

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Psalm 46 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the psalm. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

## PSALM 46:1-11 ESV

*1 To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamoth. A Song. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, 3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah 4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. 5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. 6 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. 7 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah 8 Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. 10 "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" 11 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah.*

## STRUCTURE

- I. Confidence in God's strength – despite geopolitical disturbances (1-3)
- II. Gladness in God's city – despite geopolitical aggression (4-7)
- III. Awe before God's supremacy – invitation and rebuke (8-11)

## GENERAL COMMENTARY:

The Psalm is broken down into three stanzas, each separated by a call to pause and think calmly about what was just said ("Selah"). The first stanza focuses on God's protection amidst tumultuous changes on earth. The most immovable objects are engulfed by the mysterious deep—but God has our back. We learn later in the Psalm that these "immovable objects" represent crumbling empires. Mutations of our geopolitical landscape need not frighten us.

The second stanza continues with the water imagery, but this time it's a peaceful river. This contrasts sharply with the waters that "roar and foam" in the first stanza. The second stanza clarifies that the sea, earthquake, and mountains symbolize geopolitical chaos. The nations are warmongers, directing their rage against "the city of God," which we explore in the comments below. If the primary emotion of the first stanza is confidence, the second stanza shifts toward gladness. Despite the wars and rumors of wars, God's people should remain confident and content.

The refrain that closes the second stanza mirrors the end of the third, spotlighting the song's theme that *all is well because God is with us*. The third stanza brings us the first exhortations: an invitation and a warning. The invitation is to behold—with awe and prophetic vision—the empire-destroying works of God. The rebuke warns striving nations. Their ceaseless battles and persecution of God's people reflect a restless soul that thinks it's in charge. God alone reigns, but we'll never know this until we drop our weapons—"be still!"—and reflect.

This Psalm probably relates to a time in Israel's history when her existence was threatened by war, but it is also eschatological (end-times related). The word "earth" appears five times in eleven verses, reinforcing that this is not just about a localized battle in Israel but rather a global conflagration, where God is ultimately "exalted among the nations... [and] in all the earth" (46:10). The New Testament reveals the fulfillment of Psalm 46: Armageddon. At the very end of the age, governments will conspire to persecute the church in every nation, but Jesus will return to rescue us after a long night of tribulation—"when morning dawns" (Ps. 46:5). He is the One who "makes wars cease... breaks the bow and shatters the spear... [and] burns the chariots with fire" (46:8-9). When Jesus returns, He terminates chaos and evil by destroying their provocateurs. Our response should be to stop and ponder. God's exaltation is our protection. He exalts Himself by protecting us. *Selah*.

## VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

*1 To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamoth. A Song. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

—"To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamoth": This superscription includes musical instructions for the worship leader. "Of the Sons of Korah": see last week's Study Guide. "Alamoth": appears also in 1 Chron. 15:20. According to some, it was a musical term meaning, "soprano." Scholars conjecture that Psalm 46 was to be sung by a choir of young women.

—"God is": not merely God "was" or God "will be"; God "is". Often, we have no difficulty trusting God for the distant future or identifying what He once did in the distant past. But it is difficult to maintain a dynamic *present-tense* faith.

—"refuge... strength... help":

