

How to Deal with A Disaster

Psalm 46

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In the sermon I preached in the days right after 9/11, I referenced a question from former NATO Supreme Commander General Wesley Clark after the towers tumbled and parts of the Pentagon were pulverized. Here's what he asked: *"Will we ever be the same?"* My answer then and my answer now is the same: *"I hope not. The worst thing that could happen would be for us to go back to the way we were before. We must not stay the same. We must never be the same again."*

Preaching involves at least two responsibilities. The first is to explain the Bible and relate it to life. The second is to take life and explain it in light of Scripture. My goal today is to accomplish both of these purposes.

Please turn to Psalm 46. This song, written by the sons of Korah, is set in the context of catastrophic chaos, troublesome times, and unparalleled uncertainty. The writer's world was crumbling all around him. This Psalm was written with the nation of Israel in mind, but it certainly applies to us today.

Before we get into the text of the Psalm, I want you to see the word ***"Selah"*** after verse 3, verse 7, and verse 11. This word is used 74 times in the Old Testament, 71 times in the Psalms and three times in the Book of Habakkuk. Speaking of Habakkuk, the message next weekend will be from this often-forgotten prophet. We're calling it, "Trust God No Matter What."

Most versions of the Bible do not attempt to translate ***"Selah"*** but simply transliterate the word straight from the Hebrew. We know from the title of this Psalm that it was designed to be sung: *"To the choirmaster...a song."* It seems likely then that it refers to a musical rest, in which singers stopped singing to take a breath so only the musical instruments could be heard. According to one Bible dictionary, it can also signify a musical crescendo followed by silent reflection.

The Septuagint, which is the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament, translates ***"Selah"*** as *"intermission."* The New Living Translation picks up on this by using the word, *"interlude."* The idea is to get us to take a breath in order to reflect and remember. I like how the Amplified Version renders it: *"Pause and calmly think about that."*

In addition, “**Selah**” is thought to be rendered from two Hebrew words translated as: “*to praise*” and “*to lift up.*” Perhaps the singers paused so they would think about what they had just sung in praise to God. It’s in the imperative, meaning this is something we’re commanded to do. That seems to be how the word is used in Habakkuk 3 where we’re urged to consider the weightiness of what we’ve just read or heard.

The best way to think of “**Selah**” is a combination of all these meanings. We could say it like this: *In the midst of our problems, let’s pause, pivot and praise.* Because the word “**Selah**” appears three times in this passage, we’ll follow this natural outline by pausing, pivoting and praising each time we come across it.

Listen now to God’s holy, inspired, inerrant and authoritative Word.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. *Selah*

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

In the midst of our problems, let’s pause, pivot and praise God for...

1. **His Promise – He is for you (1-3)**
2. **His Presence – He is with you (4-7)**
3. **His Power – He is above you (8-11)**

His Promise – He is For You!

Let's look at the first three verses: ***“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah.”*** This name for God is *“Elohim”* which reminds us He is Creator, King, Judge and Savior.

In the midst of whatever we're feeling today, God promises to be our refuge, our strength, and our help. He's not pointing to a refuge – He Himself is our refuge. God is our refuge even when what seemed steady is now unstable. The word ***“refuge”*** is a place of trust and literally means *“to flee,”* as in running to an impenetrable shelter. We've been told to shelter in place and while we do that, let's seek His face. Let's cry out in prayer like we hear in Psalm 142:5: ***“I cry to you, O Lord; I say, ‘You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.’”***

God promises to hide us in His shelter, and He can help us by His strength. He is also ***“a very present help in trouble.”*** The word ***“very”*** means He helps *“abundantly and greatly”* right now, in our present situation. This is literally translated like this: *“A help He has been found exceedingly.”* Aren't you glad we serve a God who comes to our assistance when we are afflicted? He is always available and always accessible as Psalm 9:9 says, ***“The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.”***

The word ***“strength”*** implies we can rely on His might when we feel weak and defenseless. The phrase ***“a very present help”*** means God is quick to give assistance because He is abundantly available in tight spaces. He is, right now, everything we need, and He will be everything we need in the future. It literally means He has *“proved”* Himself to be such a help in the past that we can trust Him in the present.

