Psalm 46 Bible Study

To the chief Musician for the sons of Korah, A Song upon Alamoth

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

2 Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;

3 Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah.

4 There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High.

5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early.

6 The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: he uttered his voice, the earth melted.

7 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

8 Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath made in the earth.

9 He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire.

10 Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.

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

Introduction

This Psalm is a declaration of security in the midst of chaos and the fear that arises from it. There are many types of fear. The type we are most acquainted with would more accurately be described as worries - about money, jobs, relationships. Other fears are phobias - of the dark, spiders, bad grammar. Seldom do we fear for our lives. And yet we often hear of foreign wars. Closer to home, horrific murders are unpleasant reminders that chaos is never fully kept at bay. Nevertheless, the most personal, mortal fears that we will entertain will probably be when we, or our loved ones, have met with an accident, or have fallen seriously ill.

Opening reflection

Read verses 1, 7, and 11. How has God been your refuge and strength recently, as well as most memorably? Have you felt God with you? What do you think it means in verse 10 to ‘Be still, and know that I am God’?

Bible Study

There are three parts to this psalm, each marked by ‘Selah’. V1-3, 4-7, and 8-11.

Q. What is part 1 about?

Part 1 begins with a statement of the relationship the psalmist and the audience has with God: God is a constant source of safety, strength, and help in trouble. The psalmist then presents us with images of the earth, mountains, and sea in turmoil.

Q. v1 What do you think it means for God to be your strength?

Q. v2 Have you felt an earthquake? Can you think of what it would be like to be in the midst of one?

Q. What do you think it means for ‘mountains to be carried into the midst of the sea’?

In 1883, the volcano island of Krakatoa in Indonesia erupted so forcefully that it obliterated itself. It is estimated that the blast was 10 000 times greater than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Dutch authorities estimated the death toll at 36 417, though other sources give up to 120 000.

Q. Have you had a personal experience of the destructive power of nature? In such circumstances, how is God a ‘refuge’? How exactly does one ‘not fear’? God is ever-present in disasters, especially when/since
everyone has no one else to turn to. Is this the psalmist’s primary meaning?

Q. What is part 2 about?

Following on from part 1, the psalmist describes a river, which allows a transition of focus onto the city of God by means of following its streams.

Q. v4 What is the city? Is it Jerusalem, the Heavenly new Jerusalem, or another metaphor?

The city is also a permanent place of dwelling, unlike the wilderness. Verse 4 in the KJV has ‘tabernacles’, which reminds us of the Exodus and Israel’s wanderings. In I Kings 8:4, Solomon brings the tabernacle to Jerusalem for the first time.

Q. Out of context, how can we emulate Solomon and figuratively bring God’s tabernacle into our city?

Q. v5 describes the timeliness of God’s help. What is your experience and your attitude towards asking for and receiving help from God? How does this description of time relate to the spatial description in v1?

The psalmist restates v1 but in the third person: she shall be helped. She shall not be moved, because God is within her. It is also expectant: ‘shall’ or ‘will’ describe the future, unlike ‘is’ in v1.

Q. v7 What is the significance of calling God the ‘LORD of hosts’, and ‘the God of Jacob’? How relevant are these names to us?

The first use of ‘the LORD of hosts’ is first found in I Samuel 17:45, where David defies Goliath. It emphasises the martial power of God, but also His holiness, the small capitals being the translation for the most sacred name the Jews have for God. ‘The God of Jacob’ reminds the audience of the past and enduring faithfulness of God to Israel - ‘Israel’ in turn being the name God gave Jacob. Is there significance that ‘Jacob’ is used instead of ‘Israel’, since the latter means ‘to contend/struggle with God’? See Genesis 32:28.

Q. What is part 3 about?

Part 3 describes the destructive and unifying power of God. It moves from an acknowledgement that God is responsible for ‘desolations’ in the earth (as in part 1) to describing God’s agency in destroying manmade instruments of war. This allows and compels the nations (as in part 2) to finally exalt God. Part 3 ends with a repetition of v7, which is in turn a restatement of v5 and v1.

Q. v8 Can ‘desolations’ still be considered ‘works’? What is God’s purpose in desolation?

Desolation is the ‘action of laying waste a land’. The English word also has connotations of loneliness or sadness. The Hebrew has connotations of horror and astonishment. God’s agency demonstrates his power, but also leads us to question His motive.

Q. v9 is a description of God’s agency in ending wars by destroying weapons. How exactly does God destroy weapons of war? Do you think God operates in the same way today?

The psalmist is possibly suggesting that God, in bringing natural disasters onto Israel’s enemies, causes wars to cease. Israel, on the other hand, is unmoved, because God is with her.

Q. v10 The NASB gives ‘cease striving’ for ‘be still’, which although less poetic, captures more of the sense of the original. How is this command different from ‘being still’? How are you still amidst trouble in your own life?

God is Israel’s ‘strength’ because He acts on Israel’s behalf. At the same time, the psalmist sees God commanding Israel to take no action of her own so that victory and glory may be wholly attributed to God.

Q. How will this result in God being exalted by and in the rest of the world?

Q. v11 How has the description of God as a ‘refuge’ or ‘fortress’ changed over the course of the psalm? Is God active or passive? What about the psalmist and the audience? What effect does this have on us?

Conclusion

God is a refuge when we encounter trouble, a safe place we can go to and into. God is also our strength, actively working outwards on the world on our behalf. This is a comprehensive reassurance to our fears. Unlikely as it might be, the psalmist also describes God’s apparently destructive agency in the world as ultimately leading to peace, providing one explanation for the existence of natural disasters. At the same time, the psalmist sees God commanding us to ‘be still’. Paradoxically, we must be actively passive after finding refuge in God in order to allow Him to work on our behalf.