- NASB: "God is our refuge and strength, a very ready help in trouble."
- NLT: "God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble."
- NIV: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."
- HCSB: "God is our refuge and strength, a helper who is always found in times of trouble."
- Refuge:
  - If there is a violent storm, you find shelter. If there is a violent army, you find a fortress. Both could be called a refuge. The image conveys safety in the face of violence. God keeps us safe amidst tumultuous changes. Political changes, global changes, cultural changes, relational changes, and more.
  - That God is my refuge also means that I don't find shelter in myself and by my own schemes. We find "safety" in many forms: the latest diet, financial hoarding, helicopter parenting, lies, political "champions," etc.
- Strength:
  - The changes on the earth can cause us to feel weak, like our spiritual and emotional legs are giving way. When even the mountains around us are melting, our hearts naturally melt within us.
  - Our job is not to turn on our motorboat and zoom around the lake. Our job is to put up the sail and let God move us. The motorboat will run out of gas, but God never runs out of wind.
  - How do we seek to overcome exterior challenges in our own strength? We refuse to ask for help from God; we refuse to ask for help from people; we dull the fear and pain through anesthetics; we compromise our values for the sake of short-term success; we fight when flight is appropriate; we flee when fighting is appropriate—to name a few.
- "Refuge" applies to God's exterior protection—of our physical well-being. "Strength" applies to God's interior fortification—of our spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being. God offers both exterior and interior support.
- Some people act like God will protect us spiritually but in no other way. This flirts with Gnosticism, which falsely assumes that God only cares about spirituality and that the material/physical universe is a barren shell. God cares about this so-called shell, however. That's why He assumed a body in the incarnation, emerged from the grave with ten fingers and toes, and will one day return as a physical man to redeem our physical world. Satan may have tainted the universe with death and sin, but God did not abandon the project He once labeled "very good" (Gen. 1:31). He cares about our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual lives. He is both our refuge (exterior support) and strength (interior support).
- "very present help"
  - "very ready, always ready, very present, ever present, always found": These are the ways that God's "help" is depicted in various translations.
  - "refuge" and "strength" emphasize God's external and internal supply; "very present help" summarizes both forms of supply while emphasizing God's readiness, especially when we most need it—"in trouble." In a word, God is our external and internal supply RIGHT NOW. He does not need us to prevail over His complacency or shake Him from slumber. He is a sprinter on His toes, waiting for the "starting pistol"—our prayer.
  - Later, it says that God will help "when morning dawns". This is not in contradiction to God's very present help. "when morning dawns" importantly qualifies "very present help." The latter cannot mean that God is a genie in a bottle. He is a sprinter on His toes, but He is not "in a hurry" and cannot be coerced, even by our prayers. God's ever-present help manifests as rescue—not a moment too late, but also not a moment too soon.

—Before the stanza descends into chaos, it ascends to thoughts of God's protection. He is the central reality of the Psalm.

**2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,**

—“Therefore, we will not fear”: God’s character should affect our emotional life. Because He is our interior and exterior support, we need not feel fear. What more can be harmed besides our interior and exterior? There is nothing left. He protects us fully.

—The Psalmist pictures an earthquake so powerful the mountains crumble, and the sea opens its mouth to swallow them. The most immovable objects—“earth” and “mountains”—change their location. And not only that. They move to “the sea,” which, in biblical times, symbolized chaos. What is more, these immovable objects don’t just “dip a toe” on the shoreline but are baptized into “the heart” of the sea. Landmarks of stability will be to future generations like a penny dropped from a cruise ship.

—In our society, what has historically been so fundamental to survival has rapidly changed: redefinition of marriage; redefinition of family; redefinition of “freedom”; redefinition of “equality”; redefinition of parenting; redefinition of good and evil! Further, technology is changing at unprecedented rates. Phones, the internet, and travel have changed how we relate, work, and spend our leisure time. AI will take this to the next level. Then we have the changes in the political landscape. Ten years ago, who would have imagined a “President Trump”? Or an octogenarian President Biden running for a second term?

—Whatever our response to all this change, it can’t be one of fear. God is our refuge, strength, and very present help.

**3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah**

—Here, the sea does not just passively receive these once-immovable mountains; now, it rages.

—Tectonic shifts in society are usually violent. See Stanzas 2 and 3.

—The forces of change sweep so rapidly that they can’t be resisted. You can’t change change. As the country singer says, “The only thing / that stays the same / is everything changes / everything changes.”

—“Selah”:

- “Selah” means “pause and think calmly of that.”
- This is a funny moment to “Selah.” The Psalmist just elaborated on the furious pace of sweeping change. On the surface, it would seem more appropriate to conclude the stanza with “Scream” than “Selah.”
- The Psalmist can “Selah” because he views the disintegration of society as a judgment that results in peace. The second and third stanza clarify this. The Psalmists did not cringe at God’s judgment; they craved it. This is because the Psalmists understood well what we too often don’t. If God never puts a period at the end of this sentence, it becomes a hellish run-on. God must judge, or else this world is the best it ever gets. Like a doctor who resets a broken bone, the *reset* of this broken world demands sharp and sudden movements. The good news is: God’s judgment will cure the world.
- I am reminded of a quote by NT Wright, from *Surprised By Hope*: “*The word judgment carries negative overtones for a good many people in our liberal and postliberal world. We need to remind ourselves that throughout the Bible, not least in the Psalms, God’s coming judgment is a good thing, something to be celebrated, longed for, yearned over. It causes people to shout for joy and the trees of the field to clap their hands. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be.*”
- The stanza that begins on a note of peace ends also on a note of peace.

