**Six Psalms By Heart + Week Four: Psalm 46 (God is Our Refuge and Strength)**

**Day One: Receiving the Text**

On this day, you have two tasks: a) read the text as many times as you wish; and b) read the “General Notes” about the text.

**A. The Text**

#### *To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamoth. A Song.*

1God is our refuge and strength,
    a very present help in trouble.
2Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
    though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
3though its waters roar and foam,
    though the mountains tremble at its swelling. *Selah*

4There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
    the holy habitation of the Most High.
5God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
    God will help her when morning dawns.
6The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
    he utters his voice, the earth melts.
7The Lord of hosts is with us;
    the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

8Come, behold the works of the Lord,
    how he has brought desolations on the earth.
9He 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!”
11The Lord of hosts is with us;
    the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

**B. General Notes on the Text**

This psalm both resonates and contrasts with Psalm 23. It resonates with “The Lord is My Shepherd” in that it proclaims the trustworthy nature of God and His almighty care. Yet it differs from Psalm 23 in this significant way: whereas Psalm 23 is intensely *personal,* this psalm is *communal* and *universal* in its scope. It draws on the public imagery of Israel’s identity as a nation, centered in the city of Jerusalem, to join our voice with the whole people of God.

1. Language:

*Sons of Korah:* A descendant of Levi, Korah perished after rebelling against Moses (Numbers 6). However, his sons, or at least some of them, were spared (Number 26:10-11). They became gatekeepers at the tabernacle and temple, as well as a musical group of singers (1 Chronicles 15:16-19). Psalm 42-49 are ascribed to them (Psalm 43 lacks this ascription, but is likely a continuation of Psalm 42: see Psalm 42:5, 11 and 43:5), as are Psalm 87-88.

*Alamoth.* We don’t know what it means; it may name a melody.

*God:* While the Old Testament can use *God* and *the Lord* interchangeably, this psalm’s reliance on God rather than the more personal *Lord* deepens its communal and universal nature: the God of Israel is *the* God of the univers.

*Gives way/moves into/roar/foam/tremble:* These terms all describe an earthquake or other earth-shattering event, but not because earthquakes are the psalmist’s main concern. Rather, it’s a matter of describing the *worst possible thing*, the whole earth breaking up, and proclaiming God’s mastery over it.

 *Selah:* As noted in Psalm 32, this is a musical term for which we have no precise meaning.

*City of God:* Jerusalem, yet now in the New Testament, the Church. Hebrew lore designated Jerusalem as the sight of the Garden of Eden, from which the original great river/rivers flowed. The belief was that these rivers sprung from a wellspring beneath the temple (the *habitation of the Most High*). In view of this latter point, read also John 7:37-39.

*She:* Personification of the city as a female figure recalls the image of Israel or Jerusalem as God’s bride.

*Lord of hosts*: this phrase identifies God as the Lord of angelic armies, who sometimes battled on behalf of Israel (2 Kings 6).

*God of Jacob:* further deepening the psalm’s communal nature, this phrase anchors the identity of God with the great father of the 12 tribes of Israel, Jacob.

*desolations:* this sounds like a bad term, but in God’s hand, it becomes good: He brings the evil plans of men to *desolation,* or destruction.

***For general notes on structure, see the next page.***

2. Structure:

The central, governing image to this psalm is God as a fortress. It is repeated twice in a refrain (verses 7, 11) and reflected in the first verse: “God is our refuge . . . .”

The occurrence of that refrain, along with appearance of the musical term *selah*,help organize the pslam’s message: occurring after the refrain (verses 7 and 11) and after verse 3, it suggests a three-part structure:

***God the Refuge (Verses 1-3):***

God rules over the forces of nature. He protects His people from *quaking mountains* and *stormy sea*.

***God in His City (Verses 4-7)***

God establishes His city over against both nature and nation. The life of the city of God contrasts sharply with the shaking earth and stormy waters. This happy city also withstands a new threat: the nations.

***God the Peacemaker (Verses 8-11)***

God breaks the military might of the nations and proclaims Himself God of all the earth.

3. Historical Note

This psalm served as the inspiration of Martin Luther’s hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God,* which he regarded as a psalm paraphrase.

**Day 2: Absorbing the First Part, Verses 1-3**

Ultimately, these first few verses of the psalm only have two sentences and two ideas: 1) God is our help, and so 2) we won’t fear, no matter what.

