



Women's Bible Study
Lecture for September 13, 2006
In Time Of Upheaval: Psalm 46

John and I had a lengthy ten month engagement, and towards the end of that time, we began consciously working on forming a joint spiritual relationship as a preparation for marriage. Of course, this also helped with impure thoughts! But I was caught a bit off guard one day when John asked me what my favorite psalm was. I liked to read the Bible, but had formed no particular affection for the psalms. I figured that I was safe with any number between one and 150, so I said, "Psalm 137." "Ah," he replied, "you have an interest in the sorrows of the Jews during the Babylonian exile, do you?" At that point I had a vague memory of a psalm beginning "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept..." (Psalm 137:1). Then I had to admit that I didn't actually know the psalms as well as I might.

But that changed with subsequent years, especially as sorrows came into my life and the psalmists helped me deal with them.

One night I found myself keeping watch in a hospital room with a dear friend. Her mother, who was also my friend, was in the bed, in a coma and dying. So I took my friend aside to a private alcove and opened this Bible.

This particular Bible was given to me by my husband in 1984, after the original Bible he gave me in 1976 had fallen apart. It's a Revised Standard Version, the version I grew up with. It contains our family history, as well as a record of my Bible reading. And the book of Psalms is heavily marked up, so that I could simply turn page after page in that hospital room, reading my favorite verses out loud to my friend as we reminded ourselves of God's goodness in the face of very great sorrow. And, as so often happens with the Psalms, we felt as though the words were addressed specifically to us in this situation...that the Psalmist, who knew nothing of IV's and organ transplants, still understood what we needed to hear that difficult night.

Each summer I read through the Psalms when I am on vacation. I want the extra time to reflect and cherish these words that have become very precious to me through repetition and through experience.

Let's begin with a commercial for the book of Psalms. If Psalms isn't your favorite book of the Bible, we hope to at least make you LIKE them through our study this fall called *Psalms: A Godly Response to Life's Realities*. Two reasons stand out.

A. Psalms echo our experience.

Because Psalms is a collection of poetry written by many authors, in response to many different situations, you can be reasonably sure that there is at least one Psalm addressing your particular dilemma. Are you angry? There's a psalm for you. Are you far from God? There is a psalm for you. Are you delighted? There's a psalm for you. They reflect honest emotions and questions, just like you and I experience every day. In the rest of the Old Testament we get the

stories about the saints, but in the Psalms, we hear their actual words. Luther wrote about the Psalms: “Here you look into the heart of all the saints, as into a lovely garden of pleasure and delight. You see what beautiful flowers grow there because of joyous thoughts concerning God and his numerous blessings.”

B. Psalms point to Christ.

They bless us because they foreshadow the Messiah to come. Although they were written by Jews for use in Jewish worship, by the illumination of the Holy Spirit the psalmwriters looked forward to the redeemer who would come. So in Psalm 22 we read the very words that Christ spoke from the cross: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1; Matthew 27:46) Not only do they echo our emotions, but they point to Christ.

So today we will take a broad look at the book of Psalms, and then finish with a study of Psalm 46.

II. What are the Psalms?

The book that we call Psalms is actually five books. They are written by many different authors, the most common being King David, a family group called the Sons of Korah, and a priest named Asaph. There are 150 of them, and it is likely that the compilation took almost 1,000 years, from Moses in the 15th century BC to Ezra in the 5th century BC.

There are many different ways to categorize the Psalms. Usually they are distinguished by their subject matter, so there are Royal psalms, wisdom psalms, penitential psalms and so on. Psalm 46, the passage we’ll study today, is a Psalm of Trust.

But I would like you to think about them in a different way – not based upon their content, but upon their nature. We can think of them in three different ways.

First, as

A. A cry from the heart

Some of the psalms are so raw that they appear as a page pulled out of someone’s diary. “**No one cares for my soul,**” David writes in Psalm 142. “**For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me,**” he writes in Psalm 51, when he had a bad conscience about adultery and murder. “**You have turned my wailing into dancing...**” he exults in Psalm 30. Just as a journal would record how we felt on a particular day, so do many psalms give a picture of strong human emotion in a specific situation. They resonate, because they are true to life.

Second, they are

B. Poetry and music

The psalms are Hebrew poetry. We may not recognize Hebrew poetic forms, because they lack rhyme and traditional meter. One characteristic form is called “parallelism” – where a statement was made, followed by another statement that echoes the first: “**In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise...**”(Psalm 56:10). Another form of poetry uses the Hebrew alphabet as an acrostic at the beginning of each line – for example, Psalm 119.

