

“Come, Behold...Be Still, and Know”

A Call to Active Passivity

Introduction

The Text

Psa 46

⁰To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamo. A Song.

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

²Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,

³though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah

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

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

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

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

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

⁹He 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!”

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

Of the Sons of Korah

A. It is no coincidence, it seems to me, that this Psalm, as indicated in the superscript, is a Psalm “of the sons of Korah” (which likely means they not only led in the singing of this Psalm, but they authored it as well). You might remember, during the wilderness journey of the people of Israel, Korah, was the Levite, who gathered a company of 250 leaders in Israel and staged a rebellion against Moses and Aaron (Num 16). The sin of Korah and his company was so great that God actually caused the earth to split apart, “[opening] its mouth to swallow them [and their families] up”, and they “went down alive into Sheol” (vv. 31-33). But the sons of Korah, for some reason, were spared (26:11). The earth literally gave way (as described in our Psalm), but they were sheltered by the Lord their fortress. They were saved from the gaping pit by the sovereign grace of God.

1. And we are among this number, are we not? Dead in our sin, yet made alive by sovereign grace. Why should we enjoy His presence and protection? We cannot say. But O how such a mystery of love makes us want to sing Psalm 46s!
 - a. Are we in this place as we begin here? If so, let this sermon be more fuel for the fire of our devotion. If not, O may God use this sermon to stir the embers of our hearts back into flame! As we look together at this Psalm,

may we move from the mere reading of words, looking down at a book, to the singing of songs, with our eyes lifted up towards the heavens!

The Outline

- A. I will organize my thoughts under 3 headings: (1) An Ironic Contrast (vv. 1-7); (2) An Ironic Command (vv. 8-11); (3) An Ironic Christ.

(1) An Ironic Contrast (vv. 1-7)

Let's walk through these verses line by line and I trust the contrast will start to become clear.

"God Is Our..." (v. 1)

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

- A. Allow me to make a couple of observations here:

1. "God is..."—The opening verse, while clearly set against the background of "trouble" doesn't focus there. Instead, the accent of the verse clearly rests on who "God is" for us in the midst of such "trouble."
 - a. And what is highlighted? "God is...refuge"—He is the one we run to for shelter and protection. "God is...strength"—He is the one we rely on to get us through the trials. "God is...a very present help" (The literal meaning of the Hebrew here is God is always found by us when we need Him)—He is here, with us in the trouble. He will never leave or forsake us. Haven't you found this to be true?!
 - b. What a different note to strike than our Psa 13. A lot has to do with the starting point. In Psa 13 it was looking at circumstances and self (how I feel about things), and then moved towards considering who God is, which finally helps reorient by the end. This Psalm starts with consideration of who God is, a note of confidence, and that makes all the difference. We are looking at trials in a different way. "Therefore, we will not fear..." (v. 2). Knowing Him, grounds the fearless courage of His people.
 - i. So who is God for you? How would you describe Him? Absent, capricious, untrustworthy, vindictive, or refuge, strength, very present help?!
2. "God is our..."—Note the first person plural in this verse (and really in the entire Psalm: "our", "we", "us"): "God is our refuge" (and by extension), "our strength", and "our help." God has committed, covenanted Himself to a people, not merely to individuals.
 - a. We run into this line of thinking in the church today (especially in America), do we not? It's all about me and Jesus and if I do or don't assemble with

God's people in worship it really makes no difference. We must not bow to such deceptions. We would cut ourselves off from a critical source of nutrient. We are a part of the body of Christ. We were meant to rejoice together and weep together. Suffering already trends toward isolation, we must not let our theology take us there as well.

- i. Healing comes not only when we personally run to God as our refuge, strength, and help, but especially when we run to Him as such together! Let's get the "our" involved in our troubles.

The Instability of this World (vv. 2-3)

A. In vv. 2-3, the first part of our contrast comes into view:

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

1. The language here is alluding back to creation. This is cosmic, Gen 1 imagery, only things are moving in reverse.
 - a. Let's consider the original creation. Obviously we could go back to Gen 1 for this, but since we're in the Psalms, turn to:

Psa 104:5-9

⁵ He set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved.

⁶ You covered it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.

⁷ At your rebuke they fled; at the sound of your thunder they took to flight.

⁸ The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place that you appointed for them.

⁹ You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.

- i. God brought forth the dry ground, the earth, from the waters of the deep. He appointed the place of mountains and established a boundary for the sea that its waters would not again cover the earth.

(1) It is important to know that for the ancient Israelite the sea was not a happy place. You didn't take your vacations beside it. They didn't have beach condos. It was a frightening place. A chaotic and unruly place. We still experience a little bit of this (sharks, alligators?!), but nothing like they did. Hence, a boundary for the sea and its waters means: everything is stable.

