



Songs of Sinners, Songs of Saints:

SONGS OF A REAL.PRESENT.GOD.

PSALM 46 | A Very Present Help

A Thematic and Scriptural Study for the 2019 LCMS Youth Gathering
by Rev. Dr. Joel D. Lehenbauer

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“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble...
Be still, and know that I am God.” **Ps. 46:1, 10**

“The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.” **Zeph. 3:17**

“Praise the Lord!
For it is good to sing praises to our God;
for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting.” **Ps. 147:1**

“Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly!
Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!
For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation.”
Ps. 149:1,3–4

“[Jabal’s] brother’s name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe.” **Gen. 4:21**

“The oracle of David...the sweet psalmist of Israel.” **2 Sam. 23:1**

“David...also set apart for the service the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun,
who prophesied with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals...The number of them along with
their brothers, who were trained in singing to the Lord, all who were skillful, was 288.” **1 Chron. 25:1, 7**

“For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he
[Jesus] is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, ‘I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.’” **Heb. 2:11–12**

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and
saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is
pleased!’” **Luke 2:13–14**

“And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” **Matt. 26:30**

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all
wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to
God.” **Col. 3:16**

“And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud
thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they
were singing a new song before the throne...” **Rev. 14:2–3**

“Music is God’s greatest gift.” **Martin Luther**

LET US PRAY:

“**O Lord Jesus Christ**, the Good Shepherd, we bring before you our young people, with all their joys, needs, and temptations. Strengthen them against the dangers and trials that threaten them in body and spirit. And in us who are older, sharpen our conscience toward the great responsibility we bear for the youth among us, that we may watch over their souls with a holy concern, ward off the offenses that beset them, impel them to all that is good, and, so far as in us lies, keep them on the path of salvation.

To you, merciful Father, we commend all work that is being done among young people, all organizations in which our youth are led to you. Arm and equip all leaders and teachers of youth with wisdom and patience, and fill us all with that power of love that believes all things, hopes all things, and never gives up. Raise up in our congregations fellow-workers who will become friends and helpers of youth.

You will require of us the souls of young people. Help us, O faithful God, to point them to you with unwearying faithfulness and **to lead them to their best friend and surest refuge, our Savior, Jesus Christ**, to whom, with you and the Holy Ghost, be glory and honor forever and ever. Amen.”¹

¹ From *Orate Fratres: Gebetsordnung für evangelisch-lutherische Pfarrer* [1952]; quoted in John W. Doberstein's *Minister's Prayer Book*, 31–32; adapted.

PRELUDE:
**Sweet Psalmists
Be Praised**

Since the great tradition of the quintuple Nobel Prize for chemistry, literature, peace, physics and medicine was established posthumously by Alfred Nobel in 1895, only thirteen Americans out of 113 honorees to date have been recognized as Nobel-worthy literary laureates—a rarified honor, indeed. Among them are such iconic figures as T. S. Eliot, Pearl Buck, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway.

Two of the thirteen, the first and last of these peerless American artists, have hailed from the great (and chilly!) state of Minnesota. The first, in 1930, was the author Sinclair Lewis, reared in the tiny village of Sauk Centre in Stearns County, Minnesota. “[If] there was ever a novelist among us with an authentic call to the trade,” wrote H. L. Mencken, “it is this red-haired tornado from the Minnesota wilds.”²

Most recently, in 2016, this prestigious honor was granted — not without controversy, befitting his wide-ranging, endlessly debated and self-proclaimed “never-ending” artistic venture — to a prodigy born in 1941 on the banks of Lake Superior to Jewish parents with Russian and Lithuanian roots. They named their firstborn son in Hebrew: Shabtai Zisl ben Avraham.

Shabtai’s English name was Robert Allen Zimmerman. He was born in Duluth and grew up in the small town of Hibbing, Minnesota, erected squarely on top of the Mesabi Iron Range in St. Louis County (the town motto: “We’re Ore and More”). He began his long and storied career by writing and singing folk songs in the Dinkeytown neighborhood of downtown Minneapolis. At some point during those Dinkeytown years, the artist formerly known as Robert Zimmerman stumbled across the poetry of Dylan Thomas. Inspired, a new name was born: Bob Dylan.

Whatever you may think of Bob Dylan and his music (and some younger readers may not think of him at all), it would be a crying shame — indeed, a travesty — if the theme and Scripture study for the first LCMS Youth Gathering in history to be held in Minneapolis did not give at least some recognition to this native son of Minnesota, who was singled out by the Nobel committee amidst a host of worthy competitors and alongside some of the greatest literary giants in American history as “a great poet in the English tradition for having

created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition.”

This seems especially apropos when the primary Scriptural basis for the 2019 Gathering is, quite literally, a compilation of songs: the most famous, revered, ancient, widely used, best-selling songbook in history; the great songbook of the Bible, the Book of Psalms. Here in the Psalms are songs that are *inspired* in the most literal sense of the term, pouring forth lyrically, poetically and powerfully from the heart, mind, spirit and mouth of God Himself through its very human authors.

Stop and think of it: We have a God who *sings*. Not only does He sing, He *created* singing. It’s His idea in the first place. Music originated in the mind, heart and imagination of God. Incredibly, astoundingly, unbelievably, God sings not only *to* and *through* His people, He sings and rejoices *over* and *on account of* them (us!), poor, miserable sinners though they be: “[I] will exult over *you*,” says the Lord, “with loud singing.”³

The songs of God recorded in the Psalms and elsewhere in Scripture have literally changed and shaped the course of human history — and my life, and your life — forever. God sang the world into being through His Word and Spirit and Son.⁴ Furthermore, He keeps on “singing the same old song” as He makes new creatures through His Word out of nothing by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. There is also the tantalizing promise of a new, unearthly song,⁵ one that the saints will spend eternity learning and singing and dancing; but no one can learn that song unless they are taught it by God Himself, the Master Singer-Songwriter and Creator of All Song.

One of the great song-poems of Scripture is Psalm 46, which serves as the primary inspiration for the choice of the 2019 LCMS Youth Gathering theme: **Real. Present. God.**

Take a few minutes now to read this psalm aloud—slowly, quietly, thoughtfully, meditatively, prayerfully—with the Gathering theme in mind. Hint: Pay close attention to the first word...and the second word...and the third word...and...well, you get the idea...

² “Sinclair Lewis.” Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia. Oct. 12, 2017. Accessed Oct. 12, 2017. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinclair_Lewis#cite_note-2.

³ Zephaniah 3:17.

⁴ Genesis 1:1; John 1:1.

⁵ Revelation 14:3.

