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HOW TO GET IN OUT OF THE RAIN

Psalm 46

There is a genre of movies that tell stories of survival against seemingly impossible odds. Some, like *Lone Survivor* and *Unbroken* are based on true events. The movie *Castaway*, starring Tom Hanks and a Wilson volleyball, is a fictional example of the genre. Another is one of my favorites, called *The Martian.* It tells a tale of an astronaut who is stranded alone on Mars, which the current rover mission is revealing to be starkly barren. For him to survive requires remarkable ingenuity, scientific know-how and perseverance. The number and popularity of these movies suggest that this subject matter speaks to something that resonates with human experience. We all feel at times like we are combatting impossible odds to make it through this world. Perhaps that is why the best movie, in my estimation, made about one of the human race’s most monumental achievements, putting men on the moon, was *Apollo 13*. It was about a mission that failed, but became a harrowing story of survival. The idea that this genre appeals to us because of our experience is bolstered by the continued popularity of the long running television series, *Survivor*, which purports to put groups of people in challenging, usually tropical, environments. They have to survive on their wits against not only the forces of nature, but also the scheming of other people on the show.

Getting through life requires no small amount of survival skills because we all face a fairly daunting, continual but ever changing range of obstacles and challenges. In the next few weeks I will be doing a series of sermons that I am calling *Survivor*, because they will be about surviving some of the challenges and ordeals of life. It would be great if we could reach a place where we were all done with hardships, that where life is smooth sailing, but that’s just not reality. As long as we are on the planet our survival skills will be tested. Some of the toughest tests come as we get near the end, so the lessons we learn in coming weeks will hopefully be helpful.

All of this surviving business is necessary because life is tumultuous. I don’t need to tell anyone that after the events of the past year. What a confusing, frustrating, trying, maddening period of life the last nearly 12 months have been. Theaters are still closed, baseball teams will still be playing in mostly empty stadiums, churches are still restricted or closed, Disneyland is closed, and we are all still wearing masks. Everyone wants things to return to normal, although I suspect by that we didn’t mean Tom Brady winning the Super Bowl yet again. We are all anxious for this period of life to be over, but we have more to come before the corona virus and its effects are in our rearview mirror. I even hear some people saying we will never leave it behind, that life is permanently changed because of it. That’s depressing, and I hope it’s exaggerated. This pandemic reminds us that there are things that can pop up with little or no warning that can turn our lives completely inside out. Who knows what will happen in coming years? For help in navigating the troubled waters of this world let’s look at Psalm 46.

GOD IS OUR STRENGTH IN TUMULTUOUS TIMES

Verse 1 states the theme of this Psalm. God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in times of trouble. God is our refuge. A refuge is a place you run to for safety and protection. The Hebrew word the Psalmist employed here was used to refer to a place one would run to for shelter from a storm and a drenching rain. Many years ago our family had an extended vacation in Florida. Near the end of the time there we spent a couple of days on the west coast of Florida. Our first night there we didn’t know where to eat. We finally decided to try this somewhat dubious looking Italian place right across the street from our sketchy hotel because it was close and convenient and we were hungry. We were surprised when the food at this place proved to be terrific. When we had finished our meal we were about to head back to our hotel when a thunderstorm struck. This was no minor shower. It was in the, “if this lasts very long we’d better build an ark” category. If you want to know what it was like, go into your shower, turn it on full blast and stand under it. The amount of water that was pouring out of the sky was stunning. The restaurant employees saw us looking at that deluge, contemplating crossing the street to get to our hotel. One said, “You don’t want to go out into that. Stay here until the storm is over. I’ll make you some fried pizza dough.” That proved to be a revelation in desserts. It was so good. But the salient point here is we took refuge in that restaurant. That’s where we went to gain protection from the absolute ridiculous downpour outside.

The Psalmist tells us in the deluge of difficulty this world can send our way at times, God is the refuge. We need a refuge. In life the storms will come. Think back to our experience of standing in that restaurant in Florida. How do you think it would have gone if we had decided we could put some newspaper over our heads to shield us from the rain? That newspaper would have turned into a soggy mess in seconds, and we would have ended up drenched. We needed a real refuge. This Psalm says that God is the refuge that we need, and it implies any other refuge we look to for protection will end up being a soggy newspaper.

In fact, he is our strength. Isn’t that what we need? The storms that threaten to knock us flat or grind us down to nothing will come. We need strength to stand, to keep going, to not be defeated by it all. Where are we going to get that kind of strength? God is the source of the power we need to keep standing firm, to not be devastated by the overwhelming events that are pounding us. The Hebrew word used for strength here was one used to describe the power of a lion. What better picture could an ancient Hebrew have come up with to depict awesome power than a lion? That’s the kind of strength God can give us. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you are at your wits end, when you are thinking, “I can’t handle this. I can’t go on”? Have you ever seen a lion thinking it couldn’t handle the situation, just wasn’t strong enough and couldn’t go on? That would be very un-lion like. This Psalm tells us God is an ever present help. He is there, present in that moment, able to give us lion-like strength to keep going and survive.

Look at what things were like for the Psalmist according to verse 2. “We will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.” That sounds to me like an earthquake. Quakes are part of the package of living here. I have lived through two of the strongest quakes in the history of Southern California. One of them I don’t really remember because I was 2 years old when it happened. That 7.3 earthquake on the White Wolf fault near Bakersfield was the most powerful quake in the state since the San Francisco quake of 1906. Most of you probably remember the second one, the Mexicali earthquake that hit on Easter Sunday in 2011. That one registered at 7.2.

Earthquakes can be truly frightening. People know when a hurricane is coming days before it arrives, so they can prepare for it. Tornadoes are less predictable, but there is generally a warning when storm conditions suggest a tornado might occur, so people can take shelter. Before a tsunami you can see the ocean water receding so you can find high ground. But there is no warning before an earthquake. Suddenly the ground itself starts moving, and you realize that you are powerless to protect yourself. You are helpless before it. Every time we have an earthquake if it lasts more than a couple of seconds I wonder, “How bad is this going to get?” The Psalmist felt his situation was something like that.

Many scholars believe that the historical situation underlying this Psalm was the one recorded in 2 Chronicles 20. Judah was being attacked by a coalition of armies from Moab, Ammon and some others. It was described in verse 2 as “a vast army.” Judah had no hope of defending themselves. They could not defeat this huge horde that was coming. It looked like their situation was hopeless, and merciless destruction was about to be their fate.

Have you ever felt like the earth was giving way, the mountains were falling into the sea? Have you ever had times where you felt like your world was falling apart and there was not a thing you could do? I was thinking about something that happened to Rich and Grace Turner years ago. They were trying to buy a home in this area, and finally succeeded. It was a cause of great celebration. Then right after the escrow closed, Rich was laid off from his job. They found themselves with a mortgage, but without the income to pay it. That’s one of those earthquake moments where it would be easy to ask God, “Why would you let this happen? How hard would it be to have the sale of the house not go through if we were going to lose our income?” There are worse things that happen to people, but that’s one of those bewildering moments where you wonder where God is.

There are many situations that can shake our world. The loss of a loved one, health crises, marital problems, financial disasters and stresses, career reversals, relationship upheaval and numerous other hardships, disappointments and discouragements can cause us to feel like the mountains are quaking.

There is a classic scene in the old Disney movie called *Snow Dogs*. The main character is a dentist named Ted Brooks. He learns that he has inherited a cabin and a dog sled team in Alaska. He tries to learn how to drive a dog sled team. He experiences a lot of bumps and bruises along the way, but one outing proves particularly bothersome. The dog team at one point starts racing too fast, out of his control, and he falls off the sled into the deep snow. He grumbles as he struggles to his feet, dusting off the snow, but then he becomes aware of a nearby shadow. He turns and discovers he is being watched by a huge grizzly bear. The bear roars at him, displaying some terrifying teeth and claws. Brooks takes off running down the mountainside. Just as the bear is about to reach him, Brooks stumbles and falls over a cliff. But he lands on a ledge before falling too far. In relief, he shouts, “I’m alive, I’m alive!” Immediately the ledge gives way, dropping him onto a steep slope, and he begins rocketing down the slope, screaming all the way as he narrowly misses trees and rocks. He finally comes to a halt at the bottom of the slope, where he smiles. But his smile doesn’t last, because he realizes he is lying on a thin layer of ice that is covering a lake. The ice begins cracking, so he lunges for a nearby solid piece of ice, which seems to hold his weight. Then it begins sinking. Then he remembers his cell phone. He dials 911 and hears a message. “You are outside of your coverage area. Should you wish to expand your service plan, please call back during our business hours.”