In verse 2 the writer is imagining the worst calamity that could possibly hit as he describes earthquakes, volcanoes erupting, and mountains slipping into the sea. It's a picture of the unmaking of the world – in Genesis 1, God divides the land from the sea and here we see the land thrown back into the sea. Even though the ***“earth gives way,”*** or the landscape suddenly changes, we don't have to be afraid. Mountains provided refuge in times of war and were considered to be the most secure part of nature. They were the most fixed and firm things on earth.

Verse 3 describes the roaring waters of the sea, which is a picture of our lives when we're out of control. ***"Roaring,"*** means to *"be in great commotion, to rage, or be at war."* Every continent is in commotion about what the coronavirus will do next. When the ***"mountains tremble at its swelling"*** refers to the pride or haughtiness of the mountains. Our sense of pride and invulnerability as a people has been replaced with quaking and concern about the future. It's fair to say the entire world has been humbled by this pandemic.

Trevin Wax writes: *"Right now, the world is experiencing a great humbling. All of the greatest and most powerful leaders and nations, including economies that just weeks ago were seeing unprecedented gains, have now ground to a halt. With supply chains disrupted, churches meeting virtually, hospitals bracing for large numbers of new cases, and grocery stores emptied of certain foods and necessities (toilet paper!), we feel the precarious nature of our predicament."*

At a personal level, this hit Beth and I hard when we were out in Virginia trying to decide whether to come back early from my sabbatical. Two weeks ago, we both woke up while it was still dark, feeling anxious. God took me to Psalm 91:5-6: ***"You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday."*** This virus, like a pestilence, seems to be stalking the entire world. It's invisible and in the darkness of night it feels inescapable. Shortly after reading, we worshipped with you online, and God used Jason Crosby's sermon to remind us God is in control of everything. We can run to Him for refuge.

The psalmist is saying when our security is suddenly gone, we're to seek refuge in God Himself. Our sense of helplessness and fear should drive us to Him. This makes me think of something Bob Goff posted: *"It's easy to trust God when He does what we want; it's the other times when we grow."* I'm praying this tragedy will bring us to our knees and cause us to be a more humble world as 2 Chronicles 7:14 so beautifully puts it: ***"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."***

→ The first "Selah" is found at the end of verse 3. Let's pause, pivot and praise God for His promises right now. Even when the whole world is turned upside down, you can run to Him for refuge. Do that right now.

His Presence – He is With You!

Look now at verses 4-7: ***“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; He utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah.”***

God *promises* us shelter when we seek Him. Fortunately, we don’t have to run far to find Him because His *presence* is right here with us. Verse 4 paints a picture that is easy for us to miss. First of all, the city of God is Jerusalem. While it was a very beautiful city, it didn’t have a river running through it like other major cities and countries of that day had. Babylon was built on the Euphrates. Egypt had the Nile. Rome had the Tiber. The Quad Cities has the Mississippi! Jerusalem did not have a physical river, but it had something even better – the very presence of God.

The title ***“Most High”*** is *Elyon*, which refers to God as the highest of all. He is sovereign and supreme, and He is present with us. God’s grace flows like a river to bring gladness and joy to His people. While the ocean rages and foams, God’s presence is depicted as a calm and gently flowing stream. God’s favor is often denoted by a river as in Psalms 36:8: ***“They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.”*** This image in Scripture is used to represent happiness, abundance, and peace, even when everything else is falling apart.

God’s presence with His people is one of the central truths of Scripture. Verse 5 says that ***“God is in the midst of her”*** and verse 7 declares that the ***“Lord of Hosts is with us.”*** This is from the root word *“Immanuel,”* which means “God with us” and was used in Matthew 1:23 to refer to Jesus. This means when we put our faith in Jesus, we have “God with us” at all times.

Notice the last part of verse 5: ***“God will help her at the break of day.”*** No matter how bad things get, God’s presence means He will help us. When we wake up to start a new day, we will experience what Jeremiah did in Lamentations 3:22-23: ***“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”*** God is faithful to us. He will never leave us or forsake us. Romans 8:39: ***“Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

God is present with His people even when ***“the nations rage, the kingdoms totter”*** according to verse 6. ***“Rage”*** is the same word used in verse 3 to describe the roar of the waters. When the nations are agitated like the waves of the sea, God is still with His people. No matter how bad things get, we can always count on His presence.