PSALM 46

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

“Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

Psalm 46 inspired one of the greatest hymns ever written, “Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott,” or in English, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” This hymn was written by none other than Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation, a history-altering event, which at the time of this writing is celebrating its 500th birthday (1517–2017). It is no mere Lutheran bias to call this “a masterpiece of musical expression.”⁶ No Christian hymn has been translated into more languages than “A Mighty Fortress.” Even before the year 1900, it was translated more than 80 times into fifty-three different languages. It appears in virtually all Protestant hymnals, and has been described as “the greatest hymn of the greatest man in the greatest period of German history.”⁷ The musical critic James Huneker has written, “This hymn

thunders at the very gate of heaven in its magnificent affirmation of belief.”⁸

Most of you have probably sung this hymn many times to some version of its bold, stirring, march-like tune. Take a few minutes to *speak* it now — slowly, quietly, thoughtfully, meditatively, prayerfully — with the words of Psalm 46 and the Gathering theme in mind:

*A mighty fortress is our God,
A trusty shield and weapon;
He helps us free from ev'ry need
That hath us now o'ertaken.
The old evil foe
Now means deadly woe;
Deep guile and great might
Are his dread arms in fight;
On earth is not his equal.*

*With might of ours can naught be done,
Soon were our loss effected;
But for us fights the Valiant One,
Whom God Himself elected.
Ask ye, Who is this?
Jesus Christ it is.
Of Sabaoth Lord,
And there's none other God;
He holds the field forever.*

*Though devils all the world should fill,
All eager to devour us.
We tremble not, we fear no ill,
They shall not overpower us.
This world's prince may still
Scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none,
He's judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him.*

*The Word they still shall let remain
Nor any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plain
With His good gifts and Spirit.
And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Let these all be gone,
Our vict'ry has been won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.*

Much like the Psalms themselves,

“This hymn is truly written out of the fullness of Luther's heart. There were moments in his life when even Luther felt something akin to despair. And in such hours he would say to Melancthon, his faithful coworker, ‘Come, Philip, let us sing the 46th

6 *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vol. 53, P. 284.

7 W.G. Polack, *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1942 [third and revised ed., 1958; reprinted, 1975]), 193.

8 Polack, 193.

Psalm.’ And the two friends would sing lustily in Luther’s own version—‘Ein’ feste Burg is unser Gott.’ Uncounted wavering, doubting, fearful hearts have been strengthened by this hymn of faith, have been filled with new courage and power to battle for the right to remain true to the faith once delivered to the saints.”⁹

Psalm 46 and all the divinely inspired God-songs of Scripture, together with the many other songs and hymns of faith that they have inspired, will surely continue to strengthen and encourage countless hearts and lives by the power of God’s Holy Spirit, including the hearts and lives of those attending the 2019 Gathering just blocks from Dinkeytown, Minnesota. But first, on to a selective prologue to the Psalms themselves: real songs of real sinner-saints — and of a very real and very present God.

9 Polack, 194.

THE Psalms:

A PROLOGUE

What follows is not intended as a “proper” or formal introduction to or overview of the Psalms. Other excellent resources provide such an introduction, such as the highly recommended *Prepare the Way of the Lord: An Introduction to the Old Testament* by R. Reed Lessing and Andrew E. Steinmann.¹⁰ The introduction to the Psalms in *The Lutheran Study Bible* is also outstanding and highly recommended.¹¹ The prologue offered here focuses on three general characteristics of the Psalms: the Psalms as Miniature Bible; the Psalms as Songbook; and the Psalms as Prayer Book. Our hope and intention is that reflecting on these characteristics of the Psalms will help deepen your appreciation for this unique and precious book of the Bible and enhance your use of it.

THE PSALMS AS A MINIATURE BIBLE

For the past 40 years or so, I’ve made a concerted effort to read through the Bible at least once each year. Those efforts have been marked more by failures than successes; but the many hours spent in God’s Word over the years have undoubtedly yielded great blessings — because God promises that His Word never fails to do its work, even when we don’t see or feel it working.¹²

A number of years ago, however I “hit a wall” in my Bible reading efforts. It’s somewhat reassuring, in retrospect, to have learned that even such a “hero” of faith as Martin Luther struggled in this way at times. During a time of spiritual and physical struggles during his mid-life years, for example, Luther simply stopped preaching for an extended period of time, admitting, “I eat, drink and sleep, but I cannot read, write or preach.”¹³

In semi-desperation, I finally decided to give up my attempt to plow my way through Genesis to Revelation once again. Instead, I decided to try to the old “KISS” strategy—“Keep It Simple, Stupid.” I decided to make it my goal to read through just one psalm every day. After all, I reasoned, how much time or effort does it take to read just one little psalm? I could hardly claim that I couldn’t handle *that*. Plus, I thought, this “simplified” approach to reading the Bible might have the added benefit of allowing time to ponder and meditate

on specific words and phrases in each psalm, to carry those thoughts with me through the day, and to think and pray about how they might apply to what I was dealing with that day.

I found practicing this “one psalm a day” method for several months deeply enriching and rewarding. Although I haven’t made it a practice since that time to “limit myself” to the Psalms, I certainly don’t regret the decision I made at that time; in fact, it opened up for me a whole new appreciation of the Psalms and led me to a new (or renewed) encounter with all kinds of psalm-based devotional resources that have continued to enrich my spiritual and devotional life.

As he was translating the Bible into German, Martin Luther wrote brief prefaces to each book of the Bible that summarized key features of a particular book, its main points and purposes, and its value and importance within the context of the Bible as a whole. Recently, I read through Luther’s Preface to the Psalms—*WOW*. It has a whole new freshness and impact, especially when reading it in the context of reflecting on the 2019 Gathering theme: Real. Present. God.

“Many of the holy fathers,” begins Luther, “prized and praised the Psalter above all other books of the Scriptures.”¹⁴ If you want to know why, he says—just read it: it speaks well enough for itself, and gives the highest praise to its own author: God the Holy Spirit. Luther goes on to offer his own “praise and thanks” for the Psalms:

“The Psalter ought to be a precious and beloved book, if for no other reason than this: it promises Christ’s death and resurrection so clearly—and pictures his kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom—that it might well be called a *little Bible*. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly *everything that is in the entire Bible*. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a *short Bible* and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that *anyone who could not read the whole Bible would here have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book.*”¹⁵

¹⁰ Reed Lessing and Andrew E. Steinmann, *Prepare the Way of the Lord: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2014), 298–313.

¹¹ *The Lutheran Study Bible: English Standard Version*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009).

¹² Isaiah 55:10–11.

¹³ LW, 28, 10.

What does Luther love most and best about the psalms? The point he comes back to again and again

¹⁴ AE 35, 253.

¹⁵ AE 35, 254.

is this: The psalms are just so *real*—*real songs of praise, lament, exultation, confession, thanksgiving, etc.* bearing witness to a *very real and present God*.

