christ we cannot be condemned. “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Ro 8:1) Sin has been completely removed; we are saints. In addition God is with us to help us in every difficulty. “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also along with him, graciously give us all things? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loves us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Ro 8:31,32, 37-39)

His help is being pictured as coming at the break of day. Our troubles on earth are always to be viewed as temporary. The night always gives way to morning. Each difficulty is followed by God’s deliverance. Even if those difficulties last our entire lives here on earth, yet it is a short time compared with eternity. Psalm 90 describes our lifetime: “The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away...Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.” (Ps 90:10,14) The magnificence of a sunrise is but a reminder of the greatness of the Lord’s deliverance of his people after a short night of trial. A small child is unsure and frightened in the dark. A night-light may be necessary. In the morning when the light of day returns there is no need for the night-light. The fear and uncertainty have gone with the darkness. The application of this illustration can be made concerning God’s people as they struggle through the trials and temptations of this world.

Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts.

הָמוּ גוֹיִם מָטוּ מִמְּלָכוֹת נָתַן בְּקוֹלוֹ תַּמוּג אֶרֶץ:

The heathen and the kingdoms are in the same situation as the mountains and the sea. The verbs reappear. We see the turmoil of the natural world and the catastrophe of the political world even on an international level. The גוֹיִם are generally the nations besides Israel. Here they are viewed as roaring and making noise. These noises may be against the people of God and against God himself. If they are voiced against God or his people, they are only noises. The history of the world has seen serious threats made against believers. Persecutions have broken out throughout the world’s history and continue to break out. We can expect it! Yet through them all the Church has stood. The kingdoms have all come and gone. Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Rome are but a few. The Lord of history has vindicated his people again and again.

These deliverances of believers in the history of the world are only previews of the great vindication and victory yet to come. When the Lord sees fit to bring the world to an end the earth and everything in it will be destroyed. “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, the earth and everything in it will be laid bare ... That day will bring about the

destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.” (2 Pe 3:10,12) At that time all the nations of the earth will be brought to judgment. A brief look at Luke 21 will enlighten us:

He replied: “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them. When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.” Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will save yourselves ... There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:8-19,25-28)

The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת עִמָּנוּ מִשָּׁגְבֵי-לְנוּ אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב סֵלָה:

This verse is worth your efforts at memory work, even in the Hebrew. It is a beautiful verse that is repeated at the end of the Psalm. The Hebrew is not difficult and can be easily memorized. The Psalmist for the first time uses the tetragrammaton. This God of whom the choir has been singing is the I AM THAT I AM. He is the Lord of hosts. The great company of angels are at his disposal and direction. He is powerful, so powerful that there is no power which can overcome him or his people. He is more powerful than the most powerful of the earth's forces. This is a comforting fact when we as contemporary Christians are concerned with the enormous power of the nuclear age. All nuclear power or subsequent sources of power greater than the fission and fusion of atoms is nothing to this Lord. יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת עִמָּנוּ His angels are being sent daily to protect his people. We are secure even amid nuclear holocaust.

The psalmist also identifies this God as the God of Jacob. By that term we are reminded of the covenant of grace God made with sinful mankind. Jacob was the one who deceived his father and fled for fear of his brother. God's grace chose Jacob and established his covenant with him. We ought not forget that the fulfillment of that covenant was the sending of the descendant of Jacob, Jesus, into this world to accomplish our salvation. אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב is a God of abundant and free grace to the sinful children of this world. He is our fortress against the arrows of our own guilty consciences, the fiery darts of Satan and the roaring of the kingdoms of this world. He is with us according to his promise by virtue of his omnipresence: “For where two or three come together in my name, there am with them.” (Mt 18:20)

סֵלָה again marks the end of another section. The musical interlude of some kind, which may have followed, gave time for God's people to concentrate on the great comfort imparted to them by these verses.

Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth.

לְכוּ־תִזּוּ מִפְעֻלוֹת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר־שָׂם שְׁמוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ:

On the last day we will have opportunity to see the great desolations of the Lord. The earth will be consumed before our eyes. We will be in the assembly of all mankind to see the judgment pronounced upon the unbelieving. No matter how prestigious or powerful in this world they cannot escape the pronouncement of judgment. This great day has been previewed through the history of the world. The deliverances that the Lord has given to his Church through the ages are in the clear sight of believers. The individual deliverances that God has afforded to each and every one of his children are remembered. These are only the preliminaries. The great deliverance of the saints from all the troubles of this world is yet to come. Even the great deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian army was only a preview of the ultimate deliverance on the last day. The book of Revelation is filled with pictures of the Lord's destruction of the unbelievers and the blessed joy of his saints.

He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire.

מִשְׁבִּית מִלְחָמוֹת עַד־קִצָּה הָאֶרֶץ קָשֶׁת וְקִצֵּץ חֲנִית עֲגָלוֹת יִשְׂרָף בְּאֵשׁ:

Our Lord told us that there would be wars and rumors of wars until the end of the earth. The cessation of warfare has neither been complete nor prolonged. We have a tendency to see things only in terms of our national history. Then we mark the periods of warfare and the periods of peace. If we look beyond our national history, we see warfare to be a constant problem. War still rages today in our world, although we are not directly involved.

Wars will cease to the end of the earth, in all places, only when the Lord returns in glory. Periods of peace and prosperity could be viewed as previews of the final peace of heaven.

