

Be Still and Know – Teaching #1



INTRODUCTION

This weekend, **the key biblical text we will be focused on is Psalm 46.** As you may have noticed, the title of our retreat, “Be Still and Know,” comes from the tenth verse of this psalm. But that verse doesn’t arise out of nowhere, and to make sure we handle the instruction to “be still” well, we need a sense of what God is really telling us in this verse. So to begin, let’s read the psalm in its entirety.

PSALM 46

For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. According to alamothe. A song.

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.

God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.

The LORD Almighty is with us,
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Come and see what the LORD has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
He says, “Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.

The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

PSALM BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Sometimes, we know very little about the circumstances that inspired a psalm or why it was written. But some psalms, like Psalm 46, have a superscript that tells us such information. Here, we read that Psalm 46 has instructions for the director of music, including that it is “according to *alamoth*” and is a song. The author is also noted as being the Sons of Korah. To our modern eyes, this may not mean much, but to the original audience it would have given a good bit of information.

Knowing that this psalm is a song and that it was written by the Sons of Korah indicates that this was designed to be sung as part of temple worship. The Sons of Korah were a Levitical guild – if you remember back earlier in the Bible, in Leviticus and Numbers God talked several times about the Levites, who were one of the tribes of Israel who were set apart by God for the purpose of caring for and keeping the

religious practices associated with the Tabernacle (and later the temple). The Sons of Korah were a group who scholars believe were in charge of temple worship, so they wrote and led songs for the people to use to praise God. The translation of that funny word *alamoth* is not certain, but it comes from the same root from which we get the Hebrew word for “young woman,” so the suggestion here is that it indicates this is meant to be sung in a higher range, like a song written for the soprano part.

Okay, so this is a song of worship designed to be used during religious services to assist the people in praising God. What specifically does it praise Him for? Well, of all the categorizations of this psalm that are offered in the literature, I think the best choice is to call it a “**psalm of confidence**.” In such psalms, there is an expression of deep-set trust in God that is rooted in His steadfast character—humans can trust God because of who He is. Gerald H. Wilson says that Psalm 46 is “a psalm of radical trust in the face of overwhelming threat.” In Psalm 46, the focal point of this trust is the refuge and protection that God offers.

THREE DIVISIONS

There are three general divisions of this psalm, which are grouped according to thematic elements. **First, we have verses 1 to 3, which emphasize that God is worthy of trust.** He is described as a refuge, strength, an ever-present help, and because of that His people need not fear. Can you hear the confidence in these verses—even if the earth were to give way and the mountains fall into the sea, there will be no reason to fear. Should the seawaters whip themselves into such a frenzy that even the mountains are shaken, even then we need not be afraid. It can be easy to rush past such imagery, but like with all poetry we are meant to think about the picture that the psalm is painting for us. Think about the almighty crash that would arise from a mountain that slides off its foundations and into the sea, the path of destruction that would be left in the wake up such a happening! I have only been in one small earthquake, but even that was quite unnerving. Everything shakes, and you don’t know what the world will look like when the heaving of the earth calms down. Psalm 46 is imagining even more intense happenings than that, describing both earth and sea as in complete upheaval and mutually threatening one another—the mountains crash into the sea, and

the fury of the sea makes the mountains quake. Even in such a terrifying scenario, the psalm says, God will remain strong—a refuge that can be trusted and a willing and able source of help. We can trust God because He is steadfast!

The second portion of the psalm comes in verses 4 through 7. In this section, we see expansion on the theme of God as a source of protection. But this time, instead of the created order devolving into chaos, it is the kingdoms of man that are the threat. The section begins with calming reassurance, that there exists a place in which God dwells, and in that city there is safety. It is fed by streams that produce gladness, and it cannot fall or break because God is there. No matter how much racket is raised by the roaring battles of men, God’s voice is stronger still. In verse 7 we see the first repetition of a reassurance that will be offered twice in the psalm – “The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” That is the crux of the psalm, and what makes it a psalm of confidence. Our ability to have no fear arises from God’s presence with us. He is our steadfast protection and fortress. Again, think of the word picture that is being painted—a fortress, a sturdy and thick wall of stone that surrounds us and keeps all threats at bay. Divine protection is our one true source of stability.