Extremely popular in Luther's day were books of stories and legends about the saints. They were great stories, but in most cases they were fictional in whole or in part. Very often, these books and stories also portrayed the saints as such heroic figures like the demi-gods of Greek lore or Marvel cartoon and feature film characters of our day with whom no ordinary Christian could genuinely identify or seriously hope to imitate. These legends, says Luther, give us nothing but false, worthless, cartoon-like saints. "The Psalter, however," says Luther, "pictures for us *real, living, active saints*." Writes Luther:

"A human heart is like a ship on a wild sea, driven by the storm winds from the four corners of the world. Here it is stuck with fear and worry about impending disaster; there comes grief and sadness because of present evil. Here breathes a breeze of hope and of anticipated happiness; there blows security and joy in present blessings. These storm winds teach us to speak with earnestness, to open the heart and pour out what lies at the bottom of it.

"What is the greatest thing in the Psalter but this earnest speaking amid these storm winds of every kind? Where does one find finer words of joy than in the psalms of praise and thanksgiving? There you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into fair and pleasant gardens, yes, as into heaven itself. There you see what fine and pleasant flowers of the heart spring up from all sorts of fair and happy thoughts toward God, because of his blessings. On the other hand, where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There again you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into death, yes, as into hell itself. How gloomy and dark it is there, with all kinds of troubled forebodings about the wrath of God! So, too, when they speak of fear and hope, they use such words that no painter could so depict for you, and no Cicero or other orator so portray them."¹⁶

Not only that, but the Psalms depict these real-life words and experiences in such a way that we cannot help but see *ourselves* and our own fears, hopes and joys. "Everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his case, so

that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better."¹⁷

Anyone who has grabbed ahold of the Psalms and hung on for dear life in a time of need or crisis knows this to be true. If you want to see the real Christian life and church "painted in living color" and "comprehended in one little picture," says Luther, then all you have to do pick up the Psalter. "There you have a fine, bright mirror that will show you what Christendom is. Indeed, you will find it in also yourself and the true *gnothi seauton* ["Know Thyself"], as well as God himself and all creatures."¹⁸

Do you want to "get real?" Just read the Psalms. There you will find real people, real sinners, real saints. There you will find a real God who is really present for and with His people in every real life situation known to humankind — and to you.

H.C. Leupold, author of a classic commentary on the Psalms, agrees:

"There does not seem to be a situation in life for which the Psalter does not provide light and guidance...We have yet to hear of men who have turned for guidance to the Psalter and have not found it.

[T]he insights and comforts of the psalms are always so much to the point. They are not the fruit of abstract meditation. They did not grow out of the study of the scholar. They were born out of real life situations. They are often wet with the tears and the blood of the writer.

They [also] have a peculiarly enduring quality. Frequent use does not wear them thin. The more familiar they become, the more they are loved. That is, of course, the mark of all true literature, but doubly the mark of the psalms.

This again may be due to the fact that the psalms continually carry the reader into the immediate presence of God. They do not refer to Him in the abstract. God is not a God off in the distance to the psalmist. All the psalms were prayed on the steps of a throne of mercy. The light that emanates from that presence somehow gives light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."¹⁹

More recently, in a recent devotional book on the Psalms, Tim Keller makes the same point, drawing on

¹⁷ AE, 35, 256.

¹⁸ AE, 35, 256–257.

¹⁹ Herbert C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1969 [reprinted; copyright 1959, The Wartburg Press]), 29.

¹⁶ AE 35, 255–256.

the wisdom of church fathers over the years who cherished the Psalms:

“One of the ancient church fathers, Athanasius, wrote, ‘Whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book [the psalms] you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you...learn the way to remedy your ill.’ Every situation in life is represented in the book of psalms. Psalms anticipate and train you for every possible spiritual, social, and emotional condition—they show you what the dangers are, what you should keep in mind, what your attitude should be, how to talk to God about it, and how to get from God the help you need. ‘They put their undeviating understanding of the greatness of the Lord alongside our situations, so that we may have a due sense of the correct proportion of things.’ Every feature and circumstance of life is ‘transmitted to the Lord’s presence, and put into the context of what is true about him.’ Psalms, then, are not just a matchless primer of teaching but a medicine chest for the heart and the best possible guide for practical living

“The psalms also help us see God—God not as we wish or hope him to be but as he actually reveals himself. The descriptions of God in the Psalter are rich beyond human invention. He is more holy, more wise, more fearsome, more tender and loving than we would ever imagine him to be. The psalms fire our imaginations into new realms yet guide them toward the God who actually exists. This brings a reality to our prayer lives that nothing else can. ‘Left to ourselves, we will pray to some god who speaks what we like hearing, or to the part of God we manage to understand. But what is critical is that we speak to the God who speaks to us, and to everything that he speaks to us ...’²⁰

If the Psalms are a miniature Bible,²¹ and if the center of the Bible is Jesus Christ, God’s only Son and the Savior of the world, then is it proper to say that Jesus is also the central figure in the Psalms? Not only is it proper to say this, it is essential to say and see this as we read and pray the Psalms.

“Properly to pray the Psalms,” says Patrick Henry Reardon in his book *Christ in the Psalms*, “is to pray them in

Jesus’ name, because the voice in the Psalter is Christ’s own voice.”²²

Keller agrees and concludes the introduction to *The Songs of Jesus* by providing an apt transition to the next section of this prologue, where we consider more closely the psalms as songs:

“Most of all, the psalms, read in light of the entire Bible, bring us to Jesus. The psalms were Jesus’ songbook. The hymn that Jesus sang at the Passover meal (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26) would have been the Great Hallel, Psalms 113–118. Indeed, there is every reason to assume that Jesus would have sung all the psalms, constantly, throughout his life, so that he knew them by heart. It is the book of the Bible that he quotes more than any other. But the psalms were not simply sung by Jesus; they also are about him, as we will see throughout this volume. The Psalms are, then, indeed the songs of Jesus.”²³

GREATEST HITS OF THE BIBLE:

The Psalms as songs

One reason that awarding the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature to Bob Dylan was rather controversial is that most people probably don’t think of this well-known singer-songwriter primarily as a *literary* figure or artist. But, of course, most songs are also in some respect *poems*. Dylan, as the Nobel committee recognized, “created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition.”

The first thing we need to recognize about the Psalms, C.S. Lewis notes, is that they are “not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons,” but rather “poems, and poems intended to be sung.”²⁴ As literary scholars and judges have always recognized, poems — including poems that are intended to be sung—are a form of literature. And *great* poems are a form of *great* literature. C. S. Lewis again:

“Most emphatically the Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licenses and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry. They must be read as poems if they are to be understood; no less than French must be read as French or English as English. Otherwise we shall miss what is in them and think we see what is not.”²⁵

20 Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Songs of Jesus: A Year of Daily Devotions in the Psalms* (New York: Viking, 2015), viii.

21 No Old Testament book is quoted or referenced in the New Testament more often than the Psalms—some 400 times!

22 Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Chesterton, Indiana: Conciliar Press, 2000; revised, 2011), viii.