Remembering these basics of Hebrew poetry (see the separate “Hebrew Poetry: A Very Brief Review,” sent along with this study guide) will help us appreciate how the psalmist expresses these two ideas. He uses “hanging sentences,” in which he states one sentence, and then layers it by developing the last half in subsequent lines, building to a climax:

*Verses 1-3:*

**A:** God is **B:** our refuge and strength,

 **B:** a very present help in trouble.

**C:** Therefore we will not fear **D:** though the earth gives way,
     **D:** though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,

 **D:** though its waters roar and foam,
     **D:** though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

It’s a very simple pattern, but the layering has a powerful effect: it *swells,* you might say, and the “swelling” language reflects a swelling confidence. You can almost hear the voices of the people of Israel rising, louder and louder with each idea:

“We will not fear—though the earth gives way!

Though the mountains be moved into the sea!

THOUGH ITS WATERS ROAR AND FOAM!

**THOUGH THE MOUNTAINS TREMBLE AT ITS SWELLING!!!**”

For good reason did this psalm become the basis for that battle hymn of the Reformation, *“A Mighty Fortress”* (although, as a side note, early Lutherans were more apt to view *“My Soul, Now Praise Thy Maker”* in that light, which was sung by Lutheran armies regularly in the 17th century; *“A Mighty Fortress”* only became more popular in the 19th and 20th centuries).

*Memorization:* Seeing that there are really only two sentences here can help us memorize these verses, which may serve as a “nugget” of encouragement to carry with you. The second sentence (“Therefore…”) is the longest, and yet it moves in a progression, from earth to sea: 1) earth gives way, 2) falls into the sea, 3) the sea roars and foam, and 4) it makes the mountains tremble. Invest in memorizing this “nugget,” good bread to carry with you on the journey.

**Day 3: Absorbing the Second Part, Verses 4-7**

*Verses 4-7*

**A:** There is a river whose streams make glad **B:** the city of God,
     **B:** the holy habitation of the Most High.

**C:** God is in the midst of her; **D:** she shall not be moved;
**C:** God will help her **E:** when morning dawns.

**F:** The nations rage,

**F:** the kingdoms totter;

**G:** He utters his voice, **H:** the earth melts.

**I:** The Lord of hosts **J:** is with us;
**I:** the God of Jacob **J:** is our fortress. *Selah*

Notice how these verses pose a sharp contrast between the stormy, violent earth portrayed verses 1-3 and the serene City of God (Jerusalem/the Church). The seas roar and foam, but the river makes the city of God “glad.” The mountains tremble and fall into the sea, but the city of God (built on Mount Zion) “shall not be moved.”

That serenity provides the groundwork for the next assertion: the One who has secured the City over against nature will also turn back the rage of nations. Notice how the psalmist uses the “layering” of ideas to build climax here, too:

 The nations rage,

the kingdoms totter;

He utters his voice,

the earth melts.

“The kingdoms totter” here likely means they “quake with fury” (not, “they’re about to fall over”). We therefore have two statements building up suspense: what will happen to the city, now that the nations also rage against it? The answer is stated simply: “He utters his voice, the earth melts.” Or as Luther paraphrased it in “A Mighty Fortress”: “one little word subdues” the enemies of God.

*Memorization:* The final portion of this section (“The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress”) serves as a refrain, repeated at the end of the psalm, also. A little effort devoted towards memorizing this couplet alone equips the believer with a powerful, encouraging word. Otherwise, it’s good to recall the advice from the very first psalm guide: “What the hand writes, the mind remembers!”

**Day 4: Absorbing the Final Part, Verses 8-11**

*Verses 8-11*

**A:** Come, behold **B:** the works of the Lord,
     **B:** how he has brought desolations **C:** on the earth.

**B:** He makes wars cease **C:** to the end of the earth;
     **B:** he breaks the bow

**B:** and shatters the spear;
     **B:** he burns the chariots with fire.

**D:** “Be still, **E:** and know that I am God.
**F:** I will be exalted **G:** among the nations,

**F:** I will be exalted **G:** in the earth!”
**H:** The Lord of hosts **I:** is with us;

**H:** the God of Jacob **I:** is our fortress.

Although this section may feel like one of the longest, once we see it laid out structurally, we can see that it’s only three ideas states in multiple ways: 1) the Lord brings peace; 2) this Lord alone is God, over all the earth; 3) He is with us.

The first idea, **the Lord brings peace**, is developed through a layered explication of “the works of the Lord,” with each line describing with triumphant joy how the Lord destroys an implement of war. As noted earlier, “desolations” here is a positive term, describing God’s power to “bring to nothing” the world’s bloodthirsty violence. God’s actions are likewise violent (*breaks, shatters, burns*), but they are violent as any good general is violent: He pursues His enemies for the sake of peace. This irony reached its deepest point on the cross, where God permits violence done to Himself for the sake of a peace everlasting.

