



## RESURGENCE

### Reflections on Psalm 46 in the Wake of Tragedy

Jarram Barrs

The recent terrorist attacks and consequent military action have reminded us in a horribly stark way of how little we know of the future and how tenuous the hold is that we have on life. And as this type of warfare reminds us of how uncertain we must be when we put our hope in what we have in this life, Psalm 46 comes to us with assurance of God's sovereign care over His creation. This psalm reminds us of hope and gives us the assurance that we all need as we live through difficult times.

The psalm opens with an affirmation of faith, a statement of God's trustworthiness to assure the believer. God is our "refuge," our "strength," and our "ever-present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). When trouble comes our way, there is only one sure refuge where we may turn, and that is God. When our weakness is exposed by the alarms of life there remains One who is always strong. When disaster threatens to strike us, or does actually strike us, there is One to whom we may go who is always ready to come immediately to our aid. He is ever-present, and He is eager to help.

In the second verse of Psalm 46 the psalmist pictures the earth itself falling into chaos. God had originally formed the world out of chaos and imposed order on it, giving the seas boundaries that they were not to cross. The psalmist declares that even if the fabric of the physical universe starts to come apart we still need not fear. If there are violent earthquakes and tidal waves that threaten to engulf the land, yet we may put our trust in God. There is nothing that can happen, no natural disaster so great that God will lose His sovereign control over the forces of the natural world.

These verses are similar to Psalm 23. In Psalm 23 it is the individual who faces trouble, even "the valley of the shadow of death;" yet there is no need to fear because the Lord promises to be with His people. In Psalm 46 God's people together face great crisis and together they are reminded that they do not need to fear even though the very earth itself should start falling apart and slipping beneath their feet.

Rather than simply focusing on possible threats in the midst of crisis, the psalmist uses his prayer to turn our attention to the river of the city of God. In reality there is no great river flowing through Jerusalem, just a few tiny streams. But the psalmist is thinking symbolically. It is true that Zion is God's dwelling place on earth, but here he is thinking of the presence of God among his people everywhere (Isaiah picks up this theme of the great river of peace in 33:21). God's river of mercy, grace, and peace is always flowing to comfort His people. Jerusalem is the city where God dwells, but that city is simply symbolic of God's dwelling among His people. Because God has committed himself to live among His people they will never fall, no matter if the whole world falls apart around them. At night we may be fearful, but when morning comes He is sure to help at break of day.

Just as mountains fall, so do human kingdoms and in verse six the psalmist turns to the wars taking place among the nations. Just as the sea is roaring so the nations are in an uproar. This is the nature of our human history. Americans have lived for many,

many years without war on our soil, so we have come to take it for granted that peace and stability are permanent. Europeans do not think that way, nor do the peoples of Africa, or South America, or Asia. Every 20 to 30 years most peoples have to endure the terrible reality of war, not only far away but close at hand. As those living in America, we now find ourselves in that situation. Our lives have changed. War has come here in its terrible form, taking away our sense of security and inviolability. And, I have to say, I think it has gone forever. What is our confidence in such a time, faced with such a future reality?

Verse seven says, "The Lord Almighty is with us: The God of Jacob is our fortress." When we are faced with the fragility of human existence we have nowhere to turn but to the Lord. All the things in which we put our trust are empty vessels. And this is the reality of life every day, not just during crises. One of my colleagues passed on these words from "Learning During War-Time," an essay by C. S. Lewis, that captures a Christian response to the recent tragic events. (The word "war" in the original text has been substituted with "terrorism").

I think it is important to see the present calamity in a true perspective. The [attack] creates no absolutely new situation; it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself. If men had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure, the search would never have begun. We are mistaken when we compare [a terrorist attack] with 'Normal life.' Life has never been normal. Even those periods which we think most tranquil, like the nineteenth century, turn out, on closer inspection, to be full of crises, alarms, difficulties, emergencies. Plausible reasons have never been lacking for putting off all merely cultural activities until some imminent danger has been averted or some crying injustice put right. But humanity long ago chose to neglect those plausible reasons. They wanted knowledge and beauty now, and would not wait for the suitable moment that never comes.<sup>1</sup>

Lewis goes on to write later in this same essay,

...[Terrorism] makes death real to us: and that would have been regarded as one of its blessings by most of the great Christians of the past. They thought it good for us to be always aware of our mortality. I am inclined to think they were right. All the animal life in us, all schemes of happiness that centred in this world, were always doomed to a final destruction. In ordinary times only a wise man can realize it. Now the stupidest of us knows...If we had foolish un-Christian hopes about human culture, they are now shattered. If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned, and not a moment too soon. But if we thought that for some souls, and at some times, the life of learning, humbly offered to God, was, in its own small way, one of the appointed approaches to the Divine reality and the Divine beauty which we hope to enjoy hereafter, we can think so still.<sup>2</sup>

In verses eight to ten we are invited (as are all the nations) to come and see what God will do. He will one day bring all warfare to an end. Until He comes to reign, wars and rumors of

wars, and from now on terrorist attacks, are part of the fallen human condition. Only He can bring this sorry history to an end. That does not mean that we should not try to bring about justice. We must be ready to punish evils; that is the calling of governments. But, that can never be our hope for a world free of violence and bloodshed. When He brings wars to an end, then He will be exalted among all the nations. They will all "be still and know that he is God," the Lord we worship, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, not Allah or any other god.

*This article originally appeared in Covenant magazine, the quarterly magazine of Covenant Theological Seminary. Reprint permission is available upon request by e-mailing [covenant@covenantseminary.edu](mailto:covenant@covenantseminary.edu). Begin a free subscription to Covenant magazine at [www.covenantseminary.edu/contactus/subscription.asp](http://www.covenantseminary.edu/contactus/subscription.asp).*

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1965), 44-45.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.