

## EARTHQUAKE DRILL

Psalm 46

I can boast that I have ridden the most expensive roller coaster in the world. At the Animal Kingdom Park in Walt Disney World there is a ride called Expedition Everest that cost over \$100 million to build. It cost slightly more than that for us to go to Disney World. Laurie and I went there with our then single adult children three years ago. They raved about this ride. I still enjoy the fast rides, but I am right on the edge of becoming dizzy and sick from riding on them. That one pushed me over the edge. I came off the ride feeling kind of woozy. It took me nearly an hour to recover from it.

My experience there reminded me of humorist Bruce Cameron's description of the day his kids insisted he take them to an amusement park. He wrote, "The ride your children have selected for you is a corkscrewing, stomach-compressing roller coaster built by the same folks who manufactured the baggage delivery system at Denver International Airport. Apparently the theme of this particular park is "Nausea." When the ride is over, your children want to get something to eat, but first the ride attendants have to pry your fingers off the safety bar... They finally convince you to let go, though it seems a bit discourteous of them to have used pepper spray... At the end of the day you let your teenager drive home (because) after the theme park you are impervious to fear."

Do you ever feel like your life is mimicking one of those amusement park roller coasters? Is it inducing vertigo and scrambling your brain? That kind of dizziness can be caused by things spinning out of control in your personal life, but also by the helpless sense that the world is blowing up around you and you fear that you are going to be collateral damage of the explosion. There is so much out there that is frightening. I lived the first half of my life with many of you in the shadow of the cold war. The threat of communism and especially the Soviet Union was always there, including the horrifying specter of nuclear war. With the collapse of the Soviet Union that threat dissolved. Now life would be safer and more peaceful, right? It hasn't turned out that way.

Unfortunately nature and the news media abhor a vacuum. So a new threat arrived to take the place of the USSR. In the past 20 years we have found ourselves dealing with the scary prospect of maniacal, suicidal jihadists bent on the destruction of all things and everyone western. We might like to think that threat has gone away, but it hasn't. The Rand Corporation strategic think tank reports that since 2010 the number of terrorist groups seeking to bring jihad to our shores has increased by 58%. The

number of jihadi fighters has doubled in the past 4 years and the number of attacks by Al Qaeda affiliates has tripled.

Then there is China, a new threat looming on the horizon. They have been rapidly building up their military and rattling their sabers. But that's not all they're doing. I've recently read about a shadowy part of the Chinese People's Liberation Army known as Unit 61398 located in Shanghai that is dedicated to cyber warfare against the United States. ABC News has reported that the Chinese believe taking down our electrical grid is a critical component to ruining our nation. If they can do it they will essentially turn our economy into a vast Amish community. They believe that is the best way to destroy the US economy and remove this country as a player on the world scene. The report revealed that the grid has been under constant attack by the Chinese and that it is vulnerable.

There are other threats, but to me the most ominous is something we've inflicted on ourselves. James Rickards is the managing director of the consulting firm, Omnis. He is also a Financial Threat and Asymmetric Warfare advisor to the CIA. Rickards has publicly stated that the United States is about to enter the darkest economic period in our nation's history. Caused chiefly by government debt he says we are about to enter a Great Depression that will last 25 years. He says this will begin with a Stock Market collapse that will see the Stock Exchange averages drop 70% almost overnight. He has predicted this will happen in the spring of 2015 and that it will utterly devastate our way of life.

I hope Rickards is wrong, the jihadists give up and go away, and the Chinese settle down and remember if they ruin our economy we won't be able to buy all the shirts, pants, dresses, razors, radios, televisions, computers, phones and everything else they make, so they would be damaging themselves. However, I cannot stop or change any of that. It is utterly out of my control. We are helpless in the face of those threats. If our personal peace and security is dependent upon safety from them we are in a world of hurt. We are never going to be at peace. What if some of those disasters come upon us? What if the electric grid collapses and our entire nation goes with it? Or what if the Second Great Depression does destroy the life we have known? Will you be able to live joyfully and peacefully even if such things happen? We must have something that can enable us to be at peace in the chaos of this world. So today we're going to look at Psalm 46 to learn about dealing with chaos, another possible downside of life in this world.

