

**The Life-Giving River**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
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Chad Boorsma  
Psalm 46

On September 11, 2001, the day we commonly refer to now as 9/11, the United States was attacked by the Islamic group al-Qaeda. Nineteen militants, as they carried out a series of plane hijackings and suicide attacks, created the deadliest terrorist event ever on American soil. As most of us are well aware, the attacks against New York City and Washington, D.C. caused extensive destruction, including the death of nearly 3,000 people. Police and fire departments in New York were especially hard-hit: hundreds had rushed to the scene of the attacks on the Twin Towers, and more than 400 police officers and firefighters were killed.

In the midst of all this tragedy, many people also rushed to houses of worship to seek God and to find peace and comfort in the midst of the chaos. Surveys of North American churches for the Sunday following the attack found that the most commonly preached text that week was the one just read tonight: Psalm 46. Change “mountains falling into the heart of the sea” to “falling skyscrapers,” and we can see why so many ministers were led to this passage on that grim Sunday.

This psalm, traditionally ascribed to the "sons of Korah," the Levitical choir appointed by David to serve in the temple liturgy, is a strong confession of faith, one that is very appropriate during times of great fear and upheaval. In fact, it is said of Martin Luther, that when he heard any discouraging news, he would say, “Come, let us sing the 46<sup>th</sup> psalm.” The psalm is divided into three stanzas, and in the first stanza (verses 1-3), which was likely sung by the people of Jerusalem or the Levitical choir, we see evidence of the turmoil that can occur in nature. The passage tells us that earthquakes come, rumbling and rattling, breaking things apart, and mountains fall into the heart of the sea. Then the waters roar and foam, much like we might see during a white-water rafting expedition, and the mountains tremble as the waters surge up against them, perhaps in a tidal wave.

Are all these things to be taken literally? Not really. There is certainly some hyperbole here, some exaggeration going on. In the day when this was likely written, mountains did not “fall into the heart of the sea” nor “quake with their surging.” Today, because of bombs, these things can happen, but not in those days. Why, then, the exaggeration? Perhaps the imagery is to symbolize the great threats that Israel experienced at times from other nations, or maybe the reason is to consider the problems in our world that seem overwhelming, and then contrast them with our God who is greater than all of them.

We see more conflict in the second and third stanzas of the psalm, verses 4-6 and 8-10, sections that were likely sung by the Levitical leader of the liturgy. This time the turmoil is not in nature, but in nations. Political and military strife are evident as we read of warfare involving bows and spears, as well as carts and wagons (listed as shields in the translation). The nations are in chaos, and their kingdoms are crumbling. Unfortunately, it was fairly common at that time for cities to be besieged, to get sacked, and for enemies to get through its walls and overtake them.

One would think (hope) that thousands of years after the writing of this psalm, the turmoil between and within nations would have subsided, but in our world, populated by the sinful human beings that we are, conflict continues. We see “uproar” here in our own city when City Commission meetings repeatedly end early because irate individuals insist on yelling and

screaming during public comment times. We see it in our nation when peaceful protests, which seem to be increasing in number, do not always stay peaceful. And perhaps even more common today, conflict goes on “behind the scenes” --we might say--as people easily shoot barbs at each other through texts and on social media—all platforms where face-to-face contact can be avoided.

The upheaval continues around the world as well. In Ethiopia, for example, tension between clashing political parties escalated into a violent civil war beginning back in November 2020. The violence spilled over into neighboring countries, Sudan, and Somalia, and included troops being sent in by bordering country, Eritrea. In Afghanistan, the Taliban advanced across the country last summer and captured the capital city, Kabul, leaving many to flee the country. And then there’s Ukraine, who continues to suffer devastating loss—both physical and human—because of the evil decisions made by the Russian government. Some estimate that nearly 6 million Ukrainians are now refugees in bordering countries--having left their homes, their jobs, their schools, and their churches. Over 7 million have been displaced inside the country, fleeing from the attacks and hiding in make-shift bomb shelters. When we consider all the darkness in our communities, in our nation, and in our world, what are we to do?

One of those things to do is to remember that God has the power to do all things. This is evident in verses 8 and 9, where we’re invited to come and see what the Lord has done. He has the ability to bring an end to war, to break the bow and shatter the spear, to burn the carts and wagons. When we think of the war in Ukraine, we can say that he has the ability to make missiles malfunction, to prevent artillery shells from exploding, and to cause tanks to break down. And those are not bad things to pray regarding the conflict in Ukraine and in other areas of the world where war continues.

It’s also good and right to pray for a change in the hearts of leaders—both in Russia and around the world—that they would surrender their lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It’s good and right to pray for peace and civility in meetings, during protests, and on social media. It’s good and right to pray in faith, believing that God will act in his way and in his time.