23 Keller, ix.

24 Lewis, 10.

25 Ibid.

“Poems *intended to be sung*”—just as they were when they were originally composed:

“The shepherd’s weathered hand gently worked the strings of the harp. He created a sequence of harmonious tunes that ascended and descended the rolling Judean hills. Poetry flowed from his lips like a meadow spring, recounting the day’s experiences and offering heavenward thanks.

“The shepherd boy David learned to play and sing in just such a setting, while watching his father’s flocks of sheep or goats. The Lord made David a warrior-poet and a prophet who united the tribes of Israel as a harmonious kingdom. His collection of songs accompanied by the harp is the basis of the Psalter, one of the most beloved books of the Bible.”²⁶

Sometimes, good music even makes us want to dance. Dancing can be risky, of course, and some of us are definitely better — or worse — dancers than others.

“David, we know, danced before the Ark. He danced with such abandon that one of his wives...thought he was making a fool of himself. David didn’t care whether he was making a fool of himself or not. He was rejoicing in the Lord...”²⁷

“The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me,” says C. S. Lewis, “is to express that same delight in God which made David dance.”²⁸

No theologian sang the praises of music and song as genuine and precious gifts of God more highly than Martin Luther, who even went so far as to call music “God’s greatest gift.”²⁹ Elsewhere, he qualified that statement only slightly, and in a way that actually serves to amplify the status and value of the Psalms as *both* music and theology: “Music is an outstanding gift of God and next to theology. I would not want to give up my slight knowledge of music for a great consideration. And youth should be taught this art; for it makes fine skillful people.”³⁰

Consider these remarkable statements of Luther on music and singing:

“That it is good and pleasing to God to sing spiritual songs is, I think, not hidden to any Christian. Everyone is acquainted not only with the example of

the kings and prophets of the Old Testament (who praised God with singing and playing, with poetry and all kinds of string music) but also with the common use of music, especially the singing of psalms, in Christendom from the very beginning. Paul, too, instituted this in 1 Cor. 14:15 and bids the Colossians (3:16) heartily to sing spiritual songs and psalms unto the Lord in order that thereby God’s Word and Christian doctrine might be used and practiced in diverse ways...

“I greatly desire that youth, which, after all, should and must be trained in music and other proper arts, might have something whereby it might be weaned from the love ballads and the sex songs and, instead of these, learn something beneficial and take up the good with relish, as befits youth. Nor am I at all of the opinion that all the arts are to be overthrown and cast aside by the Gospel, as in some superspiritual people protest; but I would gladly see all the arts, especially music, in the service of Him who has given and created them.”³¹

“I am not satisfied with him who despises music...for music is an endowment and a gift of God, not a gift of men. It also drives away the devil and makes people cheerful; one forgets all anger, unchasteness, pride, and other vices. I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise. And we see how David and all saints put their pious thoughts into verse, rhyme, and songs, because music reigns in times of peace.”³²

“Experience testifies that, after the Word of God, music alone deserves to be celebrated as mistress and queen of emotions of the human heart...A greater praise of music than this we cannot conceive. For if you want to revive the sad, startle the jovial, encourage the despairing, humble the conceited, pacify the raving, mollify the hate-filled...what can you find that is more efficacious than music? The Holy Spirit Himself honors it as an instrument of His specific office when He testifies in His Holy Scriptures that His gifts came upon the prophets through its use. ... Not in vain, therefore, do the fathers and the prophets want nothing more intimately linked to the Word of God than music.”³³

“We know that music is hateful and intolerable to devils. I firmly believe, nor am I ashamed to assert, that next to theology no art is equal to music; for it is the only one, except theology, which is able to give a quiet and happy mind. This is manifestly proved by the fact that the devil, the author of depressing care and distressing disturbances, almost flees

26 W.G. Polack, *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1942 [third and revised ed., 1958; reprinted, 1975]), 839.

27 Lewis, 43.

28 Ibid.

29 Martin Luther. Compiled by Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: An Anthology, Vol. II* (St. Louis, Concordia, 1959), 982 [3102].

30 WLS II, 979 [3090].

31 WLS II, 981 [3095].

32 WLS II, 980 [3091].

33 WLS II, 982–983 [3103].

from the sound of music as he does from the word of theology. This is the reason why the prophets practiced music more than any art and did not put their theology into geometry, into arithmetic, or into astronomy, but into music, intimately uniting theology and music, telling the truth in psalms and songs. But why do I praise music now, trying to depict — or rather disfigure — so great a subject on so small a slip of paper? But my love for music, which has often refreshed me and set me free from great worries, abounds and bubbles over.”³⁴

“When sadness comes to you and threatens you and threatens to gain the upper hand, then say: Come, I must play our Lord Christ a song on the organ (be it the “Te Deum laudamus” or the “Benedictus”); for Scripture teaches me that He loves to hear joyful song and stringed instruments. And strike the keys with a will, and sing out until the thoughts disappear, as David and Elisha (1 Sam. 16:23; 2 Kings 3:15) did. If the devil returns and suggests cares or sad thoughts, then defend yourself with a will and say: Get out devil, I must now sing and play to my Lord Christ.”³⁵

“A new miracle deserves a new song, thanksgiving, and preaching. The new miracle is that God through His Son has parted the real Red, Dead Sea and has redeemed us from the real Pharaoh, Satan. This is singing a new song, that is, the holy Gospel, and thanking God for it. God help us to do so. Amen. The stringed instruments of the...psalms are to help in the singing of this new song...all pious, Christian musicians should let their singing and playing to the praise of the Father of all grace sound forth with joy from their organs and whatever other beloved musical instruments there are (recently invented and given by God), of which neither David nor Solomon, neither Persia, Greece, nor Rome, knew anything. Amen.”³⁶

Reardon reminds us:

“Christians have always preferred to sing the psalms (James 5:13). Properly to pray the psalms is to pray them in Jesus’ name, because the voice in the Psalter is Christ’s own voice. Christ is the referential center of the Book of Psalms. Even in speaking to one another, Christians invoke the psalms (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Christian lips readily break forth with the words of the Psalter, because the Christian heart meditates on the psalms day and night. Ultimately, the words of the psalms are the mighty name of

Jesus broken down into component parts. Thus has it always been.”³⁷

How fitting, therefore, is the title of Keller’s book on the Psalms, *The Songs of Jesus*: songs sung by our Savior and given to be sung by His people in, through and to Him:

“The Psalms were the divinely inspired hymnbook for the public worship of God in ancient Israel (1 Chron. 16:8–36). Because psalms were not simply read, but sung, they penetrated the minds and imaginations of the people as only music can do. They so saturated the heart and imagination of the average person that when Jesus entered Jerusalem it was only natural that the crowd would spontaneously greet him by reciting a line from a psalm (Mark 11:9; Ps. 118:26).

“The early Christians sang and prayed the psalms as well (Col. 3:16; 1 Cor. 14:26). When Benedict formed his monasteries he directed that the psalms all be sung, read, and prayed at least once a week. Throughout medieval times the psalms served as the most familiar part of the Bible for most Christians. The Psalter was the only part of the Bible a lay Christian was likely to own. At the time of the Reformation, the psalms played a major role in the reform of the church. Martin Luther directed that ‘the whole Psalter, psalm by psalm, should remain in use.’

