

Psalm 46

First Sunday of End Time: Reformation

October 31, 2021

Study the history of the Reformation times and you have to marvel at Martin Luther. The sheer volume of his writings and work, his bold confession of the truth, and his accomplishments in many fields such as language and music in addition to the church, were amazing. His example of faithful service is one to follow. As we strive to do so, the source of guidance and strength is the same for us as it was for him: God's Word. A special source of comfort for Luther was Psalm 46. When he was greatly troubled, he would say to his co-worker, Philip Melancthon, "Come, Philip, let us sing the 46th Psalm." Taking imagery especially from the beginning of the psalm, Luther wrote the hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" which became the battle hymn of the Reformation. We enjoy singing and playing it still, and will do so later in the service. This hymn has been translated more than any other Christian hymn. There are several English versions. We even have a choice of two melodies in our hymnal. Its title provides the theme as we consider Psalm 46 today.

A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD

- I. Therefore we will not fear
- II. God will help us
- III. Know that he is God

Only because God is our mighty fortress are we able to say, "Therefore we will not fear." Troubles arise all around us in life. We don't know the exact circumstances behind the writing of this psalm. God provided many victories for the people of the Old Testament in the face of overwhelming odds. It fits lots of situations. Satan is continually raising temptations and stirring up trouble to try to cause us to be afraid. Natural disasters occur, as described in the psalm: the earth giving way and the mountains falling into the heart of the sea, so that "its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging." We think of earthquakes, volcano eruptions, tidal waves, hurricanes, and tsunamis. Those have to be terrifying experiences, when forces much stronger than you seem to unleash their power uncontrollably.

Troubles are frequent in our personal lives as well. Family strife threatens our home, economic disaster befalls, accidents or illnesses ruin our health. Our hands and our hearts tremble with weakness and uncertainty. We don't know if we can take another step in safety. Opponents of our faith can stir up trouble as well.

Spiritual side effects may result. We start to question our Lord and his love for us. Satan is quick to plant doubts in our minds. "God doesn't care about me." We fall

into great sin. "I don't deserve anything from God but anger and punishment." Of course, that would be true if our behavior determined the situation, but that fear ignores the truths of God and his mercy.

"The LORD Almighty is with us," the psalm assures us. That term LORD in all capital letters is the name God gave to himself. It is used in connection with his gospel promises. It is his name of free and faithful grace. "Almighty" reminds us of his unlimited power. Literally it is the Lord of hosts, referring to the forces he commands in our behalf, likely indicating the angels. Combine the two names and we know we are in good hands.

God is there for us as "an ever-present help in trouble." He allows himself to be found. Look in his Word and see his promises. Experience verifies his presence. Maybe you have had car trouble, but someone—it could be a friend or a complete stranger—happens along and provides the needed help. It was no chance occurrence to thank your lucky stars for. It was God's care in action. Or you were deeply troubled and opened your Bible or a devotional book and there was just the message that addressed your situation.

In all times of need, "God is our refuge," our place of safety, "and our strength," having the power to overcome our enemies and troubles. He is our help against all oppressions and anxieties. There is no need for us to fear, for God is in charge, even of the small details of our lives, and he knows what he is doing.

How well Martin Luther realized that truth! He faced opposition from the church and the government. He was excommunicated and declared an outlaw of the state, which meant he was ripe for the picking. Anybody who killed him would be doing a service to the nation. How did he respond to these threats? They impelled him to do greater work rather than to waste energy in fear. When the emperor demanded that he retract his writings, he made the famous statement, "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." In today's Gospel reading Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would guide us to proper words in times like that. Luther's work also faced challenges from within the reforming movement. There were radical individuals who destroyed religious articles and ran roughshod over consciences as they sought to correct the errors of the past. The only way to maintain equilibrium was to know God was the place of refuge and the source of strength.

