

Psalm 46

When I was growing up, the world was divided into two main camps - those who were for freedom and democracy and those who were enemies of our values, the communists of the Soviet Union, in particular. That was the black and white picture that our media presented us with and I, like many others, swallowed it pretty much as it was presented (after all, our first TV was black and white). I knew who we had to be afraid of - and it sure wasn't us! We were the good guys.

There was a new threat, one that had ended the Second World War, the threat of nuclear war, a war that could destroy the earth. This was the first time in history we had faced such a threat, and we had been staggered by the pictures of the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and were told that the new generation of atomic weapons were far more powerful and would do far greater damage than the primitive atomic weapons that ended the war.

If we are kept in suspense in our day by the threat of an intercontinental ballistic missile reaching us from North Korea, or by the new supersonic missiles that have been developed by Russia, or by the threats represented by terrorist groups such as Isis and Al- Qaeda, when I was a youth we only had one great political fear - the Soviet Union and their arsenal of nuclear weapons. There were several crises through the years, none more tense than the Soviets placing missiles on the island of Cuba and President Kennedy putting up a blockade of Soviet ships until the offending missiles were removed. I was 11 years old and I could imagine mushroom clouds over B.C. and radiation poisoning everything.

In the period of history when the ancient Israelites were writing psalms, they had a picture of what a world-wide catastrophe would look like. It had nothing to do with nuclear weapons, but it instilled a very similar kind of fear. It's described in the second and third verses of Psalm 46:

If earthquakes come and the mountains crumble into the sea ...

The oceans roar and foam ... the mountains tremble as the waters surge.

In the ancient world, the land represented security, stability. The mountains were places of refuge, where you could run and be safe. The oceans, on the other hand, represented chaos. When you read a book like Revelation, you see all sorts of evil things coming out of the sea - it was the realm of evil creatures and of the forces rebelling against God.

The picture of disaster here near the beginning of Psalm 46 is the worst: the mountains are destroyed by earthquakes and crumble into the sea. Then the sea takes on this aggressive stance - roaring and foaming - and the mountains tremble in the face of the surge of these frightening waters. This is very frightening stuff for the ancient reader, the kind of poetry that inspires nightmares.

What's the point? Let's back up to the opening:

God is our refuge and strength

*Always ready to help in times of trouble
So we will not fear, even if earthquakes come
And the mountains crumble into the sea.*

Here it is: God is our refuge and strength. We will not fear.

The psalmist is describing the worst kind of calamity he can imagine - the most destructive natural disaster that he could picture. Earthquakes and the collapse of stability is terrifying and that's the image that he chooses. But in the midst of the most terrifying circumstances, he says, "God is our refuge and our strength." God is there. God is always ready to help us in times like these, times of trouble. Because of His presence and because of His power and because of His love for His people, we will not be afraid.

So, "let the oceans roar and foam. Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge!" "Go ahead, give it your best shot!" the psalmist crows, and then immediately turns his focus back inward to the city of Jerusalem and to what is happening there:

*A river brings joy to the city of our God, the sacred home of the Most High
God Himself lives in that city; it cannot be destroyed
God will protect it at the break of day*

What has just happened? We were in the midst of chaos and destruction, with mountains crumbling and oceans roaring and now, suddenly, we're in a scene of security, peace and joy. What made this big difference? The presence of the Almighty. The city is, of course, Jerusalem and it has within it the "home of the Most High", the Temple of Yahweh. This "home" guarantees security to the people of Israel - where God is, they are protected; where God is, destruction is kept away.

The Psalm doesn't mention any possible reason for God leaving the city, and so God's presence is being taken for granted - something that would prove to be a mistake when Jerusalem fell to Babylon.

The verses that follow seem to be combining the earlier elements of chaos with the overwhelming and awesome power of God, the kind of great strength that keeps Jerusalem secure. Let's read:

*The nations are in an uproar and kingdoms crumble
God thunders and the earth melts
The LORD Almighty is here among us;
The God of Israel is our fortress.
Come, see the glorious works of Yahweh
See how He brings destruction upon the world
And causes wars to end throughout the earth
He breaks the bow and snaps the spear in two
He burns the shields with fire (vv. 6-9)*

Now, I want to spend a little time on this section, because it sounds a bit off. How does bringing destruction on the world cause wars to end? Does that mean that

everyone gets wiped out and so there's no one left to fight anymore? Let's break it down and see what's going on in these verses.