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”

הֲרַפוּ וְדַעוּ כִּי־אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהִים אַרוֹם בְּגוֹיִם אַרוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ:

הֲרַפוּ directs us to leave off or desist. We are directed to pay attention to these truths. Leave off and desist all effort that would cause you to lose this great comfort. Be still! Know! Stop the worrying! Stop all fear and anxiety. The reason is that the Lord God is present with us. He himself is behind all these things. Another view would have these words directed to the raging nations of unbelievers. Then it would mean they were to stop all their opposition and rebellion against the Lord and his people. This will occur on the final judgment. On the last day they must admit that he is God. They must cease all their rebellion and opposition. They will not be allowed any longer to afflict the saints. There will be no other choice but to acknowledge Him as Lord. “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Php 2:9-11)

On the observance of the Reformation this Psalm is a reminder of the great victories God has provided for the Gospel and those who trusted its sweet and blessed comfort. The Church will never tire of singing the praises of God, who has graciously redeemed us from sin, death and hell. In an age when the headlines trumpet great strides in ecumenical circles and when Lutherans in large numbers have deserted the heritage of the Reformation and more importantly the blessed stream of God's Word, let our preaching echo the thought of this Psalm as it is expressed in the reprise:

The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת עִמָּנוּ מִשָּׁגְבֵּלְנוּ אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב סֹלָה:

The following is an expanded outline for Reformation Day developed from Psalm 46. It is presented for your thought.

Introduction: “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” is based on the thoughts of this Psalm.

Theme: THE GOD OF GRACE IS OUR FORTRESS AND REFUGE

- I. We are secure at all times of difficulty.
 - A. God’s grace has redeemed us.
 1. We need the grace of God.
 - a. We are born without distinction (deserving no special notice from God.)
 - b. We are born deserving God’s wrath and punishment.
 - c. We are unable to do anything to make God notice or love us.
 2. God has loved us and redeemed us.
 - a. Jesus has died for us and forgiven us.
 - b. Eph. 2:8,9
 - c. God notices us, loves, and wants us to be with Him eternally.
 3. This God of grace is the sinner’s refuge.
 - B. God by His grace makes us secure.
 1. We always stand in God’s love.
 - a. In times of trouble the Lord graciously helps us.
 - i. We do not deserve his help.
 - ii. We expect it only because he has promised it to us.
 - iii. He is a present help not a distant observer.
 - b. In good and bad times the Lord loves us.
 - c. When our consciences trouble us, we are to remember his forgiveness
 2. We are secure in the worst of times.
 - a. Psalm 46:2. This is a great catastrophe.
 - b. Yet God is our refuge and strength.
 - C. We are secure at all times of difficulty.
 1. We have peace with God through Christ.
 - a. This is a free and undeserved gift of God.
 - b. We believe it and receive it.
 - c. It soothes our troubled consciences.
 2. No calamity can change this fact.
 - a. No personal difficulty.
 - b. No past sin which may trouble us.
 - c. No catastrophe that may occur to us as a group.
 - d. No difficulty of any kind.
 - i. Nuclear war.
 - ii. Famine, persecution.
 - iii. Loss of loved ones.
 3. We are secure in God’s grace.
 - a. We have forgiveness and always stand in God’s love.
 - b. We know God will provide deliverance from troubles.
- II. We are secure against our enemies.
 - A. God’s people are secure because God is with them.

1. They are pictured as the city of God.
 - a. They are glad.
 - b. They are refreshed by a cool river.
 2. It is so because God is with them.
 - a. “God is within her.”
 - b. This God is powerful and loving.
 - i. He is the Lord of hosts—almighty ruler of angels and the entire universe.
 - ii. He is the God of Jacob—faithful to the promises of his love for the salvation of mankind.
 3. Therefore no enemy can oppose God’s people successfully.
 - a. Nations and kingdoms cannot destroy God’s people.
 - b. The Lord provides the margin of security.
- B. Believers are secure against their enemies.
1. Our major enemy is Satan who wishes to devour us.
 2. Other enemies are those who oppose God’s grace.
 - a. They make salvation depend on works or human attitude.
 - b. They dispense fear and guilt.
 - c. These religions are numerous and take various forms.
 3. These enemies ridicule and persecute believers in Christ.
 4. Believers in Christ are secure.
 - a. Forgiveness is a gift of God’s grace.
 - b. Believers have the joy and peace found only in the God of grace.
 - c. The river of God’s Word refreshes us at every turn.
 - d. The Lord of hosts and the God of Jacob is with us.
- III. We are secure eternally.
- A. We are invited to look at Judgment Day.
1. We will note the destruction of sin.
 - a. Wars will end.
 - b. All the weapons of man will be destroyed.
 - c. Sin has caused such great suffering on earth.
 - i. War is the epitome of man’s greed, prejudice, pride and hatred.
 - ii. There are other difficulties on earth as well.
 2. We will note that God is exalted.
 - a. Even those who did not acknowledge Him in time must in eternity.
 - b. All, believers and unbelievers, will know Him.
 - c. For Satan and the unbelievers it is a terrifying knowledge.
- B. On that day we will be forever with the Lord.
1. He will publicly acknowledge us.
 2. He will invite us to enjoy heaven.
 - a. “Be still”
 - b. Revelation 21:4
 3. This is all because of God’s grace
 - a. We are secure at all times of difficulty
 - b. We are secure against all our enemies.
 - c. We are secure eternally.