Perhaps there have been moments when you felt like that is how your life has been going. It is one disaster after another. Just when you think you’re out of the woods, you find things have turned worse. Maybe you might feel a bit like that right now. This Psalm asserts that in the midst of all the trials, even as the mountains are quaking, if you look to him you will never get a message telling you that you are out of your service area. God is ever present. There is never a moment of our lives when he is not with us. During trying times one of the things we most need is strength. Strength to not crumble, strength to keep going when we feel like we can’t take another step. The Psalmist says that in those times God is our strength. He will enable us to keep standing, keep going.

That’s nice religious talk. Unfortunately, I have seen times when followers of Jesus hit a disaster and wilt like a paper airplane in a rainstorm. They complain, they doubt, they question God, and sometimes get bitter. There is no peace, no confidence, no joy, and little hope. Is this something we affirm when we are in church, but that has no real value when the bullets start to fly? This Psalm came out of a real live, frightening and seemingly hopeless circumstance. The Psalmist claimed that God was, in fact, the refuge and strength he needed, that he was not out of his service area. So how do we experience God being our strength in all times, good and bad?

GOD IS A RIVER THAT MAKES US GLAD

Verse 4 says, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.” We know that the city of God in the Old Testament was Jerusalem. What does this have to do with us? We don’t live in Jerusalem. A few weeks ago Laurie mentioned this passage. She correctly interpreted the symbolism of the city of God. What made Jerusalem the city of God? It was the place where God said his temple should be, the place where people could meet with him and worship him. Thus, as the Psalmist goes on to say, it is the “place where the Most High dwells.” He did not mean that literally, for he knew that God cannot be contained in one physical location. But it was the place where God said he could be found.

Where is that place today? Ephesians 2:22 says, “in him (Christ) you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” The Holy Spirit lives in followers of Jesus, so they are now the dwelling place of the Most High. As presumptuous and as unlikely as it may sound, we who believe in Jesus are now the city of God. We are his dwelling place, the place where he can be encountered.

The Psalmist says there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. What does that mean? What is the significance of the river? Psalm 1:3 says of the person who delights in God’s truth, “He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and its leaf does not wither.” The streams of water, the river, give healthy, fruitful life. In John 7:38 Jesus said that when we believe in him “rivers of living water will flow” from within us. The rivers bring life. Many years ago I was driving with some friends back to Southern California from Texas. Somewhere out in the desolate landscape of west Texas I remember we drove over a ridge. As we came down the other side I could see a strip of green winding its way through the mostly brown and tan plain ahead of us. There was a river, and it was obvious where the river was, because where the river was, there was life. There were trees and foliage. There was a strip of lush vegetation in the arid barrenness around it. Water is necessary for life. Where there is water, there can be life. That river demonstrated that.

God, in the midst of the upheaval of a life earthquake, will give us a stream of water, a river that will produce life, and this life will make us glad. We can be like that green strip of lush life in an arid terrain. Cities typically are situated on rivers. Paris is on the Seine, Rome is on the Tiber, London is on the Thames, Cairo is on the Nile, New York is on the Hudson, St. Louis and New Orleans are on the Mississippi, even Cleveland is on the Cuyahoga, the river that once caught on fire. But Jerusalem is not on a river.

The fact that Jerusalem is not on a physical river tells us this river whose streams make the city glad is a spiritual river. In other words, the life it brings is not a result of physical circumstances. It has a spiritual source. We see that source in verse 5. “God is within her, she will not fall. God will help her at break of day.” This river comes from the presence of God in her. Which means that the river that brings life comes from the presence of God in us.

Remember this is in a time of threat when it felt like the very foundations of the world were shaking. In the middle of that upheaval this river would make the city glad. There is gladness, joy, a sense of well being to be had despite the circumstances. The Hebrew language had a feature that English doesn’t have. One of the possible forms of a Hebrew verb is an intensive form. It is like magnifying the meaning of the verb. The verb that is translated “make glad” is an intensive, so it means, “make intensely glad.” In today’s vernacular that would be “it will make us super glad.” This isn’t just an, “Oh, that’s nice” sort of feeling. It’s not, “I’m glad to hear that.” This is gladness so profound it makes you want to jump in the air and shout.