- b. But then, in our Psalm, the sea rebels: “the earth gives way...” (2a); the mountains [are slipping] “into the heart of the sea” (2b); the waters are raging and foaming and swelling up with pride. The stable creation is coming undone. The waters, as it were, are pulling it back down into its deep, dark womb. This is uncreation!
- B. This imagery highlights for us the disorienting nature of trial. Have you ever heard people describe their trials like this: “It feels like my world is falling apart.” That’s what this Psalm is about! Which way is up? Which way is down? What once felt stable is quaking beneath my feet!
 - 1. Have you ever felt like this? Maybe you feel this way even now! What do you do?! Where do you go?!

The Stability of the City of God (vv. 4-5)

- A. Here is where the second part of our contrast comes into view.

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.

- 1. Where vv. 2-3 brought us raging and foaming and swelling waters, vv. 4-5 bring us a this gently rolling river with gladdening streams.
 - 2. Where vv. 2-3 speak of something so seemingly firm as mountains being “moved into the heart of the sea,” vv. 4-5 speak of the city of God, His holy habitation (or “tabernacle”), as a place that “shall not be moved.”
 - a. Here we note that the Israelite would have understood such language as referring to God’s chosen city of Jerusalem, and His dwelling with them in the temple--there is His city; there is His holy habitation...and there is Israel’s hope.
- B. But why do I say this contrast is ironic—bringing out the opposite of what we would expect?
 - 1. The answer lies in the Hebrew beneath our translation. Those words “There is” that begin v. 4, are not present in the Hebrew. This is an interpretive rendering of the original by the translators. But when we take this out and connect v. 3 with v. 4 the irony starts to emerge:

³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling...

⁴ a river whose streams make glad the city of God...

- a. One commentator suggests, and I agree, that we are to “understand v 4 as a comment on v 3: what are these surging, destructive waters but a river.

Even a cosmic disaster is totally controlled and purposeful” in the hands of the Lord!!!

- i. Interestingly, this reality is even pictured for us within the temple complex itself. For we read in [2 Chr 4](#) that in the courtyard of Solomon’s temple there was this large bronze basin that they called “the sea.” It was over 14’ in diameter, over 7’ high, and could probably hold around 12,000 gal of water. And it was used for the purification of the priests.

(1) Implication: God takes the unruly, the troubling, the rebellious sea and domesticates it for the good of His people!

2. These raging waters in [vv. 2-3](#), then, are not what they seem! While they seem boundless and destructive, they are given banks and channeled by YHWH for the satisfaction and joy of His people—“a river whose streams make glad the city of God!” The raging sea becomes a rolling stream...and we are invited to dip in our hands and drink!
 - a. Do you believe that He is doing this with your chaos, with your pain, with your trials?! He is! Everything is working for your good!

Summarized & Refined (vv. 6-7)

- A. [Vv. 6-7](#) essentially bring together and sum up the themes developed in our Psalm thus far, while also advancing things into finer focus.

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

1. The first thing to notice is that the chaotic imagery of [vv. 2-3](#) is now applied to nations and kingdoms. The suggestion here is that Israel is under siege by enemy nations. But God is in the midst of her, and with but a word from His mouth, her enemies will be undone.
 - a. We instantly might think of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt: where, by the edge of the Red Sea, the Lord promised to fight for them as they kept silent ([Exo 14:14](#)); where they had to wait through the night for morning’s salvation; where the unruly waters really did prove to be gladdening streams in the hands of their sovereign God—as the divided sea became at once both their pathway to freedom and their enemies’ tomb!
 - b. We might think of the Assyrians under king Sennacherib who attempted to take Jerusalem from Hezekiah ([2Ki 18-19](#)). But Hezekiah runs straight to the house of the Lord and seeks Him in prayer, and, in the morning, they wake to find that the angel of the Lord had struck down 185,000 men from the camp of the Assyrians!

B. And then we are given the refrain of this Psalm (repeated in v. 11):

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

1. Here we have a return to the confidence of v. 1 only, again, now with finer focus. This God is the “God of Jacob,” He is the God of the covenant. That is why He is refuge, strength, help, and fortress for His people. That is why He turns the sea into streams. Not only does He command the armies of heaven, He covenants with the us!

(2) An Ironic Command (vv. 8-11)

Active Passivity

A. The reflections that have preceded give rise to a very intriguing string of commands in vv. 8-11:

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

1. Do you see them? 4 commands for you and I: “Come, behold...be still, and know.” It is convenient that they rhyme. Maybe we can remember it in turmoil.