## PREMISE: GOD IS OUR REFUGE

Verse 1 states up front the theme this Psalm is built around. God is our refuge and strength. He is the one we can count on in times of trouble. He is the Anchor that keeps us secure in the storms of life. What else would you expect to be the answer in church? If you have a pain in your back and you talk to an acupuncturist about it what do you think he will believe is the solution? Would you be shocked if he said acupuncture? A pastor gathers children on the platform at church to give a “children’s sermon.” He says, “Kids, what’s small, brown, furry, has a long tail and eats acorns?” One boy pipes up, “I know the answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me.”

Of course God is going to be the answer in church. But doesn’t it feel like there have been too many times in your life when you looked to God for an answer and he didn’t seem to show up? He didn’t solve the problem. We all know Christians who faced chaos, who looked to God to rescue them, and the chaos didn’t go away, it maybe even got worse. This leaves us with only two possible explanations. Either this Psalm is not true or we don’t understand it correctly. Let’s take a look at what the Psalm says to make sure that we are seeing it properly.

Consider verses 2-3. “We will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.” This is poetry, not literal prose. The author is using imagery to depict utter chaos, life being shaken down to its very core. The event he uses to picture such chaos is a massive earthquake. Like here, the people of ancient Israel were familiar with earthquakes. We know that a small earthquake is not bad, but big ones are truly frightening. When I was a kid for a long time I wouldn’t sleep in a room with a clock. It wasn’t because I was lazy and didn’t want any clock waking me up in the morning. It was because as a very young child we went through a couple of fearsome earthquakes and I was frightened by a clock in the middle of it.

If a tornado is coming you can go into a basement and survive it. If a hurricane comes you can shelter in a solid building and survive it. If a tsunami comes you can go to high ground and survive it. But how do you escape an earthquake? What do you do when the ground itself, the thing you stand on to anchor life, is moving and knocking buildings down? This is a symbol for ultimate chaos in life. Where do you go in ultimate chaos?

When we read that God is our refuge we typically think that means that we look to God for help and he fixes the problem. But if you pay attention to the Psalm you will see that is not what the Psalmist was telling us. What does the Psalm actually promise? “Therefore we will not fear though the earth give way.” It does not promise

that the earth won't give way. The earthquake does happen and it does terrible damage. The chaos does hit. The mountain does fall and the waters roar and foam. The Psalmist doesn't say that God will make that stop.

What he promises is "we will not fear" when the chaos is happening. He says God will be a help in the middle of the chaos. He will be a refuge. But think about the point of a refuge. Back in 1996 Laurie and I had the opportunity to take our kids to Florida. We were going to visit Laurie's cousin and her family in Ft. Lauderdale; then we were going to house sit for them for a month. The Sunday before we left I mentioned our upcoming trip at church. After the service Al Menconi said to me, "Hey, is that hurricane going to be a problem for you guys?" I said, "Ha ha, Al, very funny." He said, "I'm serious. There's a hurricane heading right for south Florida and it's going to get there in a couple of days." I checked the news and learned it was true! Hurricane Bertha was out to get us. I called the airline and they said we would have no problem getting in. So we flew to Florida and went to see our hosts. We talked about the hurricane and they said, "Yes, right now it is headed right toward Ft. Lauderdale and should arrive tomorrow." Having had no experience with such things we were sort of freaked. But they said, "Not to worry." They had plywood to cover the windows. They had bought ample supplies of food and water. Their house was not built like houses here. It was not wood frame covered by plywood and felt paper. It was built out of concrete block covered by stucco so it would withstand even the most powerful winds. Their house would be our refuge. It would not make the storm stop. It would just enable us to rest secure while the storm raged.

What this Psalm promises is that while the storm is raging we can rest secure in God. As verse 1 says, he will be our strength. He will make us strong enough to stand and be at peace even as the mountains are falling into the sea. There are many things I control in my life, but there are many more that I do not control. That means that chaos will happen. In Romans 8:35, Paul referred to some of the things he dealt with in his life. There was trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness and danger. In verse 37 he said, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." That's what this Psalm offers as hope, that in all these things, when the earth is shaking and the mountains are collapsing we will conquer. It is not that the trouble, the hardship, the danger does not come, it is that in our God we conquer in it. This raises the question, how do we do that?