Finally, we arrive at the final section in verses 8 to 11. Here, we are reminded that God is the Lord of all. The psalm calls us to remember what He has done. He has brought desolation upon the earth, but also makes wars cease. All weapons and tactics of men will come to nothing, ultimately, because they cannot outstrategize or outmaneuver the God of the universe. It is God who brings about the end of war and renders bows and shields obsolete.

And then the psalm introduces our key verse, verse 10: **“Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”** It is a bit of a curious instruction to receive, in the midst of a psalm that has introduced such chaotic imagery. The mountains are crumbling, the sea is raging, wars are flaring up and men are violently at odds with one another as the earth around them appears to be giving way. And yet, God says, “Be still.” What could He mean by this, and how do we live into what He is asking us to do here?

BE STILL

In the original Hebrew, the word for “be still” here is *râphâh*, and at its core it refers to letting go—to cease, to stop what you are doing, to relax your grip on something. The NASB translation captures the meaning the best, in my opinion, when it says “stop striving.” So in this passage of Scripture, we have first been reassured that we need not fear, because God’s steadfast character is trustworthy, and now we are being instructed to stop striving. We are going to get more into the second part of this verse tomorrow, but for now I want to unpack what is meant here by *striving*, and how we can identify for ourselves when we are engaging in such an activity.

To be perfectly clear, this verse is *not* instructing us to go find a quiet place and just listen for the Lord to speak to us. That is a wonderful practice, one that is backed up by many biblical passages; this just doesn’t happen to be one of them. Neither is this verse saying that we should do *nothing*, taking a laissez-faire approach that treats the world as if we bear no responsibility for assisting its improvement. Though the main agent of change in our world is God, He has graciously invited us in to participate in His Kingdom mission, and He has work for us to do in that regard. So what is it to be still, then? Simply put, **it is to trust God more deeply**. It is to remember that God is sovereign over creation and over the affairs of humanity; nothing and no one is a threat to Him or His plan.

When my brother and I were little, my dad used to throw my brother high into the air and then catch him, an activity that inevitably brought shrieks of thrilled delight from my brother. I watched how faithful my dad was to catch my brother each and every time, long before there was ever any risk of him hitting the ground. I saw how much fun my brother had, how he laughed and asked to be thrown again and again. Yet when my dad offered me a turn, I would hold tightly to the lapels of his jacket and refuse to let go, because I was too afraid to let him toss me up into the air. He tried to reassure me that he would never let me fall, and that he

would be right there to catch me. Still, I would not let go. Though I had watched my brother be tossed up and caught many times and thus had seen for myself that my dad was strong and dependable, I still could not trust deeply enough to let go. Being still is the process of letting go, of trusting God more deeply, based on who He has demonstrated Himself to be.

This psalm is offering sage guidance for a life of faith, one marked by complete confidence that God is who He says He is. Yet the attitude of our human hearts often betrays a lack of such confidence, manifesting in a desire to put trust in ourselves instead. We are implicitly convinced that if we could just be strong enough, smart enough, and savvy enough, we would be able to make our worlds be exactly what we want them to be and make everyone else think about us exactly what we want them to think. Were I to stand back and watch my life play out on a movie screen, I would see a woman who expends a lot of effort trying to make sure the important things are just so, and guaranteeing that she always says just what her friends need to hear, and puts pressure on herself to have the solution to every problem immediately, and attempts to manage the impressions of others so as to be perceived as capable and confident, and withholds grace from herself even though she would never dream of doing so to other people. It is no surprise that we are so easily convinced that “God helps those who help themselves” is wisdom straight from the pages of the Bible. (Spoiler alert: It’s not.)

Having studied Psalm 46 and this word *râphâh*, I have come to view efforts like this as *strivings*, the exact type of strivings that in this passage God is asking us to cease. **You can identify strivings by evaluating your own heart and mind for areas that evidence one or more of three things: (1) restless anxiety, (2) frantic effort, or (3) laboring to control a situation on your own.** In other words, strivings are the areas in our lives in which we take on and struggle with responsibilities that God did not actually assign to us. Let’s read the verse again: “Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” We are being called upon to recognize who is really in charge

here, and whose plans will be completed, whose purposes will be fulfilled, and whose person will be exalted. All that belongs to God and God alone.