Now let's pause for a moment and think honestly about whether you are a poetry lover or not. Many people do not like poetry, because they never developed a taste for it. But even if you don't like it, can't you at least concede that poetry is a more complex way of expressing ideas? Which statement gives more information: "You're really cute." Or instead, how Shakespeare put it: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Poetry gives us a chance to use language and nuance, rather than just the same tired set of words over and over again. We could say, "I love you, Lord," but the psalm writer said it better: **"My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God."** (Ps 84:2, RSV).

Beyond the fact that they are poetic, the psalms were also meant to be sung in public worship. The use of songs in worship to teach theology isn't a new idea. It was used by Luther in the 16th century and by Wesley in the 19th, because as any teacher knows, you can get kids to remember almost anything that is sung.

Take today's psalm as an example. Written by the Sons of Korah, Psalm 42 goes like this:

**God is our refuge and strength,
An ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
And the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
Though its waters roar and foam,
And the mountains quake with their surging. (Psalm 46:1-3)**

Centuries later, Luther took this psalm, and wrote the hymn *A Mighty Fortress*:
*A mighty fortress is our God
A bulwark never failing.
Our helper he amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing*

This psalm is sometimes called "Luther's psalm" for that reason. But this is just one of the psalms that Luther used to achieve his desire to get the word of God into the hands and minds of the people. He wrote in the preface to Johann Walter's hymnbook in 1524: "We are issuing a hymnbook so that the word of God may remain among the people by means of song."
(*Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 47, #2, April 1983: "Luther's Psalm Hymns," pg. 144.)

Songwriters continue to use this psalm. Our choir has sung a wonderful anthem by Allen Pote called *God is our Refuge and Strength*. We sing praise songs based on the phrase "Be still and know that I am God." We should remember to view psalms not only as a cry from the heart, but as poetry and music.

Psalms are also

C. Liturgy and worship

This summer I had to teach in the *Heroes of the Faith* series in Sunday school. I spoke on John Chrysostom, one of the early church fathers. One of Chrysostom's claims to fame is the liturgy he wrote in the fourth century, which forms the basis for modern day Greek orthodox worship. His liturgy was also used by the reformers in the 16th century. Liturgy provides a formal framework for worship. And the Jews were no stranger to liturgical worship. You can see instructions for use in the heading of the Psalms; for example, at the top of Ps. 46, we read

“According to Alamo”’. This means that the psalm should be sung by the sopranos. Elsewhere you’ll see the word “Selah”, which means “nobody really knows what this term means for sure”. There’s speculation that it referred to a musical interlude – you know, the ancient equivalent of a drum or guitar solo – but we don’t really know. I have a friend in LA who named her firstborn “Selah” after this mystery term from the Psalms. All but 34 Psalms include these extra bits of information at the top of the Psalm, called a superscription, that tell when it’s supposed to be used, or whom the author was.

But as we ponder the Psalms in their original context of worship and liturgy, think about how many references to God – his majesty, his protection, his salvation – we see in them. Sure, it is through the lens of human emotion. But in virtually every psalm, the answer to the human muddle is to look upward and see God for who he is. Emotion is always followed by objective truth about God. That is why, for many centuries, the worship services of the church, based around the Psalter, focused on a majestic view of God. The older hymns reflected absolute truths about God, rather than focusing on us or our response to him. It’s only in the past 100 years or so that music started to focus on OUR emotions. So the Psalms provide a good pattern for us in worship...feel emotion, but focus on God and his unchanging truth.

So as we continue to study the psalms, look for those common threads: the cry from the heart; speaking truth in a musical, poetic way; and directing our thoughts in worship to a correct understanding of God.

Next,

III. How did we get them?

In some cases,

- A. Historically.** The psalms often arose out of specific historical situations. David is trapped in a cave, and writes Psalm 142...he escapes from Saul, and writes Psalm 52.

We also got them

B. Deliberately.

Psalm writing was part of Israel’s cultural history. You see them sprinkled throughout the O.T. at times of deliverance or prayer. The Psalms were always used in worship, but received their final form only after the rebuilding of the temple and the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile. Since the Psalms passed through so many hands, the book demonstrates the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring and guiding the hands of the writers and compilers, to result in a book which has blessed generation after generation of believers.

With that background on Psalms in general, let’s turn our attention to Psalm 46. If you have a Bible, please turn to Psalm 46 now.

IV. In Time of Upheaval (Psalm 46)

This psalm became memorable to me when I heard it read in my husband’s cracked and sorrowful voice at our daughter’s funeral. He planned the service and was determined to take part in it, so he read this psalm rather than trusting himself to preach. Listening to John read, it became clear to me that the psalm writer was not simply talking about physical earthquakes, but was speaking as well about disastrous and catastrophic events that sometimes overwhelm our lives – as we had just experienced in our daughter’s death.

