

Have you ever had a day, a week or even a longer period of time when everything just seemed 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 throws us a high inside curve ball that knocks us down, like the coronavirus. Let face it, sometimes our luck runs out. This reminds me of a lost and found ad in the local newspaper: lost, male dog, lost one eye in a fight with a cat, only three legs, missing one ear, can't hear well, answers to the name Lucky.

During those difficult times in life, 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 great source of hope and encouragement during those rough periods of life. And one of my favorites and one of the most well-known is the 46th Psalm. This morning let's look at this inspired writing and see what encouragement we can find for our journey through life.

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, which we remember on this Reformation Sunday. 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 and vibrant for Luther than ever before.

During those days of solitude, prayers, and Bible reading, Luther began a translation of the Bible from Latin into German so that everybody would be able to read God's Word for themselves. Up to this time only the priests had access to the Bible. Luther also believed that congregational singing should be allowed. 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," which was our opening hymn.

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 would become 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 and debates 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.

Psalm 46 breathes a spirit of confidence in the Lord during difficult times that few other psalms or biblical passages can do. 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 as we face problems; its message is timeless and its encouragement is unceasing.

The author of the 46th Psalm gives us some insight into how God wants us to handle the trials and troubles that come our way during this journey through life. There are three key points in this psalm 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 life. Have you ever been in a tight spot where you were pressed on every side, when the walls seem to be closing in on you, where your options were limited, your freedom restricted or your progress hindered? The psalmist specifies two such places.

One of these is when we find ourselves in situations beyond our control. Verse 2 states: "We will not fear even though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the sea," describing a natural disaster such as storms, hurricanes or earthquakes. Even these frightening demonstrations of nature's fury will not cause fear for those who have confidence in God. When we face circumstances over which we have no control, God is our refuge.

The other tight place that the psalmist identifies is when we face insurmountable opposition. In verse 9, the psalmist speaks of war, bows, spears and shields. Some scholars believe that the writer is referring to the unsuccessful Assyrian attack on Jerusalem, during the reign of King Hezekiah as recorded in the nineteenth chapter of 2 Kings. The angel of the Lord went through the Assyrian camp and killed 185,000 soldiers in one night. The psalmist is saying: "When I face an army against which I have no ability to fight, I am still not afraid." Why? Because God is my refuge and strength, and He fights for me. The Apostle Paul understood this when he wrote in Romans 8:31 – "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

The second key point is that we need to recognize that our God is a mighty fortress. God uses the problems and troubles of life to help us to realize: "I really don't know what to do." Let's

face it, we are a determined people who want to come up with all the answers by ourselves. When faced with a major decision, we get a legal pad, make a list of pros and cons, then methodically and logically work through the choices, and arrive at what appears to be a reasonably good decision. When things go wrong, we know where to go, what books to read, who to consult, and what techniques to employ. And when it comes to the church, what do we do in a difficult situation? We form a committee! We sometimes act as though we don't need God. But we will never really know Him until we humbly acknowledge: "Lord, I don't know what to do, I need your help."

While our pride tells us that we can do anything and don't need any help, especially from God, sooner or later we all come to a crossroad when we realize that this is definitely not true. In all honesty, we cannot live without God; let's face it, we are not created to be without God in our lives. 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 in these times, 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. We must recognize that we can't do it by ourself; we need our mighty fortress!

Finally, the real secret for dealing with life's problems is found in the most often quoted verse from the 46th 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 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.

Have you ever been so overwhelmed by the problems of life that you didn't know what to do, and then when you finally sat down in a quiet place the answers to your problems suddenly came to you? It's because you paused 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. When the winds of life swell around us, there is a stabilizing force in the heart of every believer that calms their fears; it is trust in God.

God tells us to be still and know Him. So, what does God mean here about knowing Him? How do you get to know someone? Well, you spend quality time with them, listen to them, and pay attention to them. As I chat with each of you each week, I come to know and appreciate each of you more and more. I learn about your families, your strengths, and your concerns. As you listen to this beautiful psalm, you recognize that the psalmist knew God firsthand. He had a close personal relationship with his God. When I have a problem and go to someone for help, I like to have already met the person, face to face. Would you go to someone for advice that you didn't know? Do you know God on a one-on-one basis? Does He know your voice? Or when you are in a crisis and send a 911 call, will it be the first time that you have talked to Him in a long time? This is why spending a quiet time with the Lord each day is so important.

God is our refuge and our strength. We can receive strength from our friends, our family and even our financial resources. But the greatest strength that can meet the deepest needs of our lives when grief and worry come is that which can only be found in the Lord. He can give us the strength to adjust to new and difficult circumstances. He can give us the strength to look back and be grateful. He can give us the strength to keep going, to persevere, and to look forward with hope.

Now whenever we think of strength, we often think of something solid, massive, built to last, like the castle that Martin Luther took refuge in. In the seventh chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus describes the difference between the wise and foolish builders of life. In this passage, the wise builder constructs his house on a solid foundation, a rock, while the foolish person builds his house on sand, and when the storms came the house was lost. Of course, Jesus is not talking about a physical house but a spiritual house, the spiritual well-being of each person whose foundation is God and His Word. Jesus probably had the 46th Psalm in mind as He taught this lesson on life and faith.

The reconstruction of the Big I in downtown Albuquerque twenty years ago consisted of five levels of ramps and roadways. To support the heavy load of these bridges, ramps, and traffic, we used what are known as drilled shafts. Holes were drilled in the ground 100 feet deep and 10 feet wide. Next, we placed massive rebar cages inside the holes and filled them with concrete. The rebar was bigger than your arm. This solid foundation was necessary because the Big I was built on an old landfill and garbage dump. In addition, an earthquake fault line runs right through this part of the city all the way from Cochiti to Socorro. Without a solid foundation, it would collapse under the loads and demands of daily traffic.

In life God is our refuge and our strength. He is the solid rock upon which we should build our lives. Using the engineering terms from the Big I illustration, let His Word be like a drilled shaft that runs deep into your heart and let it carry all the loads of life. If we are going to survive the problems of life and maintain our sanity and peace of mind, we need to be rooted deeply in the Bible. How many of us when life knocks us down, go to the Bible for comfort? Sometimes it is our last resort, but eventually we wind up sitting down, being still and listening to what God has to tell us in His Word.

It is a great comfort to know that His Word is there for us in times of trouble; however, there is also a message and warning for us. If we are not deep in the Word, if over the years we have built our foundation shallow, on sand, we will have severe problems when the storms of life come crashing in on us like waves. If you are not reading the Bible each and every day, and not in a Sunday School class or weekly Bible study, then I encourage you to reconsider where you are spending the time God gives you.

You may be like some of those people who said that they were going to stay in their homes and ride out Hurricane Ian, and didn't make the necessary preparations. Afterwards, you heard those very same people on TV saying that they will never do that again and will be better prepared the next time. How deep is your foundation? Are you rooted in the Word of God? Are you ready for the next storm of life that is definitely headed your way?

Have no fear, God is here. He will help you with your burdens and concerns, and He will help you with your decisions. There are times, of course, when God requires human involvement, but there are other times when we must simply stand back, be still and let God work. In other words, let go, let God. It is then that we begin to appreciate a mighty God who is indeed "our refuge and strength." Amen