## DRINK FROM THE RIVER

Verse 4 says, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God." That's interesting because for the Psalmist of that day, the city of God was Jerusalem.

Jerusalem does not have a river running through it. The Jordan River is many miles away. Obviously then this doesn't refer to a literal river. What is this river?

In order to answer that think first about what a river meant in the ancient east. It was life giving because in that arid climate, like here, water meant life. Many years ago I was driving with friends to Austin, Texas from Colorado. We drove through arid West Texas. I remember going through some dry and desolate landscapes. At one point we came over a ridge and from the top of it looking down we saw a river winding through the dry countryside. It was like a green ribbon meandering off toward the horizon. Where the river was there was life. There were trees, reeds and shrubs following the river.

In the northwest around Seattle because it rains all the time it is green everywhere. In Mississippi in the summer where they have thunderstorms frequently it is green everywhere. But in places like Israel or west Texas or Bakersfield a river means life. In Psalm 1:3 the person who delights in God's truth is described as being "like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither." Being by a stream of water means being alive, yielding fruit and not wilting in the summer heat. Isn't that what we are talking about? Being alive and having fruit when the heat is on?

Go to the very beginning of the Bible and you will see a river. Genesis 2:10 says, "A river watering the garden flowed from Eden." Go to the very end of the Bible and you will see a river. John was discussing the vision of heaven he was given when he said in Revelation 22:1, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb." This theme of the river runs all the way through the Bible from beginning to end. This river comes from the throne of God. It is the very life of God flowing out to give life. God is the author of life. He created it, it all comes from him. But this river symbolizes the idea that real life, called eternal life in the Bible, flows from him. This is the river the Psalmist said was flowing in the "city of God."

In order to experience that life we need to connect to the river. It is great that in the river flows the water of life, but if I cannot access it then it does me no good. It has to flow into me in order for that life to exist and flourish in me. We in California understand this. There's lots of water up in the mountains in the northern part of the state. But it does not bring life to us here in the dry south unless we can connect to it and have it flow to us.

Observe that Psalm 46:4 says that this river of living water makes glad the “city of God.” The city of God was Jerusalem. It was called the city of God because that is where his temple was. Verse 4 says it was “the holy place where the Most High dwells.” If you wanted to come into the presence of God you had to go to the temple in Jerusalem. But where is the city of God today? Where is the presence of God found now, thousands of years later?

Ephesians 2:19-22 says, “you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” The place where God dwells now is the church. That doesn’t mean in an organization. It means all those in whom the Spirit of Jesus lives. Collectively they are now the temple of God. They are the city of God where the Most High lives. 1 Corinthians 6:19 says, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you?”

So the point here is that this river of God is now flowing in the place where God dwells, meaning in those who are believers in Jesus. This river of life is flowing in you. In John 7:38 Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” If you put your faith in Jesus Christ it is like a canal has been built from God’s river of life into your heart, and that river is now flowing into you. Notice that neither the Psalm nor Jesus said this river of life will flow as long as the earth doesn’t shake. Nowhere will you see any suggestion that the river can be blocked or diverted by events in this world. It does not say that you have to have the right peaceful and happy circumstances in order to have that river flow. While the earth is shaking, the Psalmist says, there is a river in the city of God. The river will continue to flow no matter what may happen around us.

What kind of effect does this river have? According to verse 4 it will “make glad the city of God.” The word translated “glad” means “filled with mirth” or “joyful.” In Jeremiah 25:10 it is used of the joy of the bride and groom on their wedding day. Have you seen a bride and groom on their big day? What do they look like to you? Are they not totally joyful? This is the gladness the river produces.

The claim of this Psalm is that in a time of chaos when your world seems to be blowing up, God’s river of life can flow into your heart and make it as glad as the bride and groom on their wedding day. There is something interesting about this statement. The Hebrew language had a form of verbs called an intensive. It meant

whatever action the verb indicated, it was happening to the max. It was intense. The verb translated “make glad” is an intensive. That means it is saying that in the midst of all the chaos God can bring not just gladness to our hearts, but intense gladness, joy to the max.

