

Psalm 46
The Ministry of Presence
by Pastor John E. Dubler
Martin Luther's Psalm¹

We all need to know “someone is there” when going through trials. Many times having friends, family and other individuals close by enables us to persevere through trials. Just so, having the ministering presence of the Lord during trials is indispensable to our endurance. I am indebted to Dr. Gary Cohen who has spoken so eloquently on this Psalm in his message entitled, “Martin Luther's Psalm.”

The text of Psalm 46:

For the choir director. A Psalm of the sons of Korah, set to Alamoth. A Song.

God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change
And though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea;
3 Though its waters roar and foam,
Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. Selah.
4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
The holy dwelling places of the Most High.
5 God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.
6 The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered;
He raised His voice, the earth melted.
7 The LORD of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah.
8 Come, behold the works of the LORD,
Who has wrought desolations in the earth.
9 He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth;
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;
He burns the chariots with fire.
10 " Cease striving 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 stronghold. Selah.²

¹ The title “Martin Luther's Psalm” is used by Dr. Gary Cohen of Zion's Hope in his excellent message by the same title. I have adapted many of Dr. Cohen's thoughts into this message. I am indebted to him.

² New American Standard Updated Version.

Introductory instructions: These instructions found at the very beginning of the text, “For the choir director. A Psalm of the sons of Korah, set to Alamoth. A Song,” are not only of academic interest, but as part of the inspired Word of God they bear looking into. There are certain editorial notes inserted as title chapters in most Bibles. These are not part of God’s inspired word, and can reflect the doctrinal persuasions of the editor. Concerning Psalm 46, the editors of my preaching Bible have inserted, “*God the Refuge of His People.*” Although this is very true, it should not be confused with the inspired scripture. However, the instructions, “For the choir director. A Psalm of the sons of Korah, set to Alamoth. A Song” are given to us by inspiration of the Holy Spirit no less than the rest of the Bible.



[Photo: Waters of the Mediterranean surge onto the coast of Melilla, North Africa, after a storm—by C. Dubler.]

We notice first that this is “A Psalm of the sons of Korah.” David wrote 75 of the 150 Psalms. Korah and sons wrote 12 psalms [42-49, 84, 85, 87, and 88]. The Korahites were among the guild of singers in the Temple. Some, or perhaps only one of them, wrote this psalm.

Secondly, we notice the instruction: “Set to *Alamoth*. A Song.” *Alamoth* means young virgins, or unmarried young women. *Almah* (singular of *alamoth*) appears in Isaiah 7:24: “behold a virgin shall conceive . . .” It may reasonably be assumed that these instructions direct that Psalm 46 be sung by a choir of young women.

Three segments of Psalm 46. The Psalm is separated into three sections, all demarcated by “Selah” an expression that means “pause.” “Selah” should not be said or sung in a recitation of the Psalm, as it is meant to be an instruction to the reader and not recited aloud. Readers should pause at the word “Selah” and give everyone who is hears a chance to think about what he has just heard. That is the purpose of “Selah.” I recall one commentator or teacher, the source forgotten to me, saying that a justifiable expansion on the word would be, “stop and think about that.” Surely that comment is very close to the truth.

First Segment: God is present with us during times of cosmic or natural disasters

Second Segment: God is present with us during times of man-made upheaval and strife

Third Segment: God is present with us during time of war

The Presence of God in cosmic troubles. The first section tells us that God will be with us in times of cosmic upheavals. “God is our refuge and strength . . .” the psalmist begins. He uses the word, *Elohim* in this case, not the personal, memorial name for God (*YHWH*), but a title which means *Mighty One or Strong One*. So the Strong and Mighty One is our refuge and strength. He is also the one who is present with us in time of trouble. The psalmist therefore tells us that

whether in time of gross upheaval or troubles more mundane, man-made or natural, striving or even warfare, we the redeemed can count on the presence of God.

The Presence of God in Judgment. The second segment, encapsulated in verses 4-7, reassures us of God's presence during time of political upheaval and strife. The nations make uproars, the kingdoms totter. One word from the Lord silences all His critics and puts to rout all His enemies. At the end of the age, when the Lord Jesus returns, He will slay them with a sharp two-edged sword which proceeds out of His mouth (Revelation 1:16). Psalm 2 gives us another look at the same concept as it is written,

Why are the nations in an uproar
And the peoples devising a vain thing?
The kings of the earth take their stand
And the rulers take counsel together
Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying,
“Let us tear their fetters apart
And cast away their cords from us!”

Here we see the same uproars and kingdoms tottering as we have in Psalm 46. But what is the outcome? Are they successful in raging against God? Their petty tyrannies are scoffed and laughed at by the Most High. He terrifies them by announcing that He has installed His King. They suddenly realize that the very one they have rejected is now revealed to rule over them.

He who sits in the heavens laughs,
The Lord scoffs at them.
Then He will speak to them in His anger
And terrify them in His fury, saying,
“But as for Me, I have installed My King
Upon Zion, My holy mountain.”