“All theologians and leaders of the church have believed that the Psalms should be used and reused in every Christian’s daily private approach to God and in public worship. We are not simply to read psalms; we are to be immersed in them so that they profoundly shape how we relate to God. The psalms are the divinely ordained way to learn devotion to our God.”³⁸

34 WLS II, 983 [3104].

35 WLS II, 983 [3105].

36 WLS II, 982 [3100].

37 Reardon, viii.

38 Keller, vii.

THE PSALMS AS PRAYER BOOK of the Bible (and the Church)

As virtually all the writers cited previously have noted, God's people throughout history have not only sung but also *prayed* the psalms. One of the "little books" that has been formative for and critical to my own devotional life is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*. Because it is impossible to improve on what he has written, I cite here only one of the opening sections of the book that shows how "Learning to Pray in the Name of Jesus" actually means learning to pray *the psalms* as the Christ-centered Word of God, and as an exposition of the Lord's Prayer.

"Now there is in the Holy Scriptures a book which is distinguished from all other books of the Bible by the fact that it contains only prayers. The book is the Psalms. It is at first very surprising that there is a prayerbook in the Bible. The Holy Scripture is the Word of God to us. But prayers are words of men. How do prayers then get into the Bible? Let us make no mistake about it, the Bible is the Word of God even in the Psalms. Then are these prayers to God also God's own word? That seems rather difficult to understand. We grasp it only when we remember that we can learn true prayer only from Jesus Christ, from the word of the Son of God, who lives with us men, to God the Father, who lives in eternity. Jesus Christ has brought every need, every joy, every gratitude, every hope of men before God. In his mouth the word of man becomes the Word of God, and if we pray his prayer with him, the Word of God becomes once again the word of man. All prayers of the Bible are such prayers which we pray together with Jesus Christ, in which he accompanies us, and through which he brings us into the presence of God. Otherwise there are no true prayers, for only in and with Jesus Christ can we truly pray.

"If we want to read and to pray the prayers of the Bible and especially the Psalms, therefore, we must not ask first what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ. We must ask how we can understand the Psalms as God's Word, and then we shall be able to pray them. It does not depend, therefore, on whether the Psalms express adequately that which we feel at a given moment in our heart. If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray. If we were dependent entirely on ourselves, we would probably pray only the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer. But God wants it otherwise. The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart.

"Thus if the Bible also contains a prayerbook, we learn from this that not only the Word which he has to say to us belongs to the Word of God, but also that word which he wants to hear from us, because it is the word of his beloved Son. This is pure grace, that God tells us how we can speak with him and have fellowship with him. We can do it by praying in the name of Jesus Christ. The Psalms are given to us to this end, that we may learn to pray them in the name of Jesus Christ.

"In response to the request of the disciples, Jesus gave them the Lord's Prayer. Every prayer is contained in it. Whatever is included in the petitions of the Lord's Prayer is prayed aright; whatever is not included is no prayer. All the prayers of the Holy Scripture are summarized in the Lord's Prayer, and are contained in its immeasurable breadth. They are not made superfluous by the Lord's Prayer but constitute the inexhaustible richness of the Lord's Prayer as the Lord's Prayer is their summation. Luther says of the Psalter: 'It penetrates the Lord's Prayer and the Lord's Prayer penetrates it, so that it is possible to understand one on the basis of the other and to bring them into joyful harmony.' Thus the Lord's Prayer becomes the touchstone for whether we pray in the name of Jesus Christ or in our own name. It makes good sense, then, that the Psalter is often bound together in a single volume with the New Testament. It is the prayer of the Christian church. It belongs to the Lord's Prayer."³⁹

Bonhoeffer groups the psalms into ten topical categories:

1. The Creation
2. The Law
3. Holy History
4. The Messiah
5. The Church
6. Life
7. Suffering
8. Guilt
9. The Enemies
10. The End

Other classifications have been advocated or suggested; Luther, for example, suggested five:

1. Prophecies about Christ
2. Doctrinal Psalms
3. Psalms of Comfort
4. Prayer Psalms
5. Psalms of Thanksgiving

³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970), 13–16.

No particular classification is “divinely inspired,” and each is worthy of consideration. Whatever categories are used, the key question to ask when reading and praying the psalms (as Luther, Bonhoeffer, Reardon, Keller and others helpfully remind us) is: Where is *Christ* here? Where and how do we hear His voice? How do I (and we as the people of God) pray this psalm in and with Him? We will return to these questions regularly, as we offer reflections on the psalm that inspired the hymn “A Mighty Fortress” — and the 2019 Gathering theme.

As your groups prepares for the Gathering by spending time in the Psalms, consider using these questions to facilitate discussion:

- Where is *Christ* here?
- Where and how do we hear His voice?
- How do I (and we as the people of God) pray this psalm in and with Him?
- What does this psalm mean for me here and now?

Reflections on PSALM 46

INTRODUCTION:

Slow-playing the Psalms

Sometimes, as the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt. The Lord's Prayer, known by memory by countless Christians, is a precious and powerful gift of God — the very words of God given by Him to teach us how to speak to Him — but if this prayer becomes a rote recitation of *mere* words, it loses its power and value. Luther's words are still relevant to us today: "Prayer used to be taught in such a way that no one paid attention to it, and people supposed it was enough if the act was performed, whether God heard it or not. But that is to take prayer on luck and to mumble aimlessly. Such a prayer is worthless."⁴⁰

The best-known passage in the entire Bible, next to the Lord's Prayer, is most likely one of the psalm: Psalm 23. And what a beautiful, comforting, life-giving psalm it is! But even many Christians have heard this psalm so many times that it may be a real challenge for them to "hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" these all too familiar words.

For long-time Lutherans, Psalm 46 may present a similar problem or challenge, due in part to its historical connection to "the Battle Hymn of the Reformation," "A Mighty Fortress." It's probably an overstatement to say that most Lutherans know this psalm by heart, but many of us may think we do, or are at least tempted like me to think: "Oh, *that* psalm again—yeah, I know that one."

With a psalm like Psalm 46, therefore, it's doubly important to do what Luther advises in his wonderful little treatise, *A Simple Way to Pray: slow down*. Did you catch that? **Slow down**. Slow down, says Luther, stop and think about the words of Scripture that you are reading and meditating on. Remember, the best way to read the psalms is to *pray* them. Take some time to "warm your heart," as Luther says. He continues:

"[T]here is nothing more laughable that anyone could possibly come up with than watching how mixed up thoughts become when a cold, distracted heart produces them while you are praying. But now, God be praised, I realize what a poor prayer it is when one forgets even what one was praying! **A true prayer meditates on all the words and thoughts of the prayer, from beginning to end.**"⁴¹

Sometimes, says Luther when he is really concentrating on each and every word of a psalm (or of the Creed or the Lord's Prayer), he doesn't even make it to the end.