That **this Lord alone is God over all the earth** becomes the logical consequence of His victory over mankind’s armies. As chariots smolder in the background and mankind’s worst killing weapons lie in pieces, God speaks those powerful words, “Be still.” He has brought stillness to the battlefield and now bids it come to our hearts, as well, as we ponder His mastery over the nations of the earth. Again this irony finds its deepest expression in the resurrection, where one empty grave unleashed a power and movement that has proven more enduring than any national government.

**The Lord of hosts is with us:** this refrain of the psalm brings home the Gospel. It’s not just that the Lord can destroy all violence and injustice on the earth, nor is it just that He alone is God; the good news is that this Lord is *with* us, favorable to us and doing all His works for our sake. He is our protection and shield.

*Memorization:* The repeating words is verse 7 and 11 make this section easier to memorize, as does the recognition that its longest portion, regarding the end of warfare, is simply a layered description of all that God does to accomplish it.

**Day 5: Singing the Psalm**

For this particular day, we pause to consider Martin Luther’s famous paraphrase of this psalm. Read over the full text below of *A Mighty Fortress*, taking time to note where it sounds similar to the psalm, and where it diverges. In those divergences you find Luther’s Christian application of the text—for example, Luther wisely notes that when God “utters His voice,” it is His Son, Jesus, whose name He speaks, and it is that Son’s words or teaching that win the day.

1 A mighty fortress is our God,
A trusty shield and weapon;
He helps us free from ev'ry need
That hath us now o'ertaken.
The old evil foe
Now means deadly woe;
Deep guile and great might
Are his dread arms in fight;
On earth is not his equal.

2 With might of ours can naught be done,
Soon were our loss effected;
But for us fights the Valiant One,
Whom God Himself elected.
Ask ye, Who is this?
Jesus Christ it is,
Of Sabaoth Lord,
And there's none other God;
He holds the field forever.

3 Though devils all the world should fill,
All eager to devour us.
We tremble not, we fear no ill;
They shall not overpow'r us.
This world's prince may still
Scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none.
He's judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him.

4 The Word they still shall let remain
Nor any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plain
With His good gifts and Spirit.
And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Though these all be gone,
Our vict'ry has been won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.

**Day 6: Christ in Psalm 46**

The language of Psalm 46 rings with Christ-filled meaning. Consider:

***a very present help/in the midst of her/is with us:***Jesus is God-with-us, as the angel told the blessed Virgin Mary: “He will be called Immanuel, that is, God with us.” This psalm shines with this *very present* Lord who is *with us*, “even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20)

***though the earth gives way:***“Heaven and earth will pass away,” Jesus said, “but my word will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35). The image of the earth as passing and unstable, but the Lord as eternal, points us to the risen One who overcame even the grave.

***a river whose streams:***“If anyone thirsts, let Him come to me and drink” (John 7:37). Jesus is the river who makes the City glad, for the City is the Church, who drinks from His truth.

***holy habitation:*** “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Jesus is God making His habitation in our midst, His body the true temple.

***morning dawns:***Jesus calls Himself the “morning star” in whom the “day dawns” (Revelation 22:16, 2 Peter 1:19). Help comes when His light brightens both our eyes and our hearts.

***utters his voice; the earth melts:*** Jesus is “the Word” (John 1:1), at whose name “every knee shall bow, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth” (Philippians 2:10-11). What He does and who He is changes the creation.

***desolations:*** Was anything more desolate than the cross? Yet by this desolation, Jesus brought a lasting peace, and truly makes ***wars cease*** among mankind as His Gospel brings reconciliation.

***exalted:*** In the Gospel of John, our Lord often refers to Himself as being “exalted” or “lifted high” (John 3:14, 8:28, 12:32), referring both to His death on the cross (which had to be “raised”) and His resurrection and ascension. It is in this death and victory of Jesus that the earth truly knows its God.

Go back and read over the whole psalm, seeing your Lord Jesus in every word.

**Day 7: Dwell with the Psalm**

Let this final day of study be a time merely to enjoy the psalm and *dwell* with it. Work at committing it to memory, and pray it, perhaps in this following fashion:

**Read verses 1-3.** Then pause, praising God for His strength, revealed both in creation and His care for creation, protecting His creatures in every season through myriad threats, as well as in His mastery over the grave and its rolling-stone door. Ask Him to strengthen you with courage.

**Read verses 4-7.** Recall that Holy Scripture calls the Church the new city of God, the new Zion (Hebrews 12:22). Praise God for His particular care for the Church in every age, especially in the face of persecution. Ask God to cast down all current and future attempts to harm His Church, and to cause its ministry to flourish.

**Read verses 8-11.** Pause and consider all the works of God that you have seen—how He has cast down your sin with His Gospel, for example, or how He has turned you and others whom you love from the way that leads to destruction to the way of life. Be still, and simply rest in the presence of your God. Confess Him to be who He has promised to be, your Savior, and praise Him for that salvation.