



Text: Psalm 46¹

Series: *Summer at the River* – A Summer Series in the Psalms

Title: Part 2 -- The River of Confidence

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Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

One of the most influential songs in the history of the Christian church is the hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*. It's been called the battle song of the Protestant Reformation and the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was one of the most influential movements in the history of the Church of Jesus Christ. This was its theme song...

**A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.**

**Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.**

**And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.**

**That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him who with us sideth:
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.**

The hymn's author, Martin Luther, wrote this song during one of his most intense times of struggle. He faced the threat of death from civil and religious leaders who condemned as heresy his preaching of the Gospel of grace. He faced ongoing and continual challenges to his preaching and teaching from other theologians. He endured the defection of friends and he faced his own internal

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spiritual battles. But in the midst of his deepest trouble it was his meditation on the psalm we're about to read that gave birth to the confident faith that ripples through the words of Luther's hymn. Here is Luther's foundation for his "Mighty Fortress." I'm reading Psalm 46 and invite you to hear and believe God's holy and inspired Word and I trust that these words will also be the foundation for your confident faith.

To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamo. A Song.

**¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.**

**² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. *Selah***

**⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.**

**⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.**

**⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.**

**⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah***

**⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.**

**⁹ He 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!"**

**¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah***

Unlike the information we have about the occasion which gave rise to Martin Luther's writing of *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* we don't know the situation that gave rise to the writing of this psalm. All we know is that the people of God were facing a serious crisis of some kind, that they turned to God for strength to face it and that they found in God the strength they needed. There are times when it's good to know the specific situation underlying a passage of the Scripture and there are times when it isn't necessary to know the underlying reason and this, I believe, is one of those. All we know is that the crisis they faced rocked their world. It felt to them as if the earth was giving way. It seemed as if every external source of security was being undermined. It seemed as if the world was



turning against them. Have you ever faced a time of crisis like that? Not knowing the specifics of the situation that gave rise to this psalm, only knowing that it was a deep crisis that shook their world, enables you and me to enter into this psalm. All of a sudden the “our” and “we” of this psalm becomes a “me, too” for us. Regardless of what crisis you’re facing, this psalm offers you “a very present help in trouble.”

What was it that put the foundation back under the feet of these people? What was the truth about God that rebuilt their confidence and calmed their fears? The foundation for the fortress of confidence in the hearts and minds of God’s people is found in the simple refrain that is repeated twice in the psalm. Did you catch it as I read it? Here it is again...

**“The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*”
Psalm 46:7, 11**

There are some profound truths about God contained in this compact declaration that provide a solid foundation for confidence. If we want to experience the confidence that this psalm exudes it is vitally important that we know our God. There’s a little slip of a verse in the Book of Daniel that I want to imbed in your thinking this morning. This scripture was spoken prophetically about a time when God’s people would be under attack. Many of the wise in Israel would spiritually falter during the onslaught, but ...

**“the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action.” Daniel
11:32**

It’s only when we know our God that we can stand firm in a crisis. It’s only when we know our God that we can act in a way that is consistent with his will and purpose. And who is our God?

First of all, the writer names God as “**The LORD of hosts.**” Luther quoted this in his hymn: “Lord Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same...” Lord of hosts or Lord Sabaoth is a reference to God being the Commander in Chief of the angelic armies of heaven. The name “Lord of hosts” is a declaration that we worship **a God who possesses limitless power.** When we turn to him for help we can be confident that he is more than able to deal with the troubles and trials we face.

Second, the writer declares that the Lord of hosts is “**with us.**” This great and awesome God is not far away; he’s close; he’s near; he’s “with us.” This is a declaration that we worship **a God who comes near to us.** Who else has a God like our God?

“For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?” Deuteronomy 4:7



In Jesus, God has come to be with us and never leaves us. He is “**Immanuel (which means, God with us).**” (Matthew 1:23) We don’t need to go and find him when we’re in need; he’s right here right now, with us.