"It often happens that I get lost in right and good thoughts as they come, so that I do not even say the rest of the Lord's Prayer [or a Psalm, etc.]. When such rich thoughts come, just let other prayers go and give these thoughts plenty of room; do not in any way hinder them. For in this way the Holy Spirit is preaching to you. His sermon is better than a thousand of our prayers. Many times I have learned more in the process of praying a single prayer than I would have struggled to learn through much prayer and writing."⁴²

Poetry, by its very nature, is open to a variety of interpretations and applications depending on the state of mind, heart and life of the person reading it. This is also true of the psalms as poems, which is just as God intended it to be. This doesn't mean "anything goes" when reading the Psalter. But it does mean that no two people, or even the same person in differing circumstances, will answer the question "What does this psalm mean for me here and now?" in precisely the same way. My hope and prayer is that some of what is offered here will help to "warm your heart" as you read and meditate on this psalm, but remember, a sermon of the Holy Spirit is worth a thousand of my words (or anyone else's). Take what's here and use it as you will, but do your own work — and let the Holy Spirit do His, through His Word.

There are many fine commentaries on the Psalms, new and old. When it comes to commentaries, everyone has his or her favorite(s). My favorite commentary on the Psalms is the vintage classic mentioned earlier by the sainted Old Testament Lutheran scholar H. C. Leupold. Much of what is offered below reflects Leupold's reading of Psalm 46. The headings summarizing the three sections of the psalm are also taken verbatim from Leupold.⁴³ First, the issue of historical context, often a challenging (and fascinating!) endeavor when reading the Psalms.

⁴⁰ LC III, 14.

⁴¹ Martin Luther. Translated by Matthew C. Harrison. *A Simple Way to Pray* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2012), 14.

⁴² Luther, 13.

⁴³ This commentary was published in June 24, 1959 — the anniversary of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession. It somehow seems meet, right and salutary to privilege a commentary published on this date when considering the Psalm that inspired the "Battle Hymn of the Reformation!"

THE STORY BEHIND THE SONG:

Something real — and really big — just happened here

Every psalm of Scripture, while inspired and therefore authored by God, was also written by a real life person on the basis of some real life event or experience. We don't know who wrote many of the Psalms; they are "unsigned compositions," or at least the name of the author has not been preserved in the written manuscripts of Scripture. Of those that are ascribed to a particular author, by far most were written by David. Sometimes we even know the specific life experience that prompted his psalms—e.g., his dramatic encounter with the prophet Nathan after his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband,⁴⁴ or his plea for mercy while fleeing from King Saul and hiding in a cave.⁴⁵

Twelve psalms in the Bible, including Psalm 46, are ascribed to the Sons of Korah, who were doorkeepers and musicians of the tabernacle and temple.⁴⁶ Underlying each of these psalms, too, is some real life event or experience, even if the Bible doesn't tell us exactly what that event or experience was.

Some commentators, notes Leupold, "feel that [Psalm 46] is best understood when it is placed against the background of the festival of the enthronement of Yahweh, when the dramatic liturgy made the congregation aware of what a great helper it had in the Lord."⁴⁷

See if you agree with Leupold who says: "The first impression created by the psalm is that it is born out of an event which is still quite vivid in the minds of those for whom it was first composed."⁴⁸ The psalm seems to refer to "a recent historical event," one which involves "actual physical dangers."⁴⁹ All things considered, two biblical events seem to present themselves as the most likely candidates for inspiring (from a human perspective) the composition of this psalm (song, poem, hymn). One possibility is God's deliverance of Israel during the reign of Jehoshaphat.⁵⁰ But in Leupold's view:

"Nothing meets the needs of the case quite so well as does the great deliverance that took place in the days of Hezekiah (701 B.C.) when Sennacherib's forces were disastrously destroyed after having directly threatened the city of Jerusalem, and when

the omnipotence of the God of Israel was underscored as it was on few other occasions."⁵¹

The biblical account is summarized very briefly below, but you are strongly encouraged to set aside this study for a few minutes and read for yourself one of the most remarkable war stories in the Bible (and in the history of the world), as it is recorded in Isaiah 36–37.⁵² In fact, this would make for a great Bible study for your group as you prepare for 2019.

In brief: During the reign of Hezekiah, one of the rare, good and godly kings of Judah, the kingdom is attacked by Sennacherib, King of Assyria, who conquers all — yes *all* — of the fortified cities of Judah.⁵³ Only Jerusalem is left, and the enemy is at the gate. This is a complete and unmitigated disaster. Imagine all the key cities of the United States being attacked and occupied by, say, ISIS.

The situation appears hopeless. Hezekiah "tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the Lord."⁵⁴ The prophet Isaiah comes to offer a word of encouragement from God: "Because you have prayed to me," says the Lord, "I swear — I will deliver Judah out of this hopeless situation. Sennacherib 'shall not come into this city' (Jerusalem) or even shoot one arrow there.⁵⁵ 'For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.'"⁵⁶

Here's what God did, and it is a vivid reminder of what God can do anytime, anyplace, in the face of hopeless disaster, siege by enemies that are far beyond our power to withstand: "And the angel of the Lord [the pre-incarnate Christ!] went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies."⁵⁷

Assuming that this is indeed the real, historical event that inspired the sons of Korah (who, if so, were holed up in the Temple in Jerusalem at the time fully expecting to be massacred by Sennacherib along with the rest of the inhabitants of Jerusalem) to compose this song of victory, read Psalm 46 again with this event in mind. See if you can read it this way without chills going down your spine, and without a sense of the

44 Psalm 51.

45 Psalm 57.

46 See 1 Chronicles 26.

47 Leupold, 362.

48 Leupold, 362.

49 Leupold, 362; 364.

50 See 2 Chronicles 20–22.

51 Leupold, 362.

52 For good measure, go ahead and read the rest of the story in Isaiah 38.

53 Isaiah 36:1.

54 Isaiah 37:1.

55 Isaiah 37:33.

56 Isaiah 37:35.

57 Isaiah 37:36.

original conviction of the songwriters that *these words are true; our God is real, and He is really present with us; and He must really, really, really love us.*

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Leupold’s observation seems almost understated at this point: “Few psalms breathe the spirit of sturdy confidence in the Lord in the midst of very real dangers as strongly as does this one.”⁵⁸

We consider briefly now the three sections or “stanzas” of this great hymn of praise to a very real God who is very present with his people in the midst of very real trouble and danger.

STANZA 1 (VV. 1–3):

The sure confidence of those who trust in the Lord in the face of [very real!] physical dangers.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

What’s the first word in the first verse of this psalm? How important is this word to a proper understanding of this psalm? Of the Bible? Of your life?

⁵⁸ Leupold, 363.