—Given that the rest of the Psalm is about nations and wars, these “tectonic shifts” seem metaphorical ways of depicting political and social changes. What once could be relied upon—the ground beneath your feet!—can no longer be trusted. The pace, degree, and violence of change will make us lose our bearings if we aren’t grounded in God’s unchanging character.

—“swelling”: this word is typically translated as “arrogance” or “pride.” This is why the NASB renders it “though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.” One nation rises against another like a foamy tsunami smashing up against a quaking mountain. Nations destroying one another are a form of judgment. But the final judgment, which Psalm 46 envisions, turns the foamy waters of chaos into a tranquil sea of glass.

**4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.**

—The water imagery continues, which only intensifies the contrast. This water is not roaring and foaming and swallowing mountains. It’s peaceful. It’s not a mysteriously deep ocean but a gently flowing stream. It doesn’t cause terror to the earth, but gladness to the city of God.

—Kidner: “With God, the waters are no longer menacing seas, but a life-giving river.”

—Kidner: “God’s help... [is] the quiet water-supply of the besieged.”

—What “river” is he talking about? And what is the “city of God”?

- The city must be either heaven (the heavenly city) or earthly Jerusalem. (In both cases, the city can include both the location and the people who dwell there.)
- In its original context, the Psalmist at least meant earthly Jerusalem. Heaven would not require God’s help “when morning dawns” (46:5).
- Jerusalem technically doesn’t have a river, however. A spring-fed stream (the Gihon Spring) flowed into Jerusalem and was channeled into pools to supply the city. But this does not seem to fully picture “a river whose streams” flow abundantly, making “glad the city of God.” It seems like the Psalmist prophetically envisioned a greater life-giving river, supporting the city’s basic needs and even the temple’s (“the holy habitation”).
- Concerning the river/temple, several biblical allusions must be accounted for:
  - Rivers supplied God’s original “garden-temple”—Eden.
  - An ever-increasing river supplies Ezekiel’s eschatological “temple-city.”
  - The “river of life” flows through God’s garden-temple in the New Jerusalem, which fills the New Heavens/New Earth in John’s end-times vision (Rev. 21-22). This river feeds the “trees of life,” whose leaves supply “healing for the nations.”
- How do we harmonize the Psalmist’s vision with these images?
  - The “city of God” originally applied to earthly Jerusalem, but this was just a shadow of the heavenly Jerusalem, which Eden and Ezekiel’s vision pointed to.
  - The Psalmist seems to know there is a relationship between the earthly city and a heavenly city since Jerusalem had no such “river whose streams make glad the city of God.”
  - Some verses in Hebrews speaking about the heavenly city:
    - Heb. 11:9-10: 9 By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 **For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.**
    - Heb. 11:13 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. **Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.**
    - Heb. 13:13 Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. 14 For here **we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.**
- In a way, the Bible is a tale of two cities: the city of man and the city of God. In Genesis 1:28, God tells man to subdue the earth, and cities express that. They demonstrate man’s ability to harness nature’s resources and transform them into something great. Cain builds the first city, and his urban lineage invents music and metalworking (Gen. 4:21-22). God views this cultural development as a beautiful expression of those made in His image, which is why theologians call Genesis 1:28, “the cultural mandate.” Nevertheless, cities do not just synergize human ingenuity, but human corruption. From Cain descends Nimrod—founder of Babylon and Assyria, the two nations that exiled Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, when God judges a nation, he judges its cities:
  - Isaiah 13:21: “Desert animals will move into the ruined **cities**.”
  - Jeremiah 50:32: “I will kindle fire in his **cities**, and it will devour all around him.”
  - Ezekiel 12:20: “Then the **cities** that are inhabited shall be laid waste, and the land shall become desolate.
  - Ezekiel 26:19: “I [will] make you a desolate **city**, like **cities** that are not inhabited.”
  - Ezekiel 35:4: “I shall lay your **cities** waste, and you shall be desolate”.
- Despite their capacity for evil, God still has a heart for cities. Ezekiel prophesied of a day when God would redeem cities by re-making the hearts of those who dwell there:
  - Ezek. 36:26-35: *“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do [them]... 33 ‘Thus... I will also enable [you] to dwell in the **cities**, and the ruins shall be rebuilt... 35 “So they will say, ‘This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the wasted, desolate, and ruined **cities** [are now] fortified [and] inhabited”*.