Strivings are our attempts to direct what is not ours to direct. We have a term for people who do this sort of thing—backseat drivers! Now, despite their reputation as irritants, backseat drivers are not necessarily motivated by the desire to annoy. Rather, they are just as likely to be acting out of concern or anxiety, worried that the driver is not attending to something properly. I'm going to play a short audio clip for you, which was recorded by a father who was fleeing from a raging wildfire, desperately navigating crowded roadways while flames lick up the shoulder of the road. His three-year-old daughter was strapped into the backseat—pay attention to the concerns she brings up to her father.

[Click here to access the clip](#) (0:45 – 2:20 in the video)

“We’re gonna get on fire...We should go back home.” You can hear the deep concern in her voice, and it is easy to see how the solution she offers makes sense to her. Home is what she knows and where she feels safe. She doesn’t understand that the fire has changed everything, and she can’t go back to where she used to be. She is anxious and wants to resolve it within what her own wisdom dictates is best. I can’t begin to express the depth to which I feel for this little girl because in so many ways I *am* this little girl. I am desperately in need of what Psalm 46:10 beckons me to do: to be still and know that *He* is God. When trust in our steadfast God is deepened, we find fewer reasons to work ourselves up into a tizzy, and we can approach our lives and all circumstances therein with less fear. Commentator Gerald H. Wilson puts it this way: **“Only when we cease our own frantic activity can we begin to experience God’s acting for us. Only then, says the psalmist, can we know that he is God.”**

Be Still and Know – Teaching #2



INTRODUCTION

Yesterday, we put our focus on strivings, those areas in our lives in which we show a state of restless anxiety, frantic effort, or laboring to control a situation on our own. As promised, today we are going to more closely examine the second part of Psalm 46:10. Before we do, though, let's refamiliarize ourselves with the psalm in its entirety.

PSALM 46

For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. According to alamo. A song.

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.

God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.

The LORD Almighty is with us,
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Come and see what the LORD has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
He says, “Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.

The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

WHAT RELAXES OUR STRIVINGS?

Returning attention to verse 10, recall that God instructs His people here to be still, despite the evidence of turmoil and mayhem all around. Even if creation disintegrates and mankind is bent on utterly destroying each other, be still. Cease striving. Relax. Let go. It seems ridiculously counterintuitive! Relax, let go, be still, when everything is devolving into chaos? Yet we’ve established that this is exactly what God is asking of us. So how exactly do we follow these instructions?

Let’s read the verse in its entirety: “**Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.**” It is critical to remember that we are not just intended to be still, but also to know that He is God. And as a function of being God, He *will* be exalted among the nations and in the earth. We can be still because of God,

because of who He is and because He is the one whose plans will be completed, whose purposes will be fulfilled, and whose person will be exalted. When we understand who God is more deeply, we develop more trust in His steadfast character, which in turn will quiet the anxious strivings of our hearts.

Let's listen to that same audio clip again, with the father and daughter evacuating through a wildfire. But this time, pay attention to what the father is saying to his little girl.

[Click here to access the clip](#) (0:45 – 2:20 in the video)

The comfort and reassurance in his voice is so powerful. “We’re not going to catch on fire...we’re doing all right.” We can hear the little girl calming down as the clip progresses. She is able to relax because she knows who is driving the car—she knows and trusts her father.

Our lives operate on the same principle. Becoming still is not something we do of our own accord, by buckling down and insisting to ourselves that we must stop worrying, or by distracting ourselves with poor substitutes for comfort, or by searching for the answer in the love and approval of another human being, or by controlling the components of our lives to line up in just the right order. Our strivings cease when we allow trust in God’s steadfast character to pry loose our tightened grip on them. We need to know who is driving the car as we progress through the flames.

WHO HAS GOD SHOWN HIMSELF TO BE?

And if we want to learn more about God’s steadfast character this weekend, what better place is there to begin than Psalm 46 itself? Here we find two crucial vertebrae in the backbone of God’s character as revealed in Scripture—He is a God of creation, and He is a God of Redemption.

GOD OF CREATION

In the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2, we are told that God creates the earth and brings order to it, telling the waters where to go and raising up land from their depths as the waters recede and dry ground appears. We are reminded of God's efforts to bring forth creation in Proverbs 8:28-29: **"...he established the clouds above and fixed securely the foundations of the deep...he gave the sea its boundary so that the waters would not overstep his command...and marked out the foundations of the earth."**

That is the imagery that Psalm 46 draws upon as it speaks of chaotic waters and mountains that tumble down. Such an occurrence would be the undoing of God's initial act of creation, a return to chaos and disorder where God had placed boundaries and order. The opening verses of Psalm 46 assert that even were such an unthinkable event come to pass, still we would not need to fear, because God is our refuge and strength. The one who initiates, directs and controls creation is undoubtedly sovereign over it, and verse 7 of the psalm reminds us that it is within His power to bring desolation to the earth. However, God discloses in the opening chapters of His Word that **it is in His very nature to create, to calm chaos, to bring flourishing upon what before was empty and formless.** God is a God of creation.