This is the kind of gladness you felt on your wedding day. What do you remember about your wedding day? I remember that when I went to pick up my tux the day before the wedding I discovered that they had messed up the jacket. The sleeves of the jacket were so short it looked like they thought I was an alligator. They only came to about halfway between my elbow and my wrist. That thing would only have fit if I was a T. Rex, with those short arms. “Laurie, do you take this carnivorous dinosaur to be your lawfully wedded husband?” They promised they would fix the problem but that meant someone had to pick up the jacket the day of the wedding and deliver it to the church. I could only hope they got it right. The night before the wedding I stayed in a motel room with my parents and a friend so we could save money. I did not sleep well at all. We got married in August in Fullerton, and it was hot. For reasons I can’t explain, we chose a navy blue velvet tuxedo for me to wear. Not a wise choice for a hot day. So I was tired, uncertain that the tuxedo problem would be resolved in time, I was hot and uncomfortable. And what I remember about that day was I couldn’t stop smiling. My smile was so big it felt like it might break my face. I wasn’t just glad. I was intensely glad with a joy that eclipsed all of the circumstances that were less than ideal. I was getting married to my heart’s desire, the most awesome woman on the planet, and everything else was just noise. Whatever else went on, that day Laurie would become my wife, and that was infinitely more important and better than anything else that happened. I was marrying Laurie! So who cared about all that other stuff? Not me.

This Psalm claims that even as turmoil is erupting and life is in total upheaval, God can and will cause his life to flow into his people. It will be a life so full that it makes us rejoice, feel intensely glad, regardless of what may be happening around us. It is a gladness that is on the inside and is independent of circumstances. Is this real? How can we experience that life and its gladness? Go back to John 7:38. Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within him.” It is that river of living water that gives us gladness. According to Jesus, we experience that by believing in him.

As we trust in Jesus, as we look to him, not to our circumstances, as we believe he loves us, forgives us, gives us eternal life, as we trust that he is working in our lives even in hard times, he gives us life. Think again about my wedding day. What was I focusing on, what was I making most important to me? It was Laurie. It was marrying her. I knew that was going to happen that day. And so anything else that happened that day, good or bad, took a back seat to that one great and joyful event. If I had made the circumstances of the wedding, such as my jacket being just right, or being well rested, or not being hot, or not wearing a tuxedo at all, the focus of my attention and my heart, I would not have experienced the gladness that I did. I would have potentially been stressed, and grumpy because not everything was exactly the way I wanted it.

That’s how we experience the streams of water that bring gladness despite circumstances. We believe in Jesus. We trust in him, and we focus on him, wanting his will more than anything else. As we do that we will experience that life and gladness. To the degree that we put our focus and our heart anywhere else, we lessen that gladness.

GOD IS THE SOURCE OF CALM

Verses 7 and 11 state a crucial theme. “The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” Those words are in this short Psalm twice. What happened there? Did the Psalmist forget he’d already said that? Was he the Alzheimer’s Psalmist who couldn’t remember when he’d already said something? Was he just not creative enough to come up with a little variety in his material? No, in Hebrew things were repeated for emphasis. We do the same thing. If I say that I prefer warm temperatures, that I really don’t like being cold, you get the idea. But if I say “I don’t like being cold. I mean I really, really don’t like being cold,” you now think I’m very serious about this temperature thing. Really, really serious.

By repeating those exact words the Psalmist was heavily emphasizing that God is Almighty, and he is a fortress like no other. Think about the situation that many believe was the inspiration for this Psalm. Israel faced an overwhelming force of invaders that they had no way to defeat. What would be the normal reaction? Let’s look for some help. What can we do to convince some other nations to come and fight alongside us? Barring that the only other alternative would be, “Run! Get out of town before it’s too late!”

But the Psalmist said, “God lifts his voice and the earth melts. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear.” How threatening is an army without any usable weapons? Not very threatening. When I studied this passage a scene from a classic old science fiction movie, one of my favorites, popped into my head. The movie was *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. I don’t mean the recent remake, which was no good, but the original black and white version, which was great. In it a UFO lands on the mall in Washington. Nothing much happens, except a huge crowd gathers to see it. Thinking it is a threat the government sends troops and tanks to guard against whatever might happen next. A being comes out of the UFO, accompanied by a giant robot. The being announces he comes in peace and holds out some device. Thinking it is a weapon a soldier fires and wounds him. The robot, clearly the bodyguard, seeing his charge attacked, begins firing beams at the soldiers’ weapons. The guns and tanks are instantly vaporized. That’s what this Psalm says God can do.

This is who our God is. He is the Almighty. Nothing can stand against him or defeat him. That’s what it means to be Almighty. And whatever rises up in our lives and seems to threaten us, even a global pandemic, this Psalm says God is greater. He is the fortress we can trust in during such times.