- God's heart for redeeming cities—ultimately fulfilled in the New Jerusalem—is partially fulfilled by reborn believers who transform our ruined cities into "the garden of Eden." We see this in Acts, as God targets cities: Antioch, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Corinth, etc.
- Our eternal future is urban. We will dwell forever in the perfected city of God, New Jerusalem. John's eschatological vision of New Jerusalem marks the end of an era. No longer will humans pervert God's purpose by building cities and towers that deify self (Gen. 11). At last, heaven and earth meet—not in the proud rise—but in the humble descent of a city (Rev. 21:2, 10). The city represents culture and civilization, disinfected from Babylon's stain. It is art and architecture, history and humanity, music and food—all of them, holy.
- In the meantime, the author of Hebrews speaks another time about the heavenly city, enlightening us about our *contemporary* experience of it:
  - Heb. 12:18 *For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*
  - In Psalm 46, the "city of God" spoke chiefly of Jerusalem, but with an eye toward the eschatological city of John's Revelation. But what is this in Hebrews 12? In what way can the author of Hebrews say that we "have come" to "heavenly Jerusalem"?
  - Hebrews 12 contrasts the gathering of believers under the Old and New Covenant. Under the Old Covenant, they gathered before a God who terrified them. Under the New Covenant—while we maintain the fear of God—we gather with eschatological joy, realized in the here-and-now. The author is indeed speaking of the heavenly city which we will one day enter, but there is a sense in which we enter it today—in the gathering of the New Covenant community for worship. Just as the Old Testament temple united heaven and earth, so does the New Testament temple—God's church. When we gather, heaven and earth become one; we gather with saints across time and space; we gather with "innumerable angels in festal gathering"; we gather to worship in the heavenly city. But how can that be? It is a spiritual reality. The raucous celebration in heaven overlaps ours on earth. The heavenly city is superimposed over our little congregations. The river that makes glad the city of God flows right through our Sunday liturgies. God sustains us for the battles we face—in the gathering. O, how sacred it is for the people of God to gather!
- Augustine on the City of Man vs. the City of God (in his civilization-altering book, City of God): *"These are the two loves: . . . the first is social, the second selfish; the first consults the common welfare for the sake of celestial [heavenly] society, the second grasps at a selfish control of social affairs for the sake of arrogant domination; the first is submissive to God, the second tries to rival God; the first is quiet, the second restless; the first is peaceful, the second, trouble-making; the first prefers truth to the praises of those who are in error, the second is greedy for praise, however it might be obtained. . . . Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self."*

—"glad": in contrast to fear, God gives us gladness. The opposite of fear is not fearlessness; it's being able to smile when we think of our future in God.

—This symbol of peace and security—the river—makes not only God's people, but God Himself, glad. God is a glad God.

—In the midst of chaos, God is not out-of-sorts. He is not frettingly frustrated over the earth's changes. Instead of being afraid, He is glad. His gladness is the wellspring of ours.

—"Most High": this is the name of God that was learned through the experience of Abram with Melchizedek. God is the Most High King. The earth suffers under constant wars. In Gen. 14, nine earthly kings battle one another, usurp one another, ally with one another, and bring chaos on the earth. But God is the Most High God—the King over all—and Melchizedek is His priest-king. The point of Genesis 14 is that the kings of the earth can battle over turf, but the turf as well as the battle belong to God. Furthermore, Jesus is our Greater Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 5-7). Just as the first Melchizedek offered bread and wine (Gen. 14:18), Jesus offers us bread and wine in communion, signifying His body and blood on the cross.

Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus became our conquering King with authority over all (Matt. 28:18; Rev. 1:5); He also became our priest, who makes intercession for us (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25).

—How does all this talk about the Most High God and Melchizedek, priest of the Most High God, relate to Psalm 46? Psalm 46 is about kings and kingdoms raging against God, but God will not be moved. He reigns over all, He reigns through Christ, and the rage of the nations will be silenced before them.

—The nations don't have to be judged, however. By His priestly work in the gospel, Jesus forgives.

### ***5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.***

—Unlike the earth that moves violently from seismic activity, God is not moved; therefore, neither is His city. We are secure because He is steady.

—God's people will sometimes have to suffer through the whole night before morning dawns. God is an eleventh-hour Savior.

- Ex. 14:27: the waters swallowed up the Egyptian army "at daybreak".
- Matt. 14:25: after the disciples rowed all night against violent forces of nature, "in the fourth watch of the night," Jesus walked toward them on top of the sea.
- In both above scenarios, not only does God save them after a long period of trepidation, but salvation is associated with waters of chaos—like we see in Psalm 46. Jesus walks on top of the chaos and evil, for He is sovereign over it. But He still allows the sea to rage—until its appointed time.

—God is presented here as being completely in charge, and yet He doesn't stop the darkness from coming. It's just part of the deal. The verses don't explain why He sometimes rescues at the last moment. They just say that He does.

—Why is it that He rescues when morning dawns rather than in the last hour of darkness? Both would have communicated "last-second rescue". But morning dawning introduces... a new day. For the righteous, there is always a new day ahead. "The light of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day" (Pr. 4). The best is always yet to come. The new day represents fresh, enduring hope. Night represents God's seeming absence and the seeming "control" of the "powers-that-be" that hold us at their mercy. But nighttime always gives way to daylight.

—For the unbeliever, this life is the best it ever gets. For believers, this life is the worst it ever gets.

—Christ rose when morning dawned to fulfill this Psalm literally. The nations raged and tottered in the crucifixion, but the stream of God's city made glad the nations that turned to their true King. Caesar thought he had conquered Christ; he strutted about the Empire like he was really something. Meanwhile, Jesus was being coronated in heaven as "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev. 1:5). His reign is now hidden, and those who proclaim it are openly mocked. One day He will return, however, to launch His open and uncontested rule. In the meantime, we are part of "God's transition team," rolling out the red carpet for the true King who reigns behind the scenes.

### ***6 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.***

—There are two noises in this verse: the uproar of the nations and the voice of God.

—"rage":

- This Hebrew word reminds us of Psalm 2, where the nations rage and plot in vain. Their uproar represents the chaos that they sought to bring. This verse prepares us for the mention of wars in the next stanza.
- It is not the same Hebrew word as in Psalm 2, however. Instead, this word "rage" (Heb. *hama*) appears in Psalm 46:3: "though its waters ROAR (Heb. *hama*) and foam..." The parallel confirms my intuition: the raging seas and earthquakes of the first stanza symbolize the raging nations.
- Strong's definition: "to make a loud sound (like English 'hum'); by implication, to be in great commotion or tumult, to rage, war, moan, clamor:—clamorous, concourse, cry aloud, be disquieted, loud, mourn, be moved, make a noise, rage, roar, sound, be troubled, make in tumult, tumultuous, be in an uproar."

—"totter":

- This word (Heb. *mot*) also appears in the first stanza, confirming beyond a shadow of a doubt that the whole Psalm centers on God's sovereignty and judgment over the kingdoms of the earth.
- For that matter, the word appears three times in this Psalm!
  - 46:2: The mountains are "moved" (Heb. *mot*) into the heart of the sea.
  - 46:5: God is in the midst of her; she shall not be "moved" (Heb. *mot*).
  - 46:6: The kingdoms "totter" (Heb. *mot*).
- Mountains commonly represent empires throughout Scripture. These seemingly permanent structures are no such thing. Empires melt, but the kingdom remains.

- God, His kingdom, His city, His temple, and His people remain intact—and glad—throughout. “For the kingdom of God is... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

—“utters his voice”:

- We don’t actually hear His voice until stanza three, the famous 46:10.
- Kidner: God’s “voice is as decisive in dissolving the world as it was in creating it.”
- NASB: “He raised his voice” (footnote in NASB reads, “Literally, ‘gave forth’”). The NASB gives the sense that God does not just speak but rather interjects authoritatively. Both translations seem reasonable, but (to me) the latter more colorfully captures the sense within this context, where God opposes the presumptuous, arrogant, raging nations.

—“the earth melts”:

- “melts” appears only here, and the NASB translates it as “quakes.” Although the Hebrew word differs from 46:3, the image of quaking/trembling is the same.
- “earth” (Heb. *eres*) appears five times in Psalm 46:
  - [Psa 46:2, 6, 8-10 ESV] *2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, ... 6 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. ... 8 Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. 10 “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”*
- The frequency of usage suggests the theme. While Israel might have been facing at that moment a national crisis, the Psalmist envisions an eschatological and global scenario. Psalm 46 is about the judgment of God upon the earth.

## **7 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah**

—“The LORD of hosts”:

- This is God as the commander of His angelic army—His “hosts”. Since Israel fought for Yahweh, the Psalmist likewise envisions Israel’s armies.
- This is the first of three mentions of Yahweh (L-O-R-D) in Psalm 46. The name “God” (Elohim) appears seven times.

—“The God of Jacob”:

- He is the God who cared for the patriarchs, fulfilling His promise to give them a people and a land. It is no accident that the name “Yahweh” appears near the name “Jacob,” for Jacob received the promises as one of the patriarchs, and Yahweh is God’s covenant/promise-making name.
- Jacob strove with God and was named Israel—“wrestles with God.” It is in the heart of man to strive with God. It’s not until we cease striving, recognizing our own weakness and His strength, that we really “win.” And we win because He wins.
- Interestingly, Psalm 46:10 says to “be still”—cease striving—and know that He is God. Jacob strove until he learned to lean on God (with the help of a limp). See Gen. 32. We, the people of God, strive with Him too—each in our own way. We all have a limp. The limp helps us lean. It reminds us that we don’t have to wrestle through the night against a God who could destroy us. We win, not by conquering, but by surrendering to God. “God of Jacob” reminds us of this lesson. It’s a lesson the nations refuse to learn. May we not be like them.

—Verse 7 is our only repeated verse. Why wasn’t it repeated in stanza 1? Stanzas 2 and 3 put God not only on defense (for His people) but on offense. He is raising His voice, melting the earth, ending the wars, and silencing man’s uproar. He is fighting for His people as the Lord of Hosts. The Psalmist seems to move from fear to fearlessness, to gladness, to quiet trust.

—“In quietness and trust is your strength” (Isa. 30:15). The nations are in an uproar, but the people of God quietly trust Him. How quiet is my soul? Is it raging and striving? Jesus screamed in a loud voice at the end of His life so that I could trust quietly in His finished work and what it ultimately means: God’s victory over all opposition.

—“stronghold”: The word “stronghold” resembles “refuge,” but its arena of protection centers on the battlefield. When you look up other references throughout the Scripture, though, it’s used synonymously with “refuge.” This is the theme of the Psalm. Because God is “in the midst” of His city, because He is “with us” as our refuge, strength, present help, and stronghold, we can be glad instead of frightened.

—Kidner says that “stronghold” adds that it is a fortress of unreachable height. Thus, the NEB reads, “our high stronghold.” By faith, we dwell beyond the reach of Satan’s arrows.



**8 Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire.**

—This is the first command of the song. There are two total commands, with the second one—“Cease striving (or, be still) and know...”—being in this same stanza.

—So far, we have been reminded that there is no need to fear; we can instead be glad. Now we shift to action. Our first act: “Behold” the works of the Lord. Particularly, behold His desolations. What desolations? The desolations of verse 9: “*He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire.*”

- In the short term, the Psalmist calls on us to behold God’s work of destroying the war-mongering nations. Napoleon came to nothing. Hitler, Mao, and Stalin, too.
- In the long term—in keeping with his theme of “the earth”—the Psalmist wants us to view these defeats as living oracles of the last battle, Armageddon, which God decisively wins. Note: I don’t believe Armageddon is a military conflict in Israel but rather a global persecution against the church by the Antichrist.
- H.G. Wells coined the expression, “the war to end all wars,” ironically, to depict World War I. Not only did WWI not end all wars, but its outcome necessitated World War II. The “bow” and “spear” and “the chariots” have only been upgraded to guns and bombs and tanks. Wars persist until Jesus returns and “makes war” (Rev. 19:11) on the church’s enemies, saving us in the eleventh hour.

—Augustine tells of an instance where an unnamed pirate was captured and brought before Alexander the Great. The pirate asked why he was labeled a pirate for doing to ships what Alexander did to nations. Alexander was the pirate of pirates! Yet people honored him as king. God holds a similar viewpoint about godless nations. They rage, attack, exploit, and pillage to advantage themselves. Kings are pirates. Psalm 46 says: their time is short.

—“Behold”: generally means “seeing with the inward eye”, as a prophet or seer does.

—“desolations”: In the first stanza, there are earthly desolations that would naturally arouse fear; in the second stanza, there are national desolations that threaten God’s people. But here, more than in any stanza, God is the One causing the desolations.

—God does not delight in desolation for its own sake, however. He destroys for the sake of peace. As it says in Revelation 11:18 (which alludes to Psalm 2 and possibly its cousin, Psalm 46): “*The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.*”

—Jesus is coming back to destroy the destroyers!

—Is there significance to the order of the commands: “behold” and “be still/know”? I think so. It’s as if to say, “Once you BEHOLD that God is the One who causes empires to rise and fall, this should cause you to BE STILL and know that He is the One in charge. Not the President, not the Supreme Court, not any man. Any opponent of God and His Christ who rises to power will have his throne stripped and legacy tarnished.

—Practically, we should engage politically and pray for the best. But even in the worst political scenario, our hearts should remain as calm and glad as the river of life that supplies God’s city.

**10 “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”**

—“Be still and know”:

- Most translations render it this way.
- CSB: “stop fighting—and know that I am God”
- NASB: “stop striving and know that I am God”
- This verse reminds us of verse 9, where God “makes wars cease.” It’s not the same Hebrew word, but both words communicate, “stop.” The point: God either forces us to stop, or else we stop. Put differently, people can either cease striving and quietly trust God, or there will come a day when God will put an end to them. There will be no more striving for God’s enemies, not because they surrendered, but because they were destroyed.
- We typically understand, “Be still and know that I am God” to mean, “slow down a little, take a Sabbath or a vacation, and listen to God.” These are all good practices, but the context focuses on national security. God warns us to cease striving for control of our national destiny, the ultimate expression of which is in combat. There’s nothing wrong with patriotism, and it is even a good thing (as long as we are not blind to the weaknesses of our nation and we don’t idolize it). But the message of the Psalm is that enduring gladness is found, not in the welfare of our state but in the river of life that flows through God’s city.
- Kidner: “‘Be still’ is not in the first place comfort for the harassed, but rebuke to a restless and turbulent world.”



—Ross: “Verse ten begins with two more imperatives to match ‘come, see’—‘be still’ and ‘know.’ In view of God’s protective presence and his ultimate victory over evil, the people are here exhorted to stop and know that he is God. Stop what? The context has been describing enemies raging and roaring against the city of God. They certainly need to stop their warring and realize the truth. The verb translated ‘be still’... has the idea of ‘slack’ or ‘drop the hands,’ i.e., abandon what was being done. The imperative is a warning for the turbulent world to stop what they were trying to do. It is also a rebuke for the restless heart, the believer who has not learned to trust in the LORD fully. In this sense Kidner observes that it resembles another command of the Lord Jesus Christ: ‘Peace! Be still.’”

—“I will be exalted...”: Ross says, “the expression means more than his elevation in the heavens; it means that his absolute sovereignty will be acknowledged and accepted among all the nations. This is what the rebellious people of the world must realize, before it is too late (Ps. 2:10-12).”

***11 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah***

—See comments on verse 7, which is identical.