The claim here is that God can do something that nothing else can. Imagine that you are lost in a trackless desert and you run out of water. You are nearly delirious. You are dehydrated and literally dying of thirst. Then to your great relief you see another person. This individual is walking toward you. There is hope. Perhaps he can give you something to drink. To your amazement you as you get close you see that this person is none other than Bill Gates. You say, “Oh, Mr. Gates, what a relief. I am so glad you found me. Do you have something I can drink?” He says, “No, I’m sorry, I do not. But I admire your strength and courage in refusing to give in to this desert. I am so impressed I am going to give you \$100 million.” That’s a good thing and you are happy about that, but it’s not what you need. What you need is water! You leave him and stagger on in search of water. You see someone else. To your shock you find that it is Kate Upton, the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model. You say, “Thank goodness I’ve run into you. Can you give me some water?” She smiles and says, “I’m sorry I don’t have any. But I find you irresistible. You’re the man I’ve been waiting for all my life and I want to be your wife.” You are a single man and that’s very nice, but it’s not what you need. You need water. Only water can give you life.

There are a lot of good things that can happen to us in life that make us glad. But they cannot give us living water. They cannot put something in our hearts so strong, so alive, so good that it can make us glad and give us peace even when the world is exploding around us. The problem with the things that make our hearts glad is that they don’t last. They change, we lose them or something else bigger and darker comes along and blots out the gladness. Only God can do bring living water into our hearts that will keep flowing even when circumstances are far from glad producing. But how does that happen?

Too often Christians go to pieces when their world goes to pieces. They don’t seem to be filled with gladness in the middle of chaos. So how do we experience this living water flowing in us? Believe in Jesus. Jesus said the living water will flow when we drink of him. First that means putting our faith in him as our Lord and Savior. But then it means continuing to drink of him as the source of life. Continuing to believe in him. We must continue believing that what Jesus supplies is enough.

Some of this life will have to do with how we think. God renews our minds and reminds us of what we have in Christ. It reminds us of our eternal hope and of the

privilege of having God with us at all times, of being his child and all the gifts that come with that. In fact, hope is a big factor here. Because God is in the situation we know whatever the difficulty is, we have hope. We have hope that our faithfulness in going through it has meaning and hope that God will bring some good purpose out of it. Having that hope means we need never despair.

While we were on vacation I managed to cut my leg on some coral and it became infected. I had to go see a doctor to get it treated. Visits to the doctor has become something of a tradition on our vacations, though this was the first time I personally was the patient. I don't know about you, but vacations are a big deal for Laurie and me. When we are on vacation one thing I don't want to do is sit in the waiting room of a doctor's office suspecting I'm about to hear news that is going to impact the rest of the vacation in a decidedly negative way. It did not make me glad. But I reflected on how different it would have been had I been there all by myself. Laurie sat with me and we figured, "hey, we're together taking it easy, even if we're not out on the beach, so this could be worse." She said, "We'll make the best of it and we'll still have fun." My point there is I was not alone. I had someone with me who loved me, encouraging me and assuring me we'd make the best of the situation. Having God's living water flowing in us means he is always with us. He never condemns us, he always encourages us, and he reminds us he will make something good out of it.

There is also a part of this river of life flowing into us that is something of a mystery. Life really is a mystery when you think about it. What happens when someone dies? There is something there one moment, and then the next moment that something is gone. All the material stuff that makes up that human body is still there, but something has changed, something has gone. What that something is cannot really be defined. We just know it is life and it is real. God is the author of physical life but also of spiritual life. And as we look to him, as we drink from Jesus he will put his life within us. It is a life we cannot bottle, we cannot analyze, we cannot quantify, but we know it is real and powerful. God will put that in us as we drink of Jesus.

### DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING, STAND THERE

In verse 7 and again in verse 11 you see the same statement. "The Lord Almighty is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress." Our biggest need is to recognize who is in us and always with us. It is the Lord Almighty. This was Martin Luther's favorite Psalm. He wrote a song about it and called it Ein Feste Burg. That is German for "A Mighty Fortress."



