



## Psalm 46 - God's Defence of His City and People

To the leader. Of the Korahites. According to Alamothe. A Song.

### Introduction

The psalm is a hymn celebrating Zion as the special city, to which God has pledged himself and through which he will bless the world. Other psalms like this include Psalms 48, 76, 87 and 122. The psalm has two stanzas, marked by a refrain (v.7 and v.11).

The Korahites were Levites from the family of Kohath and were descended from Korah. By David's time it seems they served in the musical aspect of the temple worship (2 Chronicles 20:19). Korah led a rebellion of 250 community leaders against Moses during the wilderness days of the Exodus (Numbers Chapter 16). God judged Korah and his leaders and they all died, but the sons of Korah remained. Perhaps they were so grateful for this mercy that they became notable in Israel for praising God.

### Psalm 46:1-7 - A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

The people of God are secure, even in times of tumult and upheaval, because God is their refuge and strength (v.1). God is present in his city, an emblem of his people as a whole, to protect it in all circumstances. Verses 2-3 use earthquakes, landslides, and the raging sea as images of raging nations and tottering kingdoms (v.6). There is also a contrast: though the mountains shake (v.2), Zion shall not be moved (v.5). The reason is that God has chosen Zion to be his holy habitation, i.e. the place of his sanctuary, where his people meet him in worship (v.4). In contrast to the roaring seas, the streams of this river, perhaps an image of the grace found in worshipping the true God - confirmed by Ezekiel 47:1-12 - bring joy to the city of God (v.4).

- 1 God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.
- 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
- 3 though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah

### Psalm 46:1-3

God is our refuge and strength. Many of the others Psalms begin with a description of the psalmist's crisis. In Psalm 46, the poet begins with God's provision. He looked to God for help in difficult times and found it. He could say this by experience:

- That God himself was a place of refuge, as the cities of refuge protected the fugitive in Israel.
- That God himself was strength for his people, being strong for them and in them.
- God alone was his refuge and strength, not God and something or someone else.
- That God himself was their help, not from a distance, but a very present help in trouble.

**God has always been seen as a refuge for those who seek shelter in him:** <<*I cry to you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living'*>> (Psalm 142:5), <<*O Lord, my strength and my stronghold, my refuge on the day of trouble, to you shall the nations come from the ends of the earth and say: Our ancestors have inherited nothing but lies, worthless things in which there is no profit*>> (Jeremiah 16:19), <<*The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shake. But the Lord is a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel*>> (Joel 3:16), and: <<*The Lord is good, a stronghold on a day of trouble; he protects those who take refuge in him*>> (Nahum 1:7).

Therefore we will not fear. The psalmist applied the logic of faith. If God is a real refuge, strength, and help to his people then there is no logical reason to fear, even in the biggest crisis, e.g. though the earth should change: <<*The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place*>> (Revelation 6:14).

The earth should change, the mountains shake, its waters roar and foam, the mountains tremble. The psalmist considered the most frightening, humbling natural phenomenon imaginable. He then made the reasoned estimation that God

was greater than them all, and fear before these in some way robbed God of some of his honour.

**Selah**, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect. The greatness of thought in this psalm was and is worthy of pause and careful thought.

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

<sup>5</sup> God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;  
God will help it when the morning dawns.

<sup>6</sup> The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;  
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

#### Psalm 46:4-6

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. The psalmist pictured the abundant, constant provision of a river for Jerusalem. The image is significant because Jerusalem does not in fact have such a river, only a few small streams. Yet the prophets anticipated the day when a mighty river would flow from the temple itself, as described in both Ezekiel 47:12 and Revelation 22:1. The future reality is already in the mind of the psalmist.

The river flows and makes all the city of God joyful because:

- Life-giving water is always present in that dry, semi-arid land.
- The river has many streams, a picture perhaps connected to the rivers that watered the Garden of Eden, as described in Genesis 2:10-14.
- A river is sometimes a picture of peace: *<<O that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your prosperity would have been like a river, and your success like the waves of the sea>>* (Isaiah 48:18), and: *<<For thus says the Lord: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees>>* (Isaiah 66:12). Jerusalem is in perfect peace.
- Their city is secure, having one of the best defences against an enemy besieging the city - guaranteed water.