B. But we must probe deeper. Come, behold...what? Be still, and know...what? 2 things:

1. God—Throughout this entire Psalm it is God, His presence that has made all the difference. Because He is a “very present help in trouble”...we will not fear (vv. 1-2). Because “God is in the midst of [the city]; she shall not be moved” (v. 5). “The Lord of hosts is with us...” (v. 7). Knowing Him is the critical factor here. That is why He Himself is described as our refuge, strength, help, and fortress.

- a. This being still, then, is not like that of new age meditation, emptying the mind. It’s goal is not emptiness but fullness, filling the mind with God: be still and know God!

2. His present and future victory—These verses ultimately point us to the end when God will usher in lasting peace, and will be finally and fully exalted in all the earth! He will desolate desolation; He will get violent against violence; He will curse the curse; He will put to death death; He will usher in lasting peace; and He will be exalted!

- a. By faith we are to pull back this future reality into our present experience. We are to live in God’s unshakeable city in the midst of a crumbling world,

as we wait for the seas to become streams in the light of the eternal sunrise of the new heavens and earth.

- C. Why do I say that this is an ironic command?
1. Consider what God is calling us to do in the midst of our troubles. Imagine everything falling down around you?! I'm ready to run, to take a sword and go after the enemy, I want to do something! And He's saying, here's what you must do: stop! Come, behold...Be still, and know...Me! In fact, be still in the Hebrew invokes the image of letting your hand drop.
 - a. Here's where the irony comes in. This is not what we would think. This is a call to what Francis Schaffer termed "active passivity." It actually requires incredible effort to let our hand drop and trust Him!

(3) An Ironic Christ

He Sings this Psalm to Us

- A. Now, imagine you are an Israelite. You're singing this Psalm in the temple. You've understood it to be referring to God's commitment to Jerusalem and the Solomon temple as His holy tabernacle. You've seen Him defend it in the past from enemies. You are confident He will defend it forever into the future.

And then...the sin of your people rises to such a level that the glory of God (His very presence), Ezekiel tells us, departs from the temple and leaves you exposed before the Babylonians who come in and desecrate everything ([Ezek 11:22-23](#)). Even the sea we are told was broken into pieces so they could carry back the bronze ([2Ki 25:13](#)). What does this mean? Has God forsaken His covenant? Has He abandoned His people? Is He not as strong as we thought He was?

- B. Cue the Christ, the Messiah, Jesus! He would show us that Israel and its temple were symbols and shadows pointing forward to His person and work.
1. He is the real tabernacle of God's presence, Immanuel, God with us.
 2. He is the temple, destroyed but rebuilt in 3 days.
 3. He teaches us that no longer will we worship God on this or that mountain but "in Spirit and truth" ([Joh 4:23](#)).
 4. He connects us to the heavenly city, "a kingdom that cannot be shaken" ([Heb 12:28](#))!
 5. He overcomes our greatest enemies—not Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon; but Satan, Sin, and death!
 6. He is the Prince of Peace who will soon put an end to all the chaos and will finally be exalted above the earth.
 7. He fulfills the covenant made to Jacob and all of Israel.
- C. But He does it in an ironic, unexpected way. He does it by singing this Psalm.

1. As the chaotic sea of nations raged against Him (cf. Act 4:26-27)—Gentile and Jew—He was still and trusted in God His Father. “[Peter], put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?” (Joh 18:11). What was in the cup but the foaming waters of God’s wrath against all of humanity’s sin?!
2. And yet, as He drank that sea down to its dregs on the cross, experiencing in His body the full weight of God’s fury...in His resurrection, God took that sea of wrath and through His wounds forged streams of grace for the world. No one saw this coming! He cursed the curse by becoming a curse for us. He put to death death by being put to death for us.
 - a. And He offers His victory to us: “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’ (Joh 7:37b-38). He is the one that grants us access to the “river whose streams make glad the city of God!” (v. 4).
 - i. This water is ours now by faith but will soon be ours by sight.
 - (1) John speaks in revelation of when, after the kings of the earth and their armies are slain by the sword of His mouth, a new Jerusalem will come down out of heaven where there will be no more temple (21:22), for the true dwelling place of God will be with man (Rev 21:3); no more night, but eternal dawn (22:5); no more sea, but a river of living water flowing through the middle of its street (22:1-2)!
 - ii. And all of this is ours freely by grace, because of the Lamb! We didn’t have to lift a finger: “Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev 22:17b). Without price, because He paid it!

We Sing this Psalm Back to Him

- A. Jesus sings this Psalm to us, that we might, by His Spirit, sing it back to Him.
 1. He advances all the themes of this Psalm to their proper end and makes sense of them for us. He is our refuge, strength, help, and fortress.
 2. He is the proper object of that string of commands because He is “my Lord and my God” (Joh 20:28)!
 3. In all our troubles, then, let us come, behold...be still, and know...Christ and the victory of His cross! He will turn your raging seas into rolling streams, for His glory and your gladness!