

Have you ever had a day, a week or even a longer period of time when everything just seem to go right; just as you planned it with no problems, crises, or disasters? Well, occasionally, we may be lucky enough to have such a blessing. But most of the time, life tends to surprise us and at times throws us a high inside curve ball that knocks us down, like this coronavirus. Remember how things were going merrily along about two months ago, and then all of a sudden, out of nowhere comes this deadly virus and our lives were turned upside down. Sometimes our luck runs out. This reminds me of a lost and found ad in the newspaper: lost, male dog, lost one eye in a fight with a cat, mangled ear, only three legs, missing one ear, can't hear well, answers to the name Lucky.

During those difficult times in life like right now, hopefully like me, you have turned to the Bible for comfort and inspiration. Over the years I have found the Book of Psalms to be a source of hope and encouragement during those rough times of life. And one of my favorites and one of the most well-known is the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm. This morning let's look at this wonderful writing and see what encouragement we can find for our journey through life and this current crisis.

Read Psalm 46

A stormy conflict began on October 31, 1517, in Wittenberg, Germany, when a Catholic priest developed a list of complaints against the Catholic Church and nailed that list on the door of the Cathedral of Wittenberg. That expression of discontent in the heart of Martin Luther ignited the greatest upheaval in centuries within the Catholic Church, the Protestant Reformation. This created a huge conflict between those who wanted change in the church and those who wanted things to stay just as they were; emotions ran high. Fearing for the safety of Martin Luther, a sympathetic friend led him to the shelter of a castle. It was here that Luther experienced once more the protection and comfort of a mighty God. Within his temporary hiding place, God's Word became more alive for Luther than ever before. During those days of solitude, prayers, and Bible reading, Luther observed that the devil, who is the author of most sorrow, anxiety and trouble, flees before the sound of God's music almost as much as he does before the Word of God. With that inspiration, Luther composed one of our most powerful hymns "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Even though the Catholic Church excommunicated him, Luther went on to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ until his death in 1546, and played a major role in what became the Protestant faith. His majestic hymn was sung at his funeral and the first line is engraved on his tombstone. In spite of Luther's excommunication, his hymn was eventually accepted into the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s. While there may be divisions within the Church universal, this hymn unifies all believers in the love and protection of God.

Inspired by Psalm 46, this hymn is a bold affirmation of a powerful and loving God. This Psalm encourages us to trust in the Lord during difficult times like right now. It provided continual comfort and assurance to Martin Luther as he faced opposition and even possible death, and as he repeated over and over again: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." And it can also be just as reassuring to us today; its message is timeless and its encouragement is unceasing.

In times of trouble, what do you do? When you face a crisis, how do you react? How do you handle difficult situations? Are you calm and always under control or do you go into a panic mode? Do you approach the problems and surprises that life throws your way with a positive, can-do attitude or do you assume a victim mentality, a defeated attitude?

Now the normal human reaction is one of panic. When the unexpected suddenly jumps up in front of us and we don't know what to do, our heart starts beating so fast that you can almost hear it; there is a tightening in our chest like we are about to have a heart attack; we get short of breath and start gasping for air; and we start speaking so fast that we sound like an auctioneer. Does that sound familiar? Ever felt that way? And of course, we always try to solve the problem or resolve the situation all by ourselves since we think that we are the only one who really knows the solution. We don't listen to anybody else or seek any advice on how to handle the situation; after all we know what's best for all involved. Right? Am I still on track?

Now this is the way that most people handle unexpected problems and crises in life. However, the author of the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm gives us some insight into how God wants us to handle the troubles that come our way during this journey through life. In this psalm, there are three key points that inspired Luther to write his hymn. First, the psalmist calls God a "very present help in trouble." The Hebrew word translated "trouble" literally means "a tight space." As Christians we are not guaranteed immunity from the problems of life. If you ever meet anyone who tells you that if you accept Jesus Christ into your heart and join their church, you will prosper, be rich and never have any more problems, run from that person as fast as you can. That's not Christianity, that's a cult.

From experience we all know that we are going to face problems each and every day; that's just how life is. Have you ever been in a tight spot where you were pressed on every side, where your options were limited, your freedom restricted or your progress hindered? As indicated in this psalm, we all face situations that are beyond our control at some time such as tornadoes, hurricanes, forest fires or the coronavirus. As you listened to the victims of these disasters telling their stories of survival, the most consistent comment is their faith in God. When we face circumstances over which we have no control, God is truly our refuge.