Verse 7 says ***“The Lord of Hosts is with us...”*** Here we’re introduced to another name for God – *Jehovah Sabaoth*, which means, “Lord of the Angel Armies.” The Lord Almighty has all the hosts of heaven ready to do His work. Psalm 24:10 asks the question: ***“Who is He, this King of glory? The LORD of Hosts [Jehovah Sabaoth] — He is the King of glory. Selah.”*** God is the king and commander over every army, both spiritual and earthly, and He mobilizes them to accomplish His purposes. It was the promise of His presence which gave Moses peace according to Exodus 33:14: ***“My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”***

I love how this verse ends: ***“...the God of Jacob is our fortress.”*** As in verse 1, God is depicted not only as powerful, but also as a fortress that we can run to for safety. By the way, this is the text that moved Martin Luther to write the hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”

Don’t miss that He is the God of ***“Jacob.”*** Jacob was known as a deceiver with a twisted mind and heart. We have a lot in common with him. Even though Jacob had a lot of faults, God stuck with him, shaping and molding him into a man of faith, changing his name to “Israel,” which means, *“prince of God.”* Aren’t you glad God takes selfish sinners like us and changes us from the inside out?

→ Let’s pause, pivot and praise at this second “Selah” by thanking God for His presence with us.

His Power – He is Above You

We can depend on God during times like this because of His *promise*, His *presence*, and finally, because of His *power*. We see the heart of God in verses 8-11: ***“Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. ‘Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!’ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah.”***

According to verse 8 we're called to **"come, behold the works of the Lord."** We're to *"run or pursue"* in order to **"behold."** The word **"behold"** has a number of nuances. It means, *"to perceive through sight, to peer, to spy out, to gaze intently upon, to observe fully"* and expresses strong feelings of surprise, hope, expectation and certainty. To **"behold"** has the idea of vividness and emotional involvement and is used in the imperative, meaning it's a command. It is variously translated as *"Lo! Behold! Look! Note!"*

I keep coming back to a phrase I heard some time ago: *"We become what we behold."* Here's what I wrote down: *Tell me what you're beholding, and I'll tell you what you're becoming.* This verse tells us we're to behold the **"works of the Lord."** The word **"desolations"** means, *"ruin, astonishment, wasting, dismay and horror."*

I've been amazed at how people are seeking the Lord right now. Even though we're hunkered down, there's a hunger for Him. Let's live on mission, church. Dr. Mark Jobe, the president of Moody Bible Institute, made this statement in online chapel this week: *"Our location has changed but our mission remains the same."*

Verse 9 shows us that in His position as the Almighty God, He makes **"wars cease to the ends of the earth; He breaks the bow and shatters the spear, He burns the chariots with fire."** The Assyrian empire was at that time the mightiest on the globe. It had already overrun many of the smaller kingdoms and had hoped to conquer the entire world. But God had other plans. A broken bow is of no value and a spear that is shattered is no longer effective. Chariots set on fire cannot function.

Hasn't it felt like there's nothing we can do to stop this virus? We've felt helpless and even hopeless. In His position as sovereign king, God is in charge! Marlene Pritchard posted something helpful this week: *"Covid-19 has ripped away the illusion that we ever had any control over the details of our lives."*

Listen. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has shattered sin and Satan and demolished death! He has broken our bondage so we don't have to be burned by the fires of Hell!

The majority of this psalm is written in the third person as the psalmist speaks about God. In verse 10, the Lord speaks in the first person from His position as

sovereign ruler. We're called to ***"Be still and know that I am God."*** To ***"be still"*** means to ***"cast down or let fall"*** and was used of dropping weapons. We're to cease fighting a battle we can't win. It's the idea of not putting forth exertion. The picture is of opening our clenched fists and letting our hands fall to our sides, as we leave matters with God. We're not to just have a "moment of silence" or even to just be quiet. We're to cease and desist, to surrender and let go. Psalm 37:7 captures it well: ***"Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for Him; fret not yourself..."***

The purpose of being still is so we can know God. To ***"know"*** means to ***"acknowledge and comprehend, to discover intimately."*** It's not enough to just know about Him; we're called to know Him relationally. But we can't know God experientially until we become still before Him. This is actually a rebuke. We're to cease striving and fretting and working in our own self-effort and fully submit ourselves to God. Check out Zechariah 2:13: ***"Be silent, all flesh, before the LORD, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling."***

Notice the last part of verse 10: ***"I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"*** As we quiet our souls and reflect upon His position of power as Lord over the whole world, we will recognize His supremacy and inevitable triumph over the nations. Until we're still and surrendered before Him, the reality of His coming exaltation among all the nations will not impact us. Brothers and sisters, no matter what happens, remember this: God *will be* exalted among the nations and He *will be* exalted in the earth! He is working out all things for His glory and for our ultimate good.