Verse 10 says we must “Be still and know that I am God.” Have you ever noticed that God seems to be a big proponent of us being still? In Ecclesiastes 5:2 we read, “Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.” If you are in the presence of someone infinitely wiser, infinitely more knowledgeable than you, infinitely more powerful than you and your mouth is moving, are you learning? No, in fact it is your yammering that is keeping you from learning. God is saying “be still, quiet down, and learn this vital, central truth: I am God. You are not.” We need to learn to know God as he truly is.

One of the most important things we can do when the earth is shaking is to listen to verse 6. “Come and see the works of the Lord.” We should reflect on what God has done. We should reflect that he is the eternal creator of all. Do you ever reflect on his works? The first night of our vacation Laurie and I went out on the balcony of our hotel room and looked out on the ocean. The moon was out over the ocean. The moonlight reflecting on the water was so spectacular it didn’t look real. It created this sense in my heart, almost an ache, that was so deep I can’t really even express what it was. God has made this beauty. He has created the heavens and when we look at the stars it is simply awesome. Our God is a God of magnificent power, goodness, beauty and creativity.

Having a wound was, for me, another reminder of God’s greatness. The wound on my leg healed. It is astounding to consider the healing process. Once the infection was gone the leg just started healing. I didn’t give it any thought or any effort. It just went from raw wound to all healed all by itself. God created that amazing system.

God gave Abraham and Sarah a son just as he promised when that was physically impossible. He parted the Red Sea to rescue his people from the Egyptian Army. He provided manna in the wilderness to sustain his people. He knocked down the walls of Jericho. He has created a plan to rescue the human race that no human could ever have conceived of. He entered human history as a baby. He walked on water, made a storm stop raging by a simple command and changed water into wine. He sacrificed himself to pay for our sins by dying on the cross and then conquered death itself. He has shown us unfathomable mercy and love by rescuing us through Jesus Christ when we deserved nothing but rejection and judgment. In our own lives he has given us his Spirit and his Word, he has provided abundantly for us both physically and spiritually, he has answered countless prayers, he has refused to answer prayer when to do so would have been the worst thing in the world for us.

When I think back on the works of the Lord in my life I am astounded. I recall how God provided funds for me to get through college in astounding ways. He did the same with grad school. When I thought it hopeless he gave me Laurie, the greatest blessing in my entire life. He sustained us through 35 years of ministry when we thought that could never happen. He provided a great wife for our son and a great husband for our daughter. We had a friend, a Christian friend no less, who told us when Toby started out on his effort to become a doctor that it would never happen and that it was a really bad idea. This friend was insistent about this and pressed her point repeatedly. He would never get in a med school, according to this friend. Now he's not only in med school, but in one of the best, most respected schools in the country. The list could go on forever.

We need to see the works of the Lord and remember that he is God. We need to mostly stand and know that he is the Lord so we can let him run creation as he sees fit. This is one reason why gathering with other believers is so important. We need that constant reminder that our God is powerful, wise, good, loving and kind. We need to be still and see again that he is God.

Do you remember what Jesus' disciples did when he was arrested? They ran and hid. Peter stuck around unfortunately because that put him in position to pull his infamous act of cowardice when he repeatedly denied even knowing Jesus because he was afraid. After Jesus died do you know what they were doing? Hiding, cowering, trying to figure out a way to sneak out of Jerusalem without being spotted. Later in Acts 4 Peter and John are boldly, openly preaching Jesus to the people they most feared. They did so in such a forceful way Acts 4:13 tells us those people saw their courage and were astonished. What changed? Well they had the Holy Spirit, so the river was flowing in them. But a huge change was that they had seen Jesus risen from the dead. They saw him for who he really was. Seeing him for who he was changed *everything*.

In his book, *The Signature of Jesus* (p. 69), Brennan Manning wrote, "Herein lies the secret, I believe, of the inner life of Jesus. Christ's communion with (His Father) in the inner sanctuary of his soul transformed his vision of reality, enabling him to perceive God's love and care behind the complexities of life. Practicing the presence of God helps us to discern the providence of God at work especially in those dark hours when the signature of Jesus is being traced in our flesh." Francis Chan said, "When you understand who Jesus really is, you're content wherever you are." When chaos hits, be still and know that He is God.