So what should we do? Verse 10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God.” The word translated “be still” literally meant to drop or let drop. It was used in Joshua at one point of the sun going down. One translation of it is, “relax.” The second part of that command is important. “And know that I am God.” Oh, yeah, that’s right. Almighty God is with me. When I remember that I can relax. Right, God can disarm the threatening invaders so they can’t hurt me.

When our kids were young one year we took them to the Air Show at Miramar, back when it was still Fightertown USA, the Miramar Naval Air Station. It was exciting watching those powerful airplanes fly and seeing the Blue Angels perform. But I also remember some of the static displays that had on the ground. One of those was a display by the Navy Seals. There were several of them there manning their display, one that had some of their equipment and weapons out on tables for us to look at. We have a picture of 8 year old Toby holding a fearsome looking assault rifle. What I most remember about that was knowing those Navy Seals are some of the best fighting men in the world. Whether it be hand to hand combat or using those weapons, they are elite. It occurred to me that if I were walking down a dark street in a bad neighborhood where there was a lot of crime, and I saw a few unsavory looking characters up ahead, but I was in the company of a squad of fully armed Navy Seals, I wouldn’t be even mildly fearful. I would know that I was totally safe.

That is the picture the Psalmist wants us to have as we go through the ordeals of life. We are accompanied by someone much more powerful than a squad of Navy Seals. We have Almighty God with us. Being still, relaxing, is about letting God have control. We get tense and stressed because we get target lock on an outcome, the way we want things to go in life. That’s understandable. If I was in ancient Israel I would not want to be overrun by bloodthirsty, violent invaders who would be completely merciless. I’d have a serious fixation on wanting to stay safe. There are many occasions in life now where I get fixed on the way I want things to go because I don’t want the pain that will come with the terrible disasters I fear might befall me.

The irony is that most of the time I have no control over those situations. When I have no control, but I am fixated on a particular outcome, what can I do? I can worry. I can stress over it. I don’t have many other options because I don’t have the power to control it. Ah, but there is one other vital option I do have. Be still, and know that I am God. Relax. Know that he is God, which means he has control. He always has, and my control for the most part is an illusion.

Laurie and I both recently realized there were some things we were kind of stressing about. The reason we were stressing was that there was a way we wanted things to go and we didn’t have the ability to make it go that way. In other words, we didn’t control the outcome. But then, each of us, on our own, kind of let go of that desired outcome. We both said, “We just want whatever God wants,” and actually meant it. And both of us discovered we could relax. We found that it will be interesting and to see what God does. We were still, and knew that he is God. And the result was peace.

CONCLUSION

When the bullets start to fly, when the earthquake hits and it feels like the very ground you stand on is shaking apart. This Psalm points us to 3 things to do.

BELIEVE IN JESUS

Look at him, and rejoice in his grace for you. Be glad in the new life he has given you. Whatever else may happen, in Christ you have God as your father, you are loved unconditionally and without limit, you have him with you, you have eternal life, you have hope. These things literally are priceless and more important than anything else. Look at and be thankful for that life, focus on it rather than on the things that are going wrong.

KNOW THAT HE IS GOD

The Psalmist tells us to know that he is God. We already know that. So what is he telling us to do. He is telling us to remember and to trust in that reality. The key to the next point of application, which is where the rubber really meets the road, is knowing that God really is God, believing that, and counting on that truth.

LET IT DROP

Relax. Be still. Know that Almighty God is with you. Let God be in control, even when it doesn’t feel like it. I have mentioned before an occasion when Laurie and I were on an airplane that was seconds from landing on Maui when suddenly it accelerated and began to ascend. At first I thought we were going around and would make another approach, but we didn’t. We kept ascending for some time and then turned west toward Honolulu. It wasn’t hard to figure out that the aircraft had a problem. It could fly, but not land, so we were heading toward an airport with a longer runway and better emergency services. Well that’s not good. I started to stress, thinking it might be a problem with landing gear, which would be exceedingly concerning. But in the 20 minutes between airports one thing became very clear. I had no control over what was going to happen. There was not a thing I could do to affect the outcome. It was totally in the hands of the pilots. Me stressing and somehow trying to control things was useless. So I had to let it drop, and give control to the pilots. They handled it superbly, and we landed safely.

We are flying through life, and at times we will hit turbulence. There will be turmoil in life, and most of the time, we don’t control how it will all go. But God does. So we need to give control to him and watch him work.