Third, the psalm names him as “**the God of Jacob.**” This name identifies God as the God who made an unusual promise to Jacob, the grandson of Abraham and the son of Isaac. I call it an “unusual promise” because Jacob should not have received it; his older brother Esau should have received it. But God chose to make his promise to Jacob, not because Jacob was more deserving than Esau, but because God wanted to demonstrate that his promises were made to us, not because we deserve them, but because He is gracious. The name “God of Jacob” reminds us that we worship **a God of rich grace.** When turn to God for help in our time of need we don’t need to tally up our “brownie points” to see if we deserve God’s help. He helps us because he is gracious to the core.

And **fourth**, the psalm declares that “the God of Jacob is **our fortress.**” The word here in Hebrew suggests an elevated position, a castle on a rocky outcrop, like the ancient fortress of Masada in the Holy Land, where God places us out of reach of our enemies. We worship **a God who protects his own.** When we encounter hardship it isn’t because God has abandoned us; he doesn’t do that! He is our fortress.

“The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.” Psalm 18:2

Who is our God? What’s he like? **Our God is...**
Almighty over us,
Present with us,
Gracious to us and
Protective of us.

That’s what enables us to “stand firm” in the midst of a crisis. He alone is the foundation under our feet that cannot be moved. When everything around us is shifting and unsteady, he remains unchanged. **The key to confidence in any and every circumstance is the presence in our lives of a Biblical vision of the One and True God that grips our souls and fills our hearts.**

Brothers and sisters, it is vitally important that we prepare ourselves for the crises that will almost inevitably come to us all by developing a clear understanding of our God. Sadly, over the years I’ve seen a pattern in my own life and in the lives of others believers. If our understanding of God is weak or deficient we are thrown into spiritual confusion by hardship and trial. Please hear me: my experience is that crisis does not build good theology; it reveals it. Hardship



comes upon us and we start grasping after one spiritual straw after another; in the midst of trials we become susceptible to being misled by one spiritual charlatan after another; we don't stand firm and we don't act to the glory of God. Why? Because we don't know our God.

When the writer of this psalm encounters trouble and hardship he brought his understanding of God to bear on his circumstances and because of that, he stood firm. But if we're weak in our understanding of God, it's our circumstances that will come to bear on our faith and we'll be moved and shifted and shaken. If we bring our understanding of God to bear on the crises we face, first of all, he tells us...

Because God is with us we have nothing to fear even if our world falls apart

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way...” Psalm 46:1-2

The psalm pictures a world in utter chaos. The mountains have been thrown into the sea and the sea is in a raging turmoil. The mountains in the Old Testament were often used to represent strength and dependability. The writer of Psalm 121 asks...

“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?” Psalm 121:1

Does my security rest in defenses of the mountain? No, he responds...

“My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Psalm 121:2

And the sea is often used in the Old Testament to represent confusion and chaos. But we worship the God who made the sea and whose word controls it.

“O Lord God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O Lord, with your faithfulness all around you? You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them.” Psalm 89:8-9

Our confidence isn't to be placed in anything in the created world, but only in the One who created the world. The world may fall apart -- our world may fall apart - - but because God is our refuge and strength, everything of value in our lives is kept safely hidden in him. The psalm doesn't say that we will not fear because God will stop the world from falling apart. It says that even though the seas rage and the mountains crumble, we will not fear, because God is with us.

The image of the raging sea in Psalm 46 brings to mind an incident in Jesus' life when he stilled the sea for his fearful disciples. You can find the story in Mark's Gospel, chapter 4 verses 35 to 41. Jesus was crossing the Sea of Galilee in a



boat with his disciples. While he slept, a storm arose and waves began to break over the bow of the boat. The disciples woke Jesus and said to him...

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” Mark 4:38-41

Mark Galli, an American author whose insights I’ve come to appreciate, recounts his experience of introducing that story in Jesus’ life to some people who were unfamiliar with Jesus. Galli wrote...

A group of Laotian refugees who had been attending the Sacramento church I pastored approached me after the service one Sunday and asked to become members. Our church had sponsored them, and they had been attending the church only a few months. They had only a rudimentary understanding of the Christian faith, so I suggested we study the Gospel of Mark together for a few weeks to make sure they knew what a commitment to Christ and his church entailed. They happily agreed.