The city of God: The connection is clearly with Jerusalem, the holy habitation of the Most High. At the same time, the title 'the City of God' lifts the concept to God's ideal, perfect city, the New Jerusalem: *<<If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you*

*the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name>> (Revelation 3:12), <<And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband>> (Revelation 21:2).*

God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved. All the blessing and provision of the city of God comes because of God's presence. Because of his presence the city is more firmly set than the earth which may be moved (v.2). The city is so established because God will help it when the morning dawns, at the start of the new era.

The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. As in Psalm 2, God pays no regard to the rage of the nations. At his mere voice the earth melts away.

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

#### Psalm 46:7

The Lord of hosts is with us. The idea behind the title *Yahweh Sabaoth* is that he is the commander of armies, both the army of his people and the armies of heaven. The title emphasises his glory and might, connecting it with the idea that this glorious God is with his people. This is something that even others noticed: *<<At that time Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, said to Abraham, 'God is with you in all that you do'>> (Genesis 21:22).*

The God of Jacob is our refuge. The title God of Jacob not only emphasises the aspect of covenant, but also grace, in that Jacob was a rather shabby character, not known for his great holiness. This gracious and merciful God is an open refuge for his people. In these two phrases God is seen in two aspects. He is the King of the multitude, the community, of all hosts. He is also the God of the individual, with personal relationship even to Jacob the man.

#### Psalm 46:8-11 - God Will Be Exalted Among All Nations

God's goal for his choosing of Zion is that out of it the word might go forth to the peoples of the whole world, bringing them all to live in godly peace with one another: *<<The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from*

*Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!>>* (Isaiah 2:1-5). This will be the means by which he makes wars cease (v.9). Since the address in v.10 <<*be still, and know*>>, is plural, readers should imagine God speaking these words to the nations, among whom he will eventually be exalted. This is the meaning of the Lord of hosts being with his people (v.11); and is confirmed by: <<*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*>> (Matthew 28:19-20). He will indeed see to it that the mission of Genesis 12:1-3 is accomplished.

- <sup>8</sup> Come, behold the works of the Lord;  
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
- <sup>9</sup> He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;  
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire.

#### Psalm 46:8-9

Come, behold the works of the Lord. If the dominant idea in the first section of the Psalm was God as a refuge and help, here the emphasis shifts to a consideration of the glory of God: <<*Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals*>> (Psalm 66:5).

See what desolations he has brought on the earth. God is mighty to make desolations or to enforce peace, making wars cease. The idea may be that God's people are invited to look over the field of battle after God has completely routed his enemies and their instruments of war are scattered, broken, and burning: <<*After the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing, and the troops of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed*>> (Daniel 9:26), and: <<*When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near*>> (Luke 21:20).

- <sup>10</sup> 'Be still, and know that I am God!  
I am exalted among the nations,  
I am exalted in the earth.'

### Psalm 46:10

**Be still, and know that I am God!** The idea is not that the faithful reader should stop activity and stand in one place. The sense is more that argument and opposition should stop and be still. This is done in recognition of God's glory and greatness, as mentioned in the previous verse: <<***To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him***>> (Deuteronomy 4:35). The idea is something like this: "As you know the glory and greatness of God, stop arguing with him or opposing him. Simply surrender to his will."

**I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.** The appropriately silenced man or woman of God can glory in God's exaltation. God's triumph will extend far beyond Israel to all the earth.

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

### Psalm 46:11

**The Lord of hosts is with us.** All who believe in him and serve him can have the confidence that the same God exalted in all the earth is with them. They need no more.

**The God of Jacob is our refuge.** The singer or reader leaves the psalm with confidence and serenity: <<***The Lord answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protect you!***>> (Psalm 20:1). This is worthy of reflection, closing with Selah.