The key phrase in this morning's text is "an ever present help in trouble." The *New English Bible* translates it this way: "a timely help in trouble," and the *Message* says: "ready to help when we need Him." Ever present, God is always there with us not just during the good times, but also in our times of trouble when the going gets tough. Many times when we are in a crisis, we are so worried about that is happening around us that we forget that God is there with us; that He is our constant companion. Because of what's going on around us, we may not see His hands at work or feel His abiding presence, but He's always there. In the last verse of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus promised to all who will believe in Him: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world." In Hebrews 13:5, God says "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." As we go through this time of self-isolation and uncertainty, remember these verses and especially the word "always." God is always there to help us through whatever situation we may find ourselves in.

The second key point is that we need to recognize that our God is a mighty fortress. In the days of the psalmist, people needed a refuge in the time of storms and in the time of danger when enemies approached. Often they would build a refuge in the form of a tower on top of the highest hill in the area or as in Luther's day, they would build a castle. Today God is the refuge to whom all believers can go when threatened by the storms of life.

However, even today with the constant threat of the virus, many people are stubborn and don't think they need to seek refuge with God. Many States have even listed the church as nonessential. After all we have all this modern technology, science and information at our finger tips; so we can come up with the answers to all our problems by ourselves by just googling it on our smart phones; so who needs God. While our pride tells us that we can do anything and don't need any help, especially from God, sooner or later we come to our senses and realize that this is not true.

In all honesty, we cannot live without God; let's face it, we are not created to be without God in our life. It is only when we finally recognize that our lives, our survival, our very existence, and our happiness are dependent upon God that we truly begin living. Only God can bring sunshine out of the storms and flowers out of the mud. He can protect us on the outside as our refuge, and He can strengthen us on the inside as our Friend.

Of course, as we all know from experience, the Christian life is not without its share of storms, but God offers us assurance and certainty; He is always there, always providing and meeting our needs. There is comfort in the knowledge that while things around us are always changing; God's love for us is constant. God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. The Apostle Paul understood this when he wrote in Romans 8:28 that in all things God works for the good of those who love and trust Him. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 Paul also encourages us by noting that God will never let us be pushed beyond our limit; He will always be there to help us through

whatever we may face. However, it's up to us to call on God so that we can move beyond merely surviving to thriving.

Finally, the real secret for dealing with life's problems is found in the most often quoted verse of the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm, the tenth verse: "Be still, and know that I am God." Have you ever seen a child in a tizzy, a temper tantrum – upset, crying, and fretful? Having watched our grandchildren recently go through the terrible twos I have some experience in this. They only began to be quiet and settle down when we hugged them close and calmed their fears. This is the way that the Lord deals with our problems when we are in a panic or upset; so think of God as your loving Grandfather.

However if you are like me, you will wrestle with a problem or situation by yourself for a while; then only after a long time of worry and anxiety will you realize that you need to call on God for help. Only when we quiet down, be still, do we feel the presence of God. Of course, He has been there all along, but we have been in such a panic that we don't realize it until later. God says be still, come to me, listen to me, let me calm you down, let me handle the problem, I will get you through this situation, trust me.

In the day-to-day routines of life, we can get so preoccupied with all the things we have to do – work, family, chores – that we forget about God until we are in a crisis; or like the old saying "until we are up to our elbows in alligators." But the psalmist is telling us what he most likely learned from experience and that is that God is always there ready to help us through whatever is troubling us; big or small, nothing is impossible for God. This is what it means when we pray in the Lord's Prayer – "give us our daily bread." We want our bread, but we must never forget who supplies it. God helps us through each and every day. The more we are aware of His presence, the more we will lean on Him and the better and more peaceful life will be.

Have you ever been so overwhelmed that you didn't know what to do, and then when you finally sat down in a quiet place the answers to your problems came to you? It's because you stopped and took time to clear your mind and gather your thoughts. God is saying that when life gets rough, go to a quiet place and be still and listen for His guidance.

In closing let's take a more detailed look at the phrase "Be still and know that I am God." The Hebrew word for "be still" means "enough!" In addition, the term "know" means to acknowledge, confess your dependence on the Lord and His amazing grace. Thus, the Lord is basically saying: "**Enough**, enough, I am here to help you; why don't you let me make your life better. Don't ignore me, don't be stubborn; I can help you. You only have to acknowledge your dependence on me and your love for me." Because let's face it, when the storms of life beat down on us, we all need a refuge, a place of security, and that place is in the arms of God.

During this difficult time as we wait for life to get back to somewhat normal, acknowledge that He is God and bring Him your concerns and problems; then be still and feel His abiding presence and love for you. The Lord is always on your side and with Him nothing is impossible. Remember God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Rest on this assurance. Amen