Despite the Laotians' lack of Christian knowledge—or maybe because of it—the Bible studies were some of the most interesting I've ever led. After we read the passage in which Jesus calms the storm, I began as I usually did with more theologically sophisticated groups: I asked them about the storms in their lives. There was a puzzled look among my Laotian friends, so I elaborated: We all have storms—problems, worries, troubles, crises—and this story teaches that Jesus can give us peace in the midst of those storms. "So what are your storms?" I asked.

Again, more puzzled silence. Finally, one of the men hesitantly asked, "Do you mean that Jesus actually calmed the wind and sea in the middle of a storm?"

I thought he was finding the story incredulous, and I didn't want to get distracted with the problem of miracles. So I replied: "Yes, but we should not get hung up on the details of the miracle. We should remember that Jesus can calm the storms in our lives."

Another stretch of awkward silence ensued until another replied, "Well, if Jesus calmed the wind and the waves, he must be a powerful man!" At this, they all nodded vigorously and chattered excitedly to one another in Lao. Except for me, the room was full of wonder. I suddenly realized that they grasped the story better than I did.²

² © 2010 PreachingToday.com Mark Galli, *Jesus Mean and Wild* (Baker, 2006), p. 112



You see, the point of the story in Mark's Gospel isn't about Jesus' ability to still the storms of our lives; it's about Jesus' ability to still the storm because he is God. And Jesus rebuke of his disciples' lack of faith was not because they didn't believe he could still the storm, but because they were afraid of the storm even though he was right there in the boat with them. You see, the presence of Jesus was not enough for them, because they didn't know who he really was. They didn't know their God. They didn't know that Jesus was "Emmanuel, God with us."

Is God's abiding presence with us enough to dispel our fear, regardless of the circumstances we face? Do we really know our God?

Second, the writer of this psalm assures us that...

Because God is with us we have access to a limitless supply of God's grace and strength in the midst of the challenges of life

"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns." Psalm 46:4-5

A few weeks ago I was reflecting on this psalm with a group of other pastors when something struck me: there is no river in Jerusalem! There never has been a river in Jerusalem, "the city of God." So what does the writer mean when he refers to "a river whose streams make glad the city of God"? It led me on a bit of a Bible search and I came across this passage in the Book of Isaiah...

"Behold Zion, the city of our appointed feasts! Your eyes will see Jerusalem, an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be plucked up, nor will any of its cords be broken. But there the LORD in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor majestic ship can pass." Isaiah 33:20-21

The river is God himself. He is the one who brings gladness and refreshment and strength to his people. Jerusalem was the place where God had commanded that his temple be built. It was the place of his "holy habitation." And out from his temple, out from the place where God's presence dwelt, the psalmist envisions a river of water that breaks into flowing streams that bring life and refreshment to God's people as they commune with him. The river of God's blessing breaks into streams that flow into the lives of people, bringing them strength and refreshment. The picture of God as a river of life is repeated by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 47:1-12) and by the Apostle John (Revelation 21:1-5) and by Jesus, who said...



**“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”
John 7:37-38**

The picture of a river breaking into streams and feeding God’s people with life reminds me of another Bible picture, the picture of the grapevine and the branches. Jesus said...

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5

I recently read the testimony of a woman who shared her story of how she came to realize the importance of staying connected with the God’s river of blessing in Jesus. She wrote...

Nearly seven years ago, I started a business. I prayed diligently about the decision and sensed God's confirmation to move forward. Because of my inexperience in retail operations, I depended heavily on God for wisdom and direction. Between the first time I caught a vision for this venture and the day we opened our doors, I prayed every step of the way.

On opening day, customers lined up around the building. With pounding heart and sweaty palms, I became acutely aware of the fact that the success or failure of this business rested on me. For the next four years, I ran the store as if this were true.

Instead of praying for God's wisdom or listening to the counsel of trusted advisors, like my husband, Dan, who was also my business partner, I relied on my own understanding. I simply was too busy and preoccupied to spend time reading my Bible. And when I did make time, I found myself re-reading the same passage over and over and never grasping the words. Daily preoccupation over my work took the place of daily quiet time with God.

Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." I discovered how true his words are. The longer I skimmed in my spiritual life, the further I fell from the vine. And the further I fell from the vine, the more all my efforts proved fruitless.

Making decisions apart from God and Dan started to have a snowball effect that eventually led to the demise of our business—and nearly our marriage.



Looking back on those four years, I know now what was at play: apart from Christ, I could do nothing. Instead of remaining in Jesus, as he instructs us to do, I ran on ahead without him.³

It's so easy to do that, isn't it? Life, with all its challenges and demands, has a way of drawing us away from the very thing we need – God's river of life. Although God wants to provide us with the river of his refreshment and strength, we run on our resources and pretty soon we run dry and then the trouble starts. Let's keep drawing our refreshment from the river, let's keep absorbing our nutrients from the vine. Let's allow Him to feed us and strengthen us with his life and grace.

Finally, the writer of this psalm challenges us with the truth that...

Because God is with us we have Someone who is far greater than any problem we face

“Come, behold the works of the LORD... ‘Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!’” Psalm 46:8, 10

“Be still, and know I am God.” “Be still,” we usually hear this as a gentle word of invitation, but it really isn't, you know. It has more of the sense of the parent or teacher who says to the child who is yelling and running wildly: “Sit down and be quiet!” Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of the Bible renders it as: “Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your High God, above politics, above everything.” Another translation puts it this way: “Cease striving and know that I am God.” Like the woman in the story I just read, we think everything depends on us and so we run around and work and strive and try and do with all our might, and we forget God. Our problems and challenges fill our vision, our plans and ideas and efforts become our focus, and we forget God.

John Ortberg, an American pastor and writer, recounts the following story and makes the accompanying challenge and with this I close this morning.

Many years ago I was walking in Newport Beach, a beach in Southern California, with two friends. Two of us were on staff together at a church, and one was an elder at the same church. We walked past a bar where a fight had been going on inside. The fight had spilled out into the street, just like in an old western. Several guys were beating up on another guy, and he was bleeding from the forehead. We knew we had to do something, so we went over to break up the fight. ... I

³ © 2010 PreachingToday.com Marian V. Liautaud, "Remain in Me," Christianity Today's Kyria blog (12-22-09)



don't think we were very intimidating. [All we did was walk over and say,] "Hey, you guys, cut that out!" It didn't do much good.

Then all of a sudden they looked at us with fear in their eyes. The guys who had been beating up on the one guy stopped and started to slink away. I didn't know why until we turned and looked behind us. Out of the bar had come the biggest man I think I've ever seen. He was something like six feet, seven inches, maybe 300 pounds, maybe 2 percent body fat. Just huge. We called him "Bubba" (not to his face, but afterwards, when we talked about him).

Bubba didn't say a word. He just stood there and flexed. You could tell he was hoping they would try and have a go at him. All of a sudden my attitude was transformed, and I said to those guys, "You better not let us catch you coming around here again!" I was a different person because I had great, big Bubba. I was ready to confront with resolve and firmness. I was released from anxiety and fear. I was filled with boldness and confidence. I was ready to help somebody that needed helping. I was ready to serve where serving was required. Why? Because I had a great, big Bubba. I was convinced that I was not alone. I was safe.

If I were convinced that Bubba were with me 24 hours a day, I would have a fundamentally different approach to my life. If I knew Bubba was behind me all day long, you wouldn't want to mess with me. But he's not. I can't count on Bubba.

Again and again, the writers of Scripture pose this question for us: How big is your God? Again and again we are reminded that One who is greater than Bubba has come, and you don't have to wonder whether or not he'll show up. He's always there. You don't have to be afraid. You don't have to live your life in hiding. You have a great, big God, and he's called you to do something, so get on with it!⁴

Amen.

- **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- **Final Song:** Not Be Shaken
- **Benediction**

⁴ © 2010 PreachingToday.com John Ortberg, in the sermon "Big God/Little God," PreachingToday.com