Leupold: “The order of the words in Hebrew places emphasis on the word ‘God’ — He, nothing else, is our refuge in the face of calamities of every sort.”⁵⁹

Check the first verse of the first book of the Bible⁶⁰ and fill in the blank: “In the beginning, _____.” Check the first verse of the last book of the Bible, the book of *Revelation*. Who is singled out here as the granter of this revelation to John and the one who is in control of the flow, meaning and culmination of history?

Sometimes we think, act and talk like “it’s all about us.” From the Bible’s perspective, what (or who) is it all about? Fill in the blanks: “In the beginning, _____; in the end, _____; in between, _____.”

Hummel: “The diligent reader [of the Psalms] will soon discover that, like the whole Bible, its real subject is not man, his devotion, inspiration, or experience, but *God* as He still creates, elects, redeems, sanctifies, reigns, reveals, judges.”⁶¹

Luther said that when pondering some passage of the Bible he often got “stuck” on a single word and became lost in prayer and thought, never making it to the end of the passage. Can you imagine him (or you) getting “stuck” on the very first word in this psalm?

Now reflect on the first *two* words in this psalm: “God is.” Clearly, these two words are not a complete sentence here, but do they make sense as a complete sentence? Can you think of anywhere in the Bible where God actually describes Himself in this way?⁶² What does this tell us about God?

Nothing in all creation is comparable to God, so He doesn’t need to compare Himself to anything else in order to identify or describe Himself. At the same time, everything in creation reflects God’s nature in some way, since He created it. List all the ways you can think of in 60 seconds of finishing the following sentence in a *biblical* way: “God is _____.” If you’re reading this in a group setting, be sure to share your lists.

Now reflect on the first *three* words in Psalm 46 (we’re not going to keep going like this word for word through the whole psalm, but humor me — and Luther — one more time): “God is *our*...”

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Genesis 1:1.

⁶¹ Horace Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh: An Introduction to the Origin, Purpose, and Meaning of the Old Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1979), 448.

⁶² For examples, see Ex. 3:14 and John 8:58.

A more literal and accurate translation of the Hebrew here is “God is *for us*...” How does this affect and enhance your reading of the opening verses of this psalm? Perhaps you’re aware that for Martin Luther, the words “for us” (Latin: *pro nobis*) had huge theological significance, often functioning as a two-word summary of the Gospel.

In Rom. 8:31 Paul asks: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” How would you answer Paul’s question?

Read Rom. 8:31–39. How does Paul answer his own question? What are some of the things he lists here that cannot separate us from God’s love in Christ? Which of the things on this list resonate most with you?

You might think I’m getting carried away with reading so much into a little three-letter word like ‘our.’ Well, here’s Luther commenting on his own praying through the words of the second article of the Creed, “And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord...”:

Stop and think about this. In the First Article of the Creed you must consider yourself to be one of God’s creatures and not doubt this. Here you must also consider, and not doubt, that you are among the redeemed, and emphasize the word ahead of all other words: *Our*. So the creed says “Jesus Christ *our* Lord.” So He also suffered *for us*, died *for us*, rose again *for us*, and all that He has done is *for us* and applies *to us*. *You* are included in the *our*, as the Word itself demonstrates.⁶³

Case closed. Stop and pay attention to little words like “our” in the Bible, and remember: “*You* are included in the *our*.” If God is *our* refuge and strength, then He is *your* refuge and *your* strength — in every situation in life.

The Psalms are rich in metaphors, picture-language. This can be a powerful way of communicating, especially for people like us living in a world dominated by screens and images who tend to think more visually than abstractly or analytically. God’s saving and protecting presence among His people in this psalm is dominated by three metaphors, the first two of which appear in the very first phrase: *refuge, strength, fortress*. Reflect on these images. What comes to mind — from elsewhere in the Bible, or from your own experience?

Express in your own words what it means to be able to claim God’s presence in these ways. If you’re reading this in a group setting, consider sharing your answer

with others and encouraging each other in the reality of God’s presence as our strong refuge and strength.

Re-read the words of the hymn *A Mighty Fortress*. Based on what you know about Luther’s life and experiences, why do you think he found this particular psalm so meaningful and comforting?

In the Greek version of the Old Testament called the *Septuagint*, the word for “strength” in Psalm 46:1 is translated *dynamis*. What English word obviously has its origin in this word? Paul uses this Greek word in Rom. 1:16 to describe...what? In what way is this the greatest power in our lives and in the world?

There is a deep irony, even paradox, in the first verse of this psalm that we dare not miss or gloss over. The whole point of this verse and of the psalm as a whole is to emphasize God’s *very real presence* with and among His people (come to think of it, that would make a great Gathering theme: **Real. Present. God** ☺). God is “*a very present help*,” says the psalmist, but where and when is He present in this way? The psalm’s answer: He is a very present help “*in trouble*.” Here is a paradox to ponder: *God is really, truly present only with and among those who are in trouble*. Psalm 46 is written for “*a people in need. Only when they are in distress do they need his special protection.*”⁶⁴

“The term *very present*,” notes Derek Kidner, “has implications of God’s readiness to be ‘found’”.⁶⁵ This clearly suggests, however, that sometimes God is actually rather difficult to find. Often, in fact, God even seems to be deliberately *hiding* from us. And since God is by definition best at everything, when He hides He is virtually impossible to find. Nobody beats God at the game of hide and seek if He does not wish to be found.

This theme of a God who hides Himself, who sometimes seems to be nowhere to be found, is quite prominent in the psalms themselves. It is an agonizing theme in several of the songs, or lamentations, of the sons of Korah, including one that precedes Psalm 46 only by a page or two in the hymnal of the Old Testament. Ponder these words of the sons of Korah in Ps. 42:2–3; 9–10:

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”*

64 Gaebelein, 351.

65 Derek Kidner, *Psalm 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary on Books I and II of the Psalms* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 174.

63 ASWTP, 29.

*I say to God, my rock:
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of
my enemy?”
As with a deadly wound in my bones,
my adversaries taunt me,
While they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”*

In his commentary, *Prepare the Way of the Lord: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Reed Lessing says:

“Psalmists often acknowledge the raw experiences of feeling abandoned. They cry out to Yahweh, ‘How long?’ (e.g. Pss 6:3; 13:1-3), ‘Where is God?’ (e.g., Pss 42:3; 44:24; 79:10), ‘Why?’ (e.g., Pss 10:1; 22:1; 43:2; 74:1), ‘Are you asleep?’ (e.g., Pss 17:1; 27:7; 30:10). These writers were transparent before Yahweh and were honest when they were grieved by life’s catastrophes....

“Such prayers exhibit a thoroughgoing candor about life’s desperate moments and a profound honesty regarding deep pain. Heart-wrenching questions permeate Israel’s laments. Why did this happen? Why did God allow it? Who is responsible? Is there any order in the world? Is Yahweh really the Creator and Redeemer? Will he deliver on what he said?”⁶⁶

Have you ever wondered where God is in your life? Have you found yourself asking questions about why God would allow something to happen? You are not alone. Even the great psalmists of the Bible wrestle with these difficult questions.

