

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Songs of David: Volume 2, Part 7

Psalm 46

More than a hundred years ago, a financial crisis occurred in the US that became known as the Bankers' Panic of 1907.

The financial crisis impacted many industries, as you can imagine, and the ripple effect of the financial upheaval was felt all the way out in Bisbee, Arizona.

The lack of funding led to a dispute between the copper mining companies and the mineworkers there in Arizona. They were underpaid, and their working conditions were terrible. So they organized into labor unions and approached the company management with a list of demands for better pay and conditions.

The company refused and retaliated – any mining worker who complained would be fired.

So the mineworkers were faced with a dilemma – they were either to choose to work at the rock face of their quarry or lose their job and make matters even worse.

One of the workers coined the phrase, “we are stuck between a rock (the quarry wall) and a hard place (unemployment).” It wasn't long before the phrase took root and by 1930, newspapers were using the phrase to describe any number of impossible situations.

Between a rock and hard place simply means you're stuck in between two options, and neither one is something you want.

These are the times when we're confronted with our absolute weakness and inability hurdle to the obstacles in life.

We might deny it – we might mask it – we might try to fake it – one author wrote – and we might even try to ignore it. But the truth stubbornly persists –

we are weak creatures. Being sinful, we fail. Being prone to sickness, we hurt; being mortal, we wear out; pressure weighs us down; anxiety gives us ulcers; people intimidate us; criticism offends us; difficulties hound us.ⁱ

What choice do we really have at times – when we're stuck between a rock and a hard place?

Let me recommend that you open your Hebrew Hymnal, located in the center of your Bible and begin to get what one author called, a big dose of Psalm 46.ⁱⁱ

This Psalm is often referred to as Martin Luther's Psalm. And that's because the opening lyrics were his inspiration to pen the words to his famous hymn – A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.

As Martin Luther battled the Roman Catholic Church leadership and even the Pope himself; surrounded by threats and pressure for maintaining that justification is by faith alone – there were times he was so surrounded with trouble that he would say to his close friend Philipp Melancthon, who's biography I read some time ago – the often forgotten theologian of the Reformation – and look, how helpless can you be – a couple of converted priests taking on the Church. Talk about – between a rock and a hard place – and Martin Luther would often say to his friend, “Come Philipp, let us sing the forty-sixth Psalm.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Let's sing the forty-sixth Psalm.

Now we don't know what the melody line was – you'd have to make that up.

If might notice before verse 1 begins that this Psalm was set to Alamo from Alma – which is a

Hebrew term for a young woman. No one is exactly sure what this means, but some OT scholars think this was to be sung by the soprano or a choir of women; others think this is a reference to soprano-like instruments – sweetly pitched instruments such as flutes or harps.

Evidently, this Psalm was intended to be pleasant and soothing and calming and reassuring to the ear and certainly to the heart.

You'll notice that this song is divided into three stanzas – each stanza ends with the musical notation to pause. In a word – you'll see it at the end of *verse 3, verse 7, and verse 11*.

It's the word *Selah*. And it is designed to serve as an interlude – a time to pause – a time to reflect on what you've just sung.

To expand *Selah* and paraphrase it, the composer would say something like, "Now stop and think about it." Or perhaps even in the form of a question, "Stop . . . now what do you think about that?"

As if to say, don't race through these lyrics . . . reflect on them.

Selah . . . slow down and think it through.

What the average Christian needs is less panicking and more pausing.

I don't know about you, but I need a lot more *Selah* taking place in my life and heart.

Now the first stanza opens, *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble*.

The word for trouble is from a Hebrew verb that means to be restricted; to be cramped or in a narrow place.^{iv}

Which is another way of saying, to be caught between a rock and a hard place.

And when you are, this song emphasizes that God is *a very present help* – you can translate it, He is an *immediate* help – He is an immediate place to find refuge and find new strength when you're stuck, and there doesn't seem to be any way out.

Notice, verse 2. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; 3. Though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.

A few weeks ago our oldest daughter and her husband experienced the effects of one of the strongest earthquakes to hit the country of Chile – it took place 100 miles north of Santiago, but she said to me on the phone from their apartment in Santiago, "Daddy, there was nothing quite like running down 13 flights of stairs surrounded by screaming, crying

people, feeling the building swaying underneath you."

She said, "But don't worry . . . they build these buildings to sway during earthquakes."

Great – I feel so much better now.

The Psalmist is describing earthquakes and Tsunamis and volcanic eruptions that literally blow mountains apart – all of which is a poetic description communicating that everything in life has come unhinged – everything is unsteady . . . the foundations are swaying – life as you knew it is shifting.

Go back to *verse 2* and notice that phrase, *though the earth should change* – you can translate that, "to change hands."^v

The historical setting for this Psalm was the threat to Jerusalem by the Assyrian King Sennacherib.

He came to conquer Egypt in 710 B.C. and he's plundering and killing and conquering all the cities along the way – and here is the little city of Jerusalem standing in his way.

Sennacherib sends a messenger to Hezekiah to deliver a letter that basically said, "This is what I'm gonna do to Jerusalem."

The people of Jerusalem panicked; screaming and crying and demanding that their king do something!

Hezekiah knew they didn't stand a chance as that massive Assyrian war machine rumbled up to the gates and surrounded the city.

But Hezekiah took Sennacherib's letter and went into the temple precinct and spread out the letter before the Lord as if to say, "Lord, you need to read this!"

Isaiah the prophet came to Hezekiah and commended him for finding his refuge in God and challenged him not to consider making an alliance or even surrendering – just trust in God.

From all external evidence, it seemed pretty obvious that the earth was about to *change hands*.

But God kept His word, and 185,000 Assyrian soldiers died the night before they were to attack – some sort of sudden disease – and Sennacherib limped home to Nineveh where he was later assassinated. You can read the details in 2 Kings 18 and 19.

Out of that context; this song was composed for the nation to sing.

There was no way out; there was no way through . . . there was nowhere to go . . . but to God.

They were caught between a rock and a hard place.

By the way, don't miss the repetition of the word – *though* – or *although* – it appears four times in this opening stanza.

I am finding God to be my refuge and will not fear –

- *Although the earth should change;*
- *Although the mountains slip into the sea;*
- *Although its waters roar and foam;*
- *Although the mountains quake.*

I couldn't help but wonder – what is the *although* you're facing?

I am finding God to be my refuge:

- Although my bankruptcy just finalized;
- Although my marriage just ended;
- Although my company was just bought out and my job ended;
- Although a close friend betrayed me
- Although our home was just destroyed;
- Although our retirement savings were just lost or stolen;
- Although the doctors have no answer at the moment;
- Although that close relationship ended;
- Although that funeral just took place;
- Although that accident just occurred;
- Although I never saw that coming.

Although . . . although . . . although . . . the Psalmist is teaching us to sing – in spite of any *although*, ***God is my refuge and strength*** – He is immediately available and aware – even when I am stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Then the composer puts in this word – *Selah* . . . now . . . what do you think about that?

Pause . . . think about it!

Stanza number two begins in *verse 4*. ***There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.***

This has prophetic implications. Not only is God our present refuge – the city of God will one day be our permanent refuge – the future, coming kingdom where is ***the holy dwelling places of the Most High (verse 4); verse 5. God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.***

John describes this city in detail in ***Revelation 21:2. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. 3. And I***

heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, 4. And He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.”

The Psalmist is encouraging the believer, not only by reminding us of our present refuge but a prophetic refuge.

One day there will be peace on the earth. In the meantime, there can be peace in the heart.^{vi}

Even though, ***verse 6. The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered; He raised His voice, the earth melted.***

Don't miss the contrast – the nations are making an uproar – they're making a lot of noise – but God will one day raise His voice, and that will settle it once and for all.

Right now the nations of the earth think they if they make enough noise, they can drown out the voice of God

The Psalmist is saying, “One day God's voice will be heard above the voice of the earth . . . He's going to put down the nations and establish His kingdom on earth.”

And the Psalmist says – let's sing about this sovereign Lord – ***verse 7 – the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.***

By the way, I'm so glad he didn't compose it here to sing, “The God of David is our stronghold” or “The God of Abraham and Isaac.”

But would you note here – He is ***the God of Jacob.***

That doubting, deceiving, backsliding patriarch; that conniving man who hoped to buy his way out of trouble; this man who made his covenant of faith with God but never depended on God; this man who'd come to the conclusion late in life that God hadn't been all that good to him or his family – and that everything was against him.

God says, “I am willing to be known as the God of Abraham - and Isaac – and Jacob . . . I have embraced Jacob too.”

Listen, if God is willing to embrace Jacob – to be the God of Jacob, He is willing to be your God and mine as well.^{vii}

And at this point, the Psalmist writes in his second – ***Selah . . . now stop and think about these truths.***

Think . . . and then . . . thank!

Stanza number 3 begins at verse 8. Come, behold the works of the Lord, who has wrought desolations in the earth. 9. He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariots with fire.

This happened in the days of Hezekiah, and this will happen in the future as God brings all war to an end.

By the way, you've noticed how the world loves to blame God for every war. They're quick to remind you of all the wars fought in the name of God, all the blood shed over religious beliefs – God is responsible – it's His fault.

Never mind that even here in the context of this Psalm, the Assyrians had come looking for war, not Jerusalem.

No, my friend, God will be responsible one day for ending the war. And if He didn't end it, the war would never end.

One day mankind will beat their swords into farming tools – not because they finally had a successful UN Resolution; but because God's resolution brought about changed hearts.

Not because the right person is sitting in the White House, but because the Son of God is sitting on His throne in Jerusalem in that coming Kingdom.

But I have to tell you – in the sweep of this Song, the Psalmist here isn't so much concerned with the unrest and the troubled nations of the world – he's most interested in the unrest and the trouble in your own heart – and mine.

So – **verse 10. Cease striving 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 stronghold. Now think about that – Selah . . . think about what that means to you!**

The word cease is the Hebrew term for relax – or – be quiet. And the stem of the verb in the Hebrew language is what we call causative – which means, you do it.^{viii}

In other words, you stop striving; stop manipulating; stop trying to orchestrate life; quit trying to control everything and everyone – be still!

The Psalmist is effectively quoting God here, and God is effectively saying, "Stop playing God and know that I am God."

- If I am going to take care of the nations – can I not take care of you?!

- If I can handle the challenges facing this world – can I not handle yours?
- If I am in control of the noisy chaos and the corruption touching this world, am I not in control of whatever touches you?

Selah . . . think about it . . . there is no rock and a hard place that I am not capable of taking you through.

William Carey began his missionary ministry in the late 1700's and served in India for 40 years without ever returning to England. His work continues to bear fruit to this day throughout that vast country.

One night a fire broke out in the warehouse, and it ripped through his printing plant. In a matter of hours, years of work literally went up in smoke.

The next morning, Carey and his two associates calculated their losses; manuscripts of nearly all of his Indian Scripture versions now gone; all of Kanarese New Testament; all of his Telugu Grammar and all of Dictionary of Sanskrit – which he considered his most important life's work – all of it now destroyed.

After some 20 years of painstaking work, Carey and his associates had numerous translations in manuscripts form; several languages with lead type created for printing – the lead cast alphabets for printing – listen to this – the lead was melted in the fire – for these languages; Hebrew, Greek, Persian, Arabic, Nagari, Telugu, Bengali, Burmese, Punjabi, Tamil, and Chinese.

Also destroyed in the fire were his buildings and tools.

A friend came to the Mission and would later write, "The scene was indeed affecting – the long printing office reduced to a mere shell; the yard covered with burnt paper; Carey walked with me over the smoking ruins. The tears stood in his eyes. "In one night," he said, "the labors of years are consumed . . . how unsearchable are the ways of God . . . the Lord has laid me low." We walked over the ground strewn with half-consumed paper on which the words of life would soon have been printed. The metal under our feet amidst the ruins was melted into misshapen lumps – now rubbish and smoke.

Carey would later write to a friend and admit that this was a heavy blow – he wrote, "Oh, the providence of God is dark."

There doesn't seem to be much light . . . it doesn't make sense . . . you can't figure it out . . .

In his biography, I read how the following Sunday, Carey stood to preach in their church. He had confided in a friend this was the only text that he could preach – he turned to *Psalm 46 and verse 10. Be still and know that I am God.*

After reading the text, he preached along two points in his outline:

- Number 1: God’s right to do with us as He pleases;
- Number 2: Man’s duty to surrender to God’s will.

Carey then expounded on the principles and purpose and promises and providence of God.^{ix}

This isn’t just Martin Luther’s Psalm . . . this is William Carey’s Psalm.

I have news for you – it is intended by God to be your Psalm as well.

Let me suggest three action points:

1. Memorize *verse 1 – God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble.*

He is an immediate help when you find yourself between a rock and hard place.

2. Memorize *verse 10 – Be still and know that I am God.*

There are things He does without every giving an explanation – Just as William Carey preached: He is God, to do with us as He pleases; We are responsible for surrendering to whatever He does.

3. Finally, let me encourage you to sing or perhaps memorize some of the lyrics of Martin Luther’s hymn, inspired by this Psalm.

Let me read some of them for you:

*A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing,
Our helper He amid the flood of mortals ills
prevailing;
For still our ancient foe, Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, And, armed with
cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.*

*Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God’s own choosing
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus it is He; Lord Sabaoth, His name,
From age to age the same, and He must win the
battle.*

All that to say – if you, at this very moment, are between a rock and hard place – it won’t last forever.

God will take you through it; it won’t last forever.

But God’s kingdom will – His kingdom will last forever.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/15/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from Charles Swindoll, *Living Beyond the Daily Grind: Volume 1* (Word, 1988), p. 132

ii Ibid

iii Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Falling Into Greatness* (Thomas Nelson, 1984), p. 86

iv Swindoll, p. 133

v John Phillips, *Exploring Psalms: Volume One* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1988), p. 366

vi Donald Williams, *Psalms 1-72* (Word Publishing, 1986), p. 47

vii W. Graham Scroggie, *The Psalms: Volume 1* (Pickering & Inglis, 1948), p. 265

viii Swindoll, p. 137

ix S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey* (The Wakeman Trust, 1923), p. 288-291