

PSALM 46: 1-3, 9-11

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
- ⁹ The Lord makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
God breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
God burns the shields with fire.
- ¹⁰ 'Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.'
- ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

What is it that you fear most these days? Is it infection or disease? Is it the loss of a job or financial stability? Is it the consequences of conflict and tension in a relationship? Is it some natural disaster, as the psalmist alludes to, or war and violence as many in our world fear?

This psalm has been read, prayed and sung by many in times of trouble. It has provided deep assurance of divine providence and the comfort of trusting that we will never be abandoned, even in our darkest hour. God is greater than any disaster or trouble, and God is with us, surrounding us.

But in order for the words to really seep into our souls to strengthen, heal and empower us for what we are struggling to face, we need to let go any literal reading of them. Before the last few hundred years in the "Western world" (meaning Europe & North America), literalism was considered a most superficial reading of sacred texts. Literalism is one of the negative consequences introduced with a modern scientific worldview.

A literal reading of this psalm makes it meaningless. Think about it... What kind of help can God be if the earth is shaking, the mountains trembling and the waters roaring? Should people not fear if they are in the midst of an earthquake, volcano or tsunami? And what about those folk living in a war zone? Wars may cease here and there, but sadly, the multiplication of wars and conflicts small and great are a permanent feature of our world as we have known it so far. If God is supposed to be a strength and help in time of trouble, God has a spotty track record at best.

And yet, a more “spiritual” reading of the psalm would argue that beyond the very necessary help we need from friends, neighbours, health and governing authorities in times of personal and social trouble, without some deep inner grounding in the soul, we will not make it. We may be safe on the outside and get all the help we need, but if we are broken and shaken within, what power, movement force or energy can heal and renew life in us? God is the word the psalmist uses for this power, movement and presence in their life. God may definitely reveal God’s self in the help we receive from other people and the chance circumstances of life that work in our favour. But more specifically, God works in and through us to grow us outward so we can be and become, grow and blossom, even in the broken places...

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble.” Is God your refuge and strength in times of your trouble?

PRAYER: O God, our God, my God... Be a present help in time of my trouble... Do not abandon me... Surround me... make me strong, especially in the fragile and broken places... in the face of the tumults of life, the distress and conflicts of life, reveal yourself as the rock and foundation more solid and grounded than any shaking I will experience in my soul... Shine a light on my way forward... Give me hope that I will get through whatever I must pass through... Arouse courage in me to find the kind of strength that is also strong in compassion... Make me a present help in times of trouble for others around me... I pray this way in the name of Jesus who shone your light in the way he lived, died and rose again... Amen.