Listen while I read Psalm 46:

**God is our refuge and strength,
An ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
And the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
Though its waters roar and foam,
And the mountains quake with their surging.**

**There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God
The holy place where the Most High dwells.
God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
Nations are in uproar,
Kingdoms fall;
He lifts his voice, the earth melts.**

**The Lord Almighty is with us;
The God of Jacob is our fortress.**

**Come and see the works of the Lord,
The desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear,
He burns the shields 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 Almighty is with us;
The God of Jacob is our fortress.**

This summer we visited Jogjakarta, Indonesia, three weeks after a catastrophic earthquake. The quake seemed to target the poor; they were the ones whose houses were built with unreinforced concrete which crumbled like sand when the quake hit. Because my brother –in-law Andrew works a great deal with disaster relief in his role with the World Bank, we visited the damaged area. At first it looked just like any other stretch of Java – lush, green fields, Mt. Merapi smoking away in the distance (these poor people were also living with the specter of a major volcanic eruption), and peaceful looking villages. These suddenly gave way to acres of devastation, where the entire village might have just one or two buildings standing, with the rest a sea of rubble. The villagers had done well, separating out the usable bricks from the smashed ones, creating a community kitchen and using the donated tents and equipment to provide some relief from the hot sun and the frequent rains. This bustling picture of recovery was indeed very encouraging, but the real cost of the earthquake showed itself when we visited Borobudur temple.

This is a World Heritage site, an ancient and remarkable Buddhist temple. It normally hosts hundreds of tourists each day from around the world. There were a handful the day we were

there. Many Indonesians in this area make their living selling small hand-made trinkets to the tourists, or bottles of water and snacks. No tourists, no income. When we left the temple and started back towards the car, we were surrounded by a sea of shouting, gesticulating people all selling something. It was heartrending, and awful. John and Andrew, who happened to be the ones carrying the money, bought as many little items as they could carry. The girls and I shrank into each other and tried to get back to the car quickly. Andrew looked desperately sad as he described the devastation to the local economy. The pottery makers' shops and stock of items had been smashed. So many had lost their workplaces and their capital along with the flow of tourists to purchase them. This earthquake had truly put this nation into an uproar, with loss of life, and future loss of life, as these already poor people sank deeper into poverty.

It might seem trivial to talk about emotional devastation – what our family camp speaker referred to as “faithquakes” – in the same breath. But emotional devastation can impoverish us almost as completely. We can get so beaten down by the fallen world in which we live that we, too, nearly give up the struggle. But God is our refuge and strength, and he will carry us through whatever threatens to overwhelm us.

As we look at the words of this passage, remember that the psalms contain a cry from the heart, along with poetry, music, liturgy and worship. For that reason it makes more sense to look at the ideas contained in each section than analyze word by word.

We could divide this psalm into three sections:

A. The stability of God (verses 1-3)

**God is our refuge and strength,
An ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
And the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
Though its waters roar and foam,
And the mountains quake with their surging.**

We have already seen how these words can refer to the upheaval of nature or the upheaval of our emotional worlds. Yet the answer is the same in both cases...Jesus Christ.

B. The protection of God (verses 4-7)

**There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God
The holy place where the Most High dwells.
God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
Nations are in uproar,
Kingdoms fall;
He lifts his voice, the earth melts.**

**The Lord Almighty is with us;
The God of Jacob is our fortress.**

Often we find that phrases in the psalms are intended to remind us of historical O.T. events. The city of Jerusalem and its temple were a physical reminder of the glory and presence of God. In the Bible we learn of God's coming kingdom, the new or heavenly Jerusalem, which will be a perfect version of earthly Jerusalem. In reading these verses, we see references to both. Yet the physical, earthly Jerusalem has no physical streams.

One of the greatest points of vulnerability for ancient middle eastern cities was their water supply. If they were besieged and cut off from drinking water, the city was doomed. Knowing this, King Hezekiah built a lengthy, secret tunnel to the springs of Gihon which served as a water conduit into the city. That tunnel still exists today, although it's used as a tourist trap rather than a water conduit. But in both the heavenly and the earthly Jerusalem, **"the river whose streams make glad the city of God"** represents the blessings of God which flow unfailingly towards his people and his city.

"God will help her at break of day." (v. 5a)

There were a number of times that the Israelites were delivered at daybreak by God's hand. There was the devastation dealt to the Egyptians when the Red Sea closed over them at daybreak, and the breaking of the siege of Jerusalem in 2 Kings 20:35. The Assyrians came against Jerusalem and King Hezekiah. In the night the angel of the Lord slew 185,000, and their dead bodies were revealed in the morning light. Although nations might be in an uproar and kingdoms falling, the Lord preserves his kingdom and his people.