And who is this King? It is the Son, the Lord Jesus. As Psalm 2: 12 records, “Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry, and you perish in the way, for His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!”

It should be a great comfort to us to know that the machinations of men and nations can only go so far before the One who is our refuge and strength will say, “Do homage to the Son.” [Photo: Rocket launcher in the hands of Palestinian Arab gunman. From the Israel

Science and Technology website where it is credited to news.yahoo.com.]

I think it is not unreasonable to find comfort in this section when dealing with strife at the workplace and in other areas of life such as personal relationships. The “kingdoms” of the world

certainly include workplace kingdoms. And although such “kingdoms” are not referred to here in Psalm 46, I think the majesty of His presence in such trials can be inferred without doing damage to the text.

At the end of this segment we find the words: “The Lord of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our stronghold.” This same pattern is repeated at the end of the third segment. The Lord of hosts is “the Lord of Sabaoth.” This is not the Lord of the Sabbath, though it might sound like it to one who is not expecting the distinction. “Sabaoth” means “host” or “Lord of the armies.” Luther adopted the translation “Lord of Sabaoth” for his hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*. “Lord Sabaoth His name . . .”

The presence of God in time of war. This third segment we find in verses 8-11. God makes wars to cease. Man starts wars. God finishes them. For the sake of His people He “breaks the spear in two and burns the chariots with fire.”

Soldiers can rely on God’s presence in battle. Psalm 91, sometimes referred to as “The Soldier’s Psalm,” gives the details. God actively intervenes in the affairs of men and nations. He has demonstrably done so in all ages.



Knowing that this is so, we are to “cease striving and know . . .” *Cease Striving*: Hebrew. *Rapha*, meaning “sink, let go, relax.” *Know* means that we can approach our trials with certainty. Don’t wonder or fret. Settle it in your mind. Psalm 100:3 reminds us, “Know that the Lord Himself is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His Pasture.”
[Photo: U.S. Forces in Iraq from defendamerica.mil.]

After telling us to “cease striving,” God tells us why. He will be exalted among the nations and in the earth. Therefore the victor in all these areas of conflict is announced in advance. God is the winner. And once again we are informed in the last verse that the Lord of hosts (Lord Sabaoth) is with us. Certainly the message of God’s presence with us is clear.

Since everyone has troubles and everyone has trials, the promise of God’s presence with us is really a distinctive. The world has no such promise, and those who do not know the Lord have only their own resources to draw on when troubles come. Thank God for His presence with us!

God’s presence with us today. John 14:15-17. Jesus promised to send another “helper” or “comforter” to us when He departed earth to return to heaven. *Helper* and *Comforter* are titles of the Holy Spirit that reveal to us what He does. Though Jesus in His incarnate body was limited in space and time, the Holy Spirit has no such limitations.

In a post-resurrection appearance, Jesus breathed on the disciples saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit” **John 20:21**. Jesus knew He was going to be with the Father, and not wanting us to be without His own ministering presence He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell us.

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be called “Immanuel,” meaning God with us. Remember that in the opening of Psalm 46 we encountered the instructions “set to Alamoth”. The Hebrew word for “virgin” *almah* used here in Psalm 46 is the same which we find in Isaiah 7:14. This prophecy is subsequently quoted in **Matthew 1:23**: “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US.” And finally, the end of the Gospel of Matthew comes back to the same Psalm 46 concept: “Go ye into all the world . . . and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Our presence can be a comfort to others. God’s presence comforts us while the storms rage. In the same way, but on a much smaller scale, our presence comforts others who are in trouble. When one makes a visit to the hospital for the purpose of comforting a friend, it is this ministry of presence on your part (not so much what you say) that is important. Just being there to put your hand on their arm is the healing touch of your presence. The same is true of God’s presence. He is showing us in this Psalm that He is always there.



Martin Luther based “*A Mighty Fortress is Our God*” on Psalm 46:1, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” Luther, behind the thick walls of a Roman Catholic monastery, was teaching Romans and Galatians when he discovered that man is saved by faith in God, and not through works, as the church was teaching. He summarized his teachings that were in conflict with the church in 95 sentences called “The 95 Theses,” and nailed them to the church door at Wittenberg, Oct 31st, 1516, (Reformation Day). For example, in the parlance of our day one might have been, “Man can only be saved by faith in the Lord Jesus.” or “You cannot buy the Holy Spirit with money.” King Charles V of Spain confronted Luther at the Diet of Worms where Luther uttered his famous line, “Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me.” A

bounty was placed on Luther’s head. He had the Spanish Army, Charles V, the Pope, the church and any bounty hunter available after him. [Painting: Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach.]

It was under this kind of trial that Luther writes “A Mighty Fortress.” He knew what trials were. For Luther this was not an academic exercise or unproved speculation. He *knew* that God is present with us in time of trouble. He was hidden by his friends for 15 months in the German Castle at Wartberg, during which time he translated the Bible into German. During that experience, Luther had many hours during which he could have given way to fear. His hymn is clear evidence that he believed what he wrote. He lived the message.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.