But what does God do in the meantime, as we continue to live our lives in the midst of the challenging times? In verses 4-5, we read these words: “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.” Notice the contrast between the water imagery in those verses and the verse just before them. In verse 3, it says that the waters roar, crash, and foam. In the worldview of the time that this psalm was written, the sea was seen as a hostile threat, a threat that could cause instability at any time.

Is that what we see in verse 4? Not at all. The water in verse 4 is a river of grace—God’s river--whose streams bring joy and blessing even amidst the turmoil of life. In fact, when an earthly city back then had a river running through it (water supply, fish for food, etc.), it was harder for the invading city to bring it down.

Behind me are the banners our church uses during the growing season of the church year, the time between Pentecost and Advent. You’ll notice that the river begins in the left banner and continues on in the right banner, widening and growing as it flows. Between the banners, of course, is the chancel window, which contains a lot of images and people. But notice the person at the very top. It’s Jesus. Is it dying Jesus, on the cross? No. Is it buried Jesus, in the tomb. No. It’s ascended Jesus. It’s triumphant Jesus, the one who rules and reigns at the Father’s right hand, the one who is greater than all the darkness of this world, the one who sends forth his river of grace.

And where does that river flow? Verse 4 also tells us that it flows to where God resides, where he lives, where he dwells. We know that God's dwelling in time and space has never been fixed and final. In the Old Testament, the location was a moveable tabernacle, then a shrine at Shiloh, and finally the temple in Jerusalem, as referred to in this psalm. In the New Testament, God dwells in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul tells us in Colossians 1:19—"For God was pleased to have all his fullness *dwell* in him (in Jesus)."

What about today, though? Where does God dwell today? First of all, he resides in heaven, the place he has prepared for all who trust Jesus as their Savior. One of our homebound members had been thinking about this, and when I asked how I could pray for her, she replied, "Would you pray that God would take me home?" She had lived faithfully--serving God and trusting in him each day--yet health concerns continued to mount, and she was ready to end life on this earth and enter into the presence of her Savior, the place where the Most High dwells. What a tremendous blessing for her and for all those who know Jesus as Savior and Lord--to dwell with him in his presence forever. As we live our lives and fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, that is a wonderful comfort.

However, is that the only source of comfort we have as we live our lives? No, it's not, because that is not the only place where God dwells today. Again, going to the Apostle Paul, we hear these words that he prayed for the church at Ephesus: "I pray that out of his (God's) glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may *dwell* in your hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:16-17a)." Did you catch that...that Christ (God) dwells in our hearts--in my heart and in your hearts. Where does God live, reside, and dwell each and every day? In us. If that wasn't enough evidence for where he lives, we also read Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 6:19: "Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who *lives in you* and was given to you by God?" God (the Holy Spirit) resides in each one of us as we live our lives.

It is because of this wonderful truth that we can believe and cherish the opening words of this Psalm: "God is our refuge and strength, an *ever-present help* in trouble." And where is he present? Look at the Psalm's refrain--verses 7 and 11-- "The Lord Almighty is present *with us*."

That truth is what John Solovei was reminded of recently. John serves as a chaplain with the Rapid Response Team of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. These are teams of people who are trained for grief ministry and then deployed to provide emotional and spiritual support to those affected by man-made or natural disasters. Four years ago, at age 70, John decided to study Russian so he could read a journal written in the Slavic language by his grandfather, who had immigrated to the United States from Belarus. That was his intent--to read the journal--but God had other plans for his language skills. When he was deployed by the Rapid Response Team, where did God send him? Ukraine. There he found himself conversing with two Russian-speaking Ukrainian patients inside a Samaritan's Purse Field Hospital tent in Lviv. As John talked and prayed in Russian with the two men several times a day, he watched as smiles began to show on their stoic, solemn faces. God's river of grace broke through their hearts, and eventually both accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior. They even began volunteering to lead the group prayer times at the hospital. These men realized, as did John, that despite the chaotic, war-torn situation in Ukraine, God was still with them, that his river of grace was flowing, an ever-present help in the time of trouble.

Friends, what are the issues that weigh upon your heart tonight? You can fill in the blank what they are--perhaps grief that is raw, health concerns that persist, ongoing tension in your family, or maybe it's something else. There is river that flows to you with God's mercy and

grace. Are there people you know that are facing challenges in their life—maybe they're believers or maybe, like the two men in Ukraine, they're not. How can God use you to bring to them the river that flows with God's mercy and grace? Despite the challenges in our lives, we can take heart because that river of grace never stops flowing from God's throne (Revelation 22). In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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