GOD OF REDEMPTION

The second key characteristic of God that informs Psalm 46 is that He is a God of redemption. In verse 6 we are told that nations in an uproar are no match for Him, and that kingdoms may fall but God maintains His sovereignty over even them. This is further explored in verses 9 and 10, when it is made clear that God can bring a halt to all human violence and strife, breaking weapons and rendering the machines of war unnecessary.

This harkens back to another likely familiar story from earlier in the Bible—the crossing of the Red Sea, in Exodus 14 and 15. In this

recounting, we are told that God first delivered His people from slavery and oppression in Egypt, breaking the yoke of dominion that had characterized their lives for many generations. He brought them rescue, salvation, deliverance, redemption. And yet the people doubted, crying out as they reached the edge of the Red Sea, gazing out hopelessly at the expanse of the water and anticipating the chariots of Pharaoh would be upon them rapidly, bringing an abrupt end to the newly freed lives they had so recently begun. They become irate that they would be brought out of Egypt just to die in the desert, and they have no qualms about sharing their frustrations with Moses. They were like Lieutenant Dan, from *Forrest Gump*, asking derisively, “Where is this God of yours?”

Oh, but remember what happens next! Forrest says it plainly: “It’s funny Lieutenant Dan said that, ‘cause right then, God showed up.” And so it was for the Israelites. In a miraculous showing of His power over His own creation, God parts the waters of the sea, and the Israelites walk through on dry land. And then, in a showing of His power over human affairs, God permits the waters to crash back down, drowning the chariots and eliminating the clear and present threat to His people. The violence that seemed so inevitable is eliminated before it even began, and **God is proved to be a promise keeper, delivering His people from the clutches of what was then the most powerful human empire on earth.** God is a God of redemption.

WHAT DOES GOD OFFER US?

Because God is Creator and Redeemer, Psalm 46 is able to confidently affirm that His character offers us clear reason to trust Him. Verses 1 to 3 provide assurance that **God is our ever-present help.** As we said just a minute ago, even if the foundations of the earth tear themselves apart, God will remain our refuge and strength. There is not anything within His own creation that threatens to topple *Him*. Additionally, it is clear from these verses that the saying that has gotten passed off as biblical is anything but: God doesn’t help those who help themselves—He helps the helpless! In the face of natural disasters and destruction of the

magnitude described in Psalm 46, it is certain that we would be powerless to do anything to aid our own perilous position. Yet there will be nothing to fear, for God will be with us.

Which segues nicely into verses 4 through 7, which remind us that **God will provide us with a safe haven**. Where God dwells, there are flowing streams that make those who abide with Him glad. His presence there is assurance that the city cannot fall. The city is safe *because God is within it*. Where He is, there is safety for His people. When we abide closely with Him, we stay within the circle of His providential love and provision. He is the fortress that offers us protection. The same God who redeemed the Israelites from Egypt and accompanied them to the Promised Land is the one who redeems us and accompanies us on the journey He has laid out before us.

Psalm 46 concludes with the grateful invitation to come and see what the LORD has done. **His great and mighty acts will certainly prove to be reason to praise!** In this psalm, we have seen reminders of God's character as Creator and Redeemer, which in turn show Him as sovereign over and capable of handling all of nature and all the affairs of human history. Which is why verse 10 contains God's own voice, speaking out with confidence: "I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in all the earth." Earth and the nations will ultimately be brought to praise God, to exalt Him and honor Him as the highest and holiest. All chaotic forces will in the end become instruments of praise. He waters His city with streams of gladness, so that rejoicing may take the place of destruction and our strivings may cease.

As we look for the answers to our strivings, I want to encourage you to seek them out in God's character. The things that trouble our hearts find relief in God Himself. Our job is simply to turn to Him and ask for help to understand and trust more deeply in who He has revealed Himself to be. Let God be the one who unties the frayed and tangled knot of your strivings. You can be still in the backseat, because you know who is driving the car.