Verse 11 is a great summary statement of this entire psalm as it repeats verse 7. Because ***"the Lord of hosts is with us, and the God of Jacob is our fortress,"*** we can trust Him.

Jesus Christ is God and Lord of history. Nothing has happened outside of His plan. Nothing ever leaves Him bewildered or astonished. Nothing ever catches Him by surprise. Through incredible upheaval, though the mountains fall into the sea, those who know Jesus Christ have nothing to fear. Whether the coronavirus leads to more catastrophe and confusion, or the nations rage against one another, God is our refuge.

No matter what happens, we can *pause, pivot and praise Him for His promise, His presence and His power.*

→ Let's pause here at the final "Selah" and praise God for His power. It's time to cease striving and surrender before Him. Affirm the central truth of Scripture that He is supremely powerful and will be exalted among the nations.

Action Steps

1. Get right with God. The coronavirus is terrible, but Hell is worse. If you don't know Jesus Christ through the new birth, you are in deep trouble. We've all been infected by the virus of sin and the only healing for our souls is to be saved by the Savior.

James 4:14 asks the question, "*What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.*" Proverbs 27:1 reminds us to "*not boast about tomorrow because we don't know what a day will bring forth.*"

Life is way too unpredictable and too brief to live it without God at the center. We count our lives in years, but God tells us in Psalms 90:12 to number our days. The truth of the matter is everyone is one heartbeat away from eternity. A car accident, a viral infection, or even a terrorist attack, could snuff out your life in an instant. In 1 Samuel 20:3, David said, "*Yet as surely as the Lord lives and as you live, there is only a step between me and death.*"

Interestingly, in Luke 13:5, when Jesus gave his commentary on why a tower fell in the first century and killed 18 construction workers, He didn't give a theological treatise on the problem of evil. Instead, he personalized the tragedy and said, "*Unless you repent, you too will perish.*" We're all going to die, one way or another, therefore we must get ready. If you have never surrendered your life to Jesus, you need to do so right now, before it's too late!

2. Get ready for the return of Jesus. All of this serves as a reminder that this world will not last forever. Jesus is coming back and we better be ready. Luke 21:10-11 gives us a taste of what it will be like in the last days: "*Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences.*"

At the very minimum, this pandemic should remind us of an even greater event of even more sudden destruction awaits mankind. As such we need to be ready. 1 John 2:28 is written to believers: "*And now, little children, abide in Him, so that*

when He appears we may have confidence and not shrink from Him in shame at His coming.”

3. Tell others about Jesus. Like you, I’ve been moved by how first responders and medical professionals are doing all they can to help. I wonder if I exhibit the same zeal to help rescue people who are trapped in their sins.

Brothers and sisters, a crisis always creates opportunity. When Jesus describes the signs of the end of the age, He tells His followers in Luke 21:13: ***“This will be your opportunity to bear witness.”*** There is unprecedented openness to spiritual matters right now. Talk to your friends and family members about a relationship with Jesus. Don’t hold back. Let’s be bold and point people to Christ.

4. Be the church. Even though we can’t meet in person, this situation has highlighted the importance of the church acting like the church. Acts 2:42-43, 47: ***“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul...praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”*** Let’s stop playing games. Let’s bind together and pray as if everything depends on God, because it does! Let’s deal decisively with sin in our lives and practice grace and forgiveness with others.

When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, there was a feeling of exhilaration among our enemies. But one man knew better. Japanese Admiral Yamamoto knew that rather than victory, Japan had instead sowed the seeds for its final defeat. In his famous quote he said, *“We have awakened a sleeping giant and filled him with a terrible resolve.”*

While this virus may indeed awaken our world, my prayer is that the sleeping giant called the church will wake up and resolve to show and share the gospel of Jesus Christ like we have never done before.

In the midst of our problems, let’s pause, pivot and praise God for...

1. **His Promise – He is for you** (1-3)
2. **His Presence – He is with you** (4-7)
3. **His Power – He is above you** (8-11)

Will we be the same? No, we won’t be the same and we can’t be the same. May God be exalted in His church and in the world. Amen.

May God be with us until we meet again.