The first thing to notice is that, back out in the world, outside the protective presence of Yahweh, we are returning to chaos. The nations are in an uproar and kingdoms crumble. This is not a uniquely biblical observation - this is what is happening in the world all the time. We don't remember the time when Austria and Hungary formed one of the most powerful alliances in Europe - the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it was called, but that was only 100 years ago. The British Empire was dominant around the globe and the pound sterling was the world reserve currency up until the end of World War II, but that is long gone now. Empires and Kingdoms are forever rising and falling. Now it appears that the American Empire is crumbling and what will replace it? Maybe we'll get fooled and it will last another hundred years, but eventually it will collapse as all other empires have. So to say that the nations are in an uproar and kingdoms crumble is to describe the continual churning of political and national forces that's always going on. What the passage is stating in this kind of poetic description is the instability of evil, and it's presented in contrast with the stability, the security, of God's presence.

What about "God thunders and the earth melts"? That is telling us that the Creator has the power, just in His voice alone, to undo what He made with just His voice. He spoke and the world was created; speaking once more brings judgment on the earth.

In this context of the judgment of evil comes a word of comfort and encouragement in verse 7:

Yahweh Almighty is here among us; The God of Israel is our fortress

This is a repetition of the theme of verse 5 where God is making Jerusalem His home and providing it with His protection. Notice that the protection comes from God's presence. It's the fact that He is with Israel, that He is living among them, that offers them a sense of security and hope.

So the picture we're getting here is your Aunt Margaret's first experience of filming some live action shot with a movie camera. She starts with a shot of the chaos in the world outside, swings back to see if anything has disturbed the peace back home, looks out at the action in the big bad world, swings back to her undisturbed back yard. And now, as we get to verse 8, she'll swing the camera angle back out over the fence to see what's happened since her last look.

*Come, see the glorious works of Yahweh
See how He brings destruction upon the world
And causes wars to end throughout the earth
He breaks the bow and snaps the spear in two
He burns the shields with fire. (vv.8,9)*

This is where we address the question of how God's destruction of the world paves the way for peace. Remember what the term "world" means in Scripture. It's not referring to the physical earth, nor to people groups or animal kingdoms. The term "world" is

typically used to describe the spiritual forces that have aligned themselves against God and His Kingdom. So, you could picture a nation that is restricting Christians from worshiping together, perhaps imprisoning pastors and church leaders, and you would say that the spirits behind that hatred of God along with those who have allied themselves with those spirits represent the world, a world that is opposed to the Kingdom of God. You could say the same thing about a university campus where the professors mocked belief in God and discouraged students from holding their faith and that would also be representative of this present world, the darkness of our age. It's spiritually inspired rebellion against God but also is seen in some very practical out-workings of that rebellion. You can see it in the Canadian government's decision to restrict summer student grant applications to organizations who signed off on a variety of social issues including abortion. They could easily have amended their policy to allow for conscientious objection or religious exclusion, but that would not have satisfied the spirits behind the move and therefore was never permitted. So, when our passage talks about God bringing destruction upon the world, it's talking about the world in the biblical sense, the world against God.

So the world that is opposing God's rule, God's Kingdom, is, by its nature, evil and violent. It is pictured in this Psalm by the chaos of mountains crumbling and ocean waters surging in destruction. Because the source of this rebellious and angry world system is the same spirit that caused Satan to rebel against the rule of God - it's envious, proud, devious, ruthless, destructive - it is the spirit that causes wars to break out between nations. And before peace can become the experience of all peoples on earth, this evil must be judged and disposed of. Then, there will be purpose to breaking bows and snapping spears in two and burning shields with fire. Otherwise, the spirit of rebellion and hatred will quickly make new weapons and cause new violence on the earth.