The psalm presents timeless truths, valid for whatever enemy is attacking. False teachings have never stopped. The teaching of salvation by works creeps into the approaches of churches that resulted from the Reformation, even though that was the key error Luther opposed. The reliability and inerrancy of Scripture is denied

by many churches. Even the fact that Jesus is true God who lived a perfect life, died to atone for our sins, and rose again in victory doesn't stand as the confession of all who call themselves Christians. No wonder our society lacks a moral compass! A reformation is needed still.

When facing such conditions we could throw up our hands in dismay and give up. Instead, when we focus on God's presence and power, we declare, "Therefore we will not fear!" Continue in bold confession of the truth, knowing God will accomplish the needed results. He promises that the gates of hell will not prevail against his Church and the truth it confesses. The same is true in our personal lives. We have no reason to fear even when calamities, troubles, and temptations surround us. Smallness of faith might incline us to fear, but God is so powerful we don't need to. A mighty fortress is our God!

II.

He does not just hang around and watch. God will help us, the psalm asserts. He supplies what his Church needs. "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells." That's talking about the Christian Church, where God dwells in hearts by faith. The streams flowing from God make us glad as they supply our needs, so that the Church is a paradise like the Garden of Eden that was watered by earthly streams. The Lord feeds our faith with his mercy and builds our trust in his salvation through Jesus and in his constant care. Ancient cities met defeat when their water supply was blocked off. No enemy blockade can cut off the streams of God's grace in Christ. They are ever present in his Word and sacraments.

Our mighty fortress defends his Church. Troubles rage as, "Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall," "but God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day." The trouble lasts only a night and his help comes right away.

For our omnipotent God it takes only his voice, not an arsenal of weapons. "He lifts his voice, the earth melts." He dissolves the opposition with the heat of his anger, leaving it powerless. Think of the power of God's Word at creation when he spoke and the universe and everything in it came into existence. That's why Luther's hymn rang out, "One little word (a word of God's, that is) can fell him," referring to Satan. God is almighty; He has unlimited power. "The God of Jacob is our fortress," takes our thoughts back to the Old Testament and the wonderful care he provided for the people of Israel. A fortress is a place of safety, with tall, thick walls to protect and often located on a high hill and unapproachable, or at least with the vantage point of being able to see the advancing enemy and prepare for defense. God supplies such security for his people.

How can you have that confidence? Since this care depicts what the Lord does for his Church, be in the Church by faith in Jesus as your Savior. Recognize what God promises in his Word. Regularly hear and ponder those amazing truths. God will help you. Be assured.

III.

That assurance is not for us alone but for all people. The text issues the call to know that he is God. This invitation was directed toward the heathen, who do not yet know him. He called on them to be still, to cease making war on his people. He invited them to see the desolations he had brought on the earth. He demonstrates his power in overthrowing human enterprises. Sometimes he allows the destructiveness of war to teach lessons. He brings an end to it when the forces of evil threaten the Church. Weapons are then destroyed.

Such temporary cessations of violence are a prelude to the ceasing of all war, which we will enjoy in our heavenly existence. The Church Militant of today becomes the Church Triumphant. Then we will dwell in eternal peace. Our peace in heaven is even greater than settled relations among nations. We have peace with God through the forgiveness of sins which Jesus won for us with his suffering and death on the cross. That peace is ours now through the gospel, but we will have it in fullness in heaven, never again disrupted by repeated sinning. How we look forward to it!

That's also when all will confess him as the only true God, invincible and exalted. The Apostle Paul spoke of that day: "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." If all people will eventually recognize and acknowledge his position, why wait? Why not offer those praises now when it benefits you? At Judgment Day Jesus will receive the honor as all creatures must bow before him, but that forced admission will save no one.

God is addressing this call to you if you are outside his kingdom. If you are already a believer, then help it happen by sharing the message of Jesus Christ. That's an important task for us as heirs of the Reformation. We do not celebrate a secret this day but we share a marvel. We know and cherish the vital truth that we are justified by God's grace alone, received through faith alone. Tell those you know and invite them to hear the gospel with you.

Then we can join together in the confident trust that the Lord is at our side. "A Mighty Fortress is Our God". Sing the hymn with vigor, believe it with all your heart, and live each day in that confidence.