"The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." (v. 7)

If you were going to talk about God, would you call him the God of JACOB? The covenant relationship was primarily with Abraham. And God dealt face to face with Moses. So why Jacob? He was the man God used to bring his covenant promise to Abraham into reality. God promised Abraham many descendants, but only gave him two in his lifetime...his sons Ishmael and Isaac. So Jacob really saw the reality of the covenant promise, when God gave him 12 sons and numerous grandchildren. But Jacob was also a tricky, despicable sort of person at many points in his life. Despite his swings of fortune, God saw him through them all. Perhaps to call God "the God of Jacob" means that he is able to deal with our spiritual ups and downs as well.

So we've seen the stability of God, the protection of God, and now we see

C. The exaltation of God

**"Come and see the works of the Lord,
The desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear,
He burns the shields with fire. (v. 8-11)**

Think of how much energy we expend fighting wars, plotting wars, fretting about other people's wars. Yet it is clear that God can immediately end this strife by his greater power. We fret about what man can do to us, but we forget what God can do.

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

The Lord Almighty is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge.” (v. 10-11)

Many centuries later Jesus would speak to a troubled Galilean sea: “Peace, be still.” God the Son is able to calm nature with a word, and God the Father will calm the nations with his word. But it is only in being still that we can truly know that God is God.

Rather a lot of people have asked me questions recently about my life. They’ll say something like, “How do you get everything done?” And I usually answer, “Badly.” Or, after we got our puppy last week, they said pityingly, “I’ll pray for you.” But the fact is, without the daily stillness of knowing who God is, and that he’ll do what he says, I could not function in the life he’s given me to live in this season.

How can you find that stillness? I find it in solitude and silence. Sometimes, these have to be grabbed on the run, as when I find myself in a car alone, but generally it helps if these periods of meditation and reflection are built in on a larger scale as well as daily. I have found it very helpful to retreat by myself for a day to a hermitage, where I can remain in silence and prayer uninterrupted. I have now officially entered the age of insomnia, but those awake hours in the middle of the night are the best times of prayer and reflection I get each 24 hours.

Even the new puppy has helped, in a perverse sort of way. This little dog is a beagle, and beagles cannot help following every scent that crosses their nose. Add this to an undisciplined 9 week old, and you’ll get a dog who doesn’t like to walk in a straight line on a leash. So when I go outside with Pippin, I am prepared to just hang around, mosey from one bush to another, amble down the road or whatever until Pippin can be maneuvered back to the house, tired but happy. I try to resist the temptation to anxiously look at my watch and tap my foot, and instead open my eyes and ears to the beautiful world around me. God will provide me opportunities during the day to **“Be still and know that I am God.”** I just need to be aware enough to take them when they come.

The truth of scripture is something that we desperately need to grasp before the crisis comes. This summer one of my childhood friends suffered a terrible trauma when her 22 year old daughter was run over by a speedboat. Niki lost an eye, part of her skull, and much of her face. She has been in rehabilitation and surgery since July, but is making good progress, walking and talking. Of course, at a time like this, almost everyone asks for prayer. And people around the country have been praying for Niki to regain her health. As people prayed for them and supported them, her mom underwent a shift in her thinking. Here is what she recently wrote in her journal:

I was thinking about Jesus and how incredible he is. I was raised in the United Methodist Church and have gone to church most of my life minus several years when I just didn’t make the time. I like going to church because I get so much out of going. I have never believed you have to go to church to be religious or spiritual. I started thinking about the Lord’s Prayer as I was saying it, about the peace that passes all understanding, giving it over to God, that God never leaves you, having a personal relationship with God, and all the other things that I always thought I understood. I immediately started laughing in my car, and said to God, “I am 52 yrs. old and I finally get it. Man, Lord you are so patient!” ...My heart is more full than I can explain and I sit here crying because we have Niki and we have ALL of you and we have Christ.

This is the sort of experience that turns you into a psalm writer...someone who finds God to be unshakeable in the midst of upheaval. John Piper put it differently: “People turn away from the risks of significance and choose the brief security of success because they don’t really believe this – that God is their strength, and God is refuge, and God is their defender and their refreshment...not just a refuge, but an active counter force and a source of peace and refreshment....His response to dangerous seas that roar and foam is to become for us (note v. 4) another kind of water – a river, not a tumultuous sea – a river whose streams make glad the city of God.” (<http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1991>)

So let’s roll back thirty years to 18 year old Gretchen, hastily stalling the question from her husband to be, about what is her favorite psalm. Now I can answer with real certainty, having seen the truth of this psalm lived out in my life through grave sorrow and ecstatic joys...my favorite psalm is Psalm 46, because God IS my refuge and strength.