Now, we come across a familiar verse, but one that we have probably misunderstood in the past:

*"Be silent, and know that I am God!
I will be honoured by every nation
I will be honoured throughout the world." (v. 10)*

Some translations render the beginning of this verse as "Be still, and know that I am God." You've probably heard that and thought of a peaceful place in the country or being quiet and reflective in your own room as you think about who God is.

But this text is addressed to the turbulent, chaotic world that has been stirred up by the evil spiritual forces. This is a strong command, "Be still! Leave off! Quiet now!" This is the Creator's command to His creation, to cease the fury of its rebellion against Him in the full knowledge that He will be honoured by every nation, and throughout the cosmos. The rebellious forces that have risen up against God will not, ultimately, be successful in overcoming His Kingdom or His purposes for Creation. And so, out of the authority He has as Creator and Lord, He commands them to be gone, to be silent, to cease and desist, we might say.

And then the Psalm ends with one final verse:

*Yahweh Almighty is here among us;
The God of Israel is our fortress (v. 11)*

The camera has swung back to the inside again, and here, once more, we see the picture of security and peace. Yahweh is present with us and where He is, we are safe.

Chaos and violence versus security and peace. That's the difference between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. That's the reality from a spiritual point of view and we see that reality being played out on the stage of world politics continually. It's the world that makes justification for war or which controls people through violence, or which topples kingdoms; and it's God who disarms that violent world and makes the way for peace.

Notice that the perspective of the psalmist plays a significant part in how we read this psalm. Whenever the focus is on what's taking place outside God's city, there is chaos and violence, war and death, nations in uproar and kingdoms crumbling. When-ever the focus is on what takes place inside the walls of the city where God lives, there is the helping, calming, joyful, protecting, present God who acts as the fortress for His people and who will bring peace to the raging world.

This will be my first application from today's passage: what you focus on in life will go a long way in determining how healthy you will be emotionally - and spiritually. If your mind is occupied with the chaos of the world around you, you will be under consistent stress - and that wears on your ability to live well. If your mind is focused on the peace and security and hope and joy of the Father's love for you, His provision for your future, His grace to you at every point of need, you can't help but experience less stress and feel more hopeful and alive.

Realistically, these things are not that obvious in normal life. We don't see the kingdoms crashing and the wars erupting every day on the news - but we do see the power of evil at work and we can become more fearful than we need to be if we give too much focus to what the prince of darkness is up to. We also tend to be unaware of the protective, redeeming work that the Father is always about. We can grow in our awareness of His response to the evil in the world by regular, reflective reading of His Word. Even just reading the Psalms on a daily basis helps us to be more conscious of His heart and His actions towards those who love Him. More and more we live in a post-literate age - in other words, we read less than our parents did and our children read less than we do. Reading is being replaced by other forms of media, technologically advanced, but hollowed out in terms of our imagination and engagement. So this reading thing has to be a discipline.

The second application for today is, don't let Aunt Margaret use your Go-Pro. No, her experience of swinging back and forth between fear and faith is a common experience for many of us. But, that tells us that we don't see God as having that much greater

power than the forces of evil in our world. I want to draw again on verse 10 for this second application:

Be silent, and know that I am God!

I will be honoured by every nation ...

God has the final say, the absolute authority in what will happen in this world. That may take us through frightening times and challenging circumstances, but we can't even count on that! We have so much to be thankful for, so many reasons to be grateful people, that it seems strange to give too much credence to those possibilities when God has given us so much.

We live and move and have our being in Him, as Paul said to the men of Athens in Acts 17. And He is able to command the forces of chaos in this world and tell them to leave off and to be still, and then remind them that He will be honoured by the people of every nation. He will provide the answer to our prayer, "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." He is not involved in an arm wrestle with Satan, with some back and forth battle for supremacy - He won that battle a long time ago when Satan and 1/3 of the angels were thrown out of heaven. So one part of the answer to our battle with fear is to see God as He really is, to see Him as so much greater than our enemies, to see His power overcoming evil and delivering us from those who would harm us. We need a bigger view of God, a greater understanding of His authority in the cosmos, and we get that by drawing closer to Him. The closer we are, the bigger He appears to us. The bigger He appears to us, the more content and secure we will be. In Jesus' words, "Don't be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32)