Bonhoeffer quotes Luther: “Where do you find more miserable, more wretched, more depressing words than in the Psalms of lamentation? There you see into the heart of all saints as into death, even as into hell. How sad and dark it is there in every wretched corner of the wrath of God.”⁶⁷

Yet even in the darkness and seeming absence of our God, we cling to the promises that God IS very present in our lives, providing real help and strength in our very real difficulties.

It’s easy to “spiritualize” the Psalms and the kind of suffering and salvation they describe. Leupold offers a helpful caution in this regard, considering that Ps. 46:2–3 itself speaks quite vividly of “the earth giving way,” “mountains being moved into the heart of the sea,” “waters roaring and foaming,” “mountains trembling” at the

swelling of the sea. Natural disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, hurricanes, tornados still happen with regularity in our world, and are the cause of profound suffering, distress and questions like “Why? Where is God?”

“The question may be raised whether the author [of the Psalm] is at this point thinking in terms of actual physical dangers in the realm of nature, or whether he has in mind other dangers that may be symbolized by these natural disturbances. The most feasible answer is that he actually has in mind physical dangers of the sort described. We may encounter them; they may put our faith to the test; we may be able to remain fearless under the test. That does not exclude the application that everyone may make for himself from the suggestion offered, namely, that He who thus safeguards His own against harm in physical distresses can guard them equally well from all other assaults that may threaten their safety.”⁶⁸

Sometimes, for reasons that are often beyond our comprehension, God “shakes the world so as to affect significant political, cultural, and economic changes.”⁶⁹ Can you relate to that? “Nations and kingdoms may cause great consternation and wreak havoc on earth.”⁷⁰ Again, people may ask: “Why and how could this happen? Where is God in all of this?”

It is not “spiritualizing” the Psalms to recognize that the deepest and most profound suffering of all is the recognition of our separation from Him and, worse, His separation from us because of our very real sin and guilt. Just five psalms after Psalm 46, David, the “sweet psalmist of Israel,”⁷¹ bitterly laments his own sin and pleads that God would do a different kind of hiding:

*For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.”⁷²*

The title of this study is: “Songs of Sinners, Songs of Saints: Songs of a Real and Present God.” Tim Keller calls the Psalms “The Songs of Jesus;” Bonhoeffer says

⁶⁶ Lessing, 304.

⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer, 46.

⁶⁸ Leupold, 364.

⁶⁹ Expositor’s, 352.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ 2 Samuel 23:1.

⁷² Psalm 51: 3–4, 9,11.

we can only pray the Psalms rightly with and in Jesus Christ; Reardon says the voice in the Psalter is Christ's own voice. So how can Jesus pray these psalms of lamentation, these psalms that question God's love and presence, these psalms that speak even of being crushed by sin and guilt and cry out for God's forgiveness? Again, it is impossible for this writer to improve upon how Bonhoeffer himself summarizes the answer to this question:

"No individual can repeat the lamentation Psalms out of his own experience; it is the distress of the entire Christian community that at all times, as only Jesus Christ has experienced it entirely alone, which is here unfolded. Because it happens with God's will, indeed because God knows it completely and knows it better than we ourselves, only God himself can help. But therefore also must all our questions again and again assault God himself.

"There is in the Psalms no quick and easy resignation to suffering. There is always struggle, anxiety, doubt. God's righteousness which allows the pious to be met by misfortune but the godless to escape free, even God's good and gracious will, is undermined (Psalm 44:24). His behavior is too difficult to grasp. But even in the deepest hopelessness God alone remains the one addressed. Neither is help expected from men, nor does the distressed one in self-pity lose sight of the origin and the goal of all distress, namely God. He sets out to do battle against God for God. The wrathful God is confronted countless times with his promise, his previous blessings, the honor of his name among men.

"If I am guilty, why does God not forgive me? If I am not guilty, why does he not bring my misery to an end and thus demonstrate my innocence to my enemies? (Psalm 38, 44, 79). There are no theoretical answers in the Psalms to all these questions, as there are none in the New Testament. The only real answer is Jesus Christ. But this answer is already sought in the Psalms. It is common to all of them that they cast every difficult and agony on God: "We can no longer bear it, take it from us and bear it yourself, you alone can handle suffering." That is the goal of all the lamentation Psalms. They pray concerning the one who took upon himself our diseases and bore our infirmities, Jesus Christ. They proclaim Jesus Christ to be the only help in suffering, for in him God is with us.

"The lamentation Psalms have to do with that complete fellowship with God which is justification and love. But not only is Jesus Christ the goal of our prayer; he himself also accompanies us in our prayer. He, who has suffered every want and has brought it before God, has prayed for our sake in

God's name: "Not my will, but thine be done." For our sake he cried on the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Now we know that there is no longer any suffering on earth in which Christ will not be with us, suffering with us and praying with us—Christ the only helper.

"On this basis the great Psalms of trust develop. Trust in God without Christ is empty and without certainty; it is only another form of self-trust. But whoever knows that God has entered into our suffering in Jesus Christ himself may say with great confidence: 'Thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me' (Psalms 23, 37, 63, 7, 91, 121)."⁷³

Jesus Christ alone is our source of comfort and strength. In His suffering, death and resurrection, He has endured every sorrow we experience and defeated our greatest foe. He is worthy of our trust and joins us as we pray to our heavenly Father.

Horace Hummel reminds us that what Bonhoeffer says here is not some personal, idiosyncratic theological perspective, but the confession of the Christian church itself:

"The Christian church confesses that Christ is the only one who can or who has plumbed the depths of the primal suffering of which these psalms ultimately speak, but whose experience of it was also undeserved and hence of vicarious and redemptive significance for those who join themselves to Him. Only He can fully pray these psalms in all their fullness, and only in covenant with Him can the faithful, Old Testament as well as New, pray them validly. Even more profoundly, we insist that via Baptism it is Christ, the last Adam, the "new Israel," who prays these psalms in us and for us before the throne of the Father. And because of His victory, we know that we do not pray them in vain."⁷⁴

⁷³ Bonhoeffer, 47–49.

⁷⁴ Hummel, 431.

STANZA 2 (VV. 4–7):

The security that comes from God’s [very real!] presence in the face of the dangers of war.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Note the first word of this stanza: “There.” Where? The first stanza began by pointing us to a sacred, all-important *person*: God. The second stanza begins by pointing us to a sacred all-important *place*. Like God, this place “is” — it exists, it endures, it is ever-present and stable and dependable because its existence depends on God and is rooted in Him alone. What and where is this awesome place? Follow the stream ...

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.” The water imagery continues in the second stanza, but what a contrast! In stanza one the waters “roar and foam,” they “swell,” and swallow up everything they meet — even the mountains themselves, like the great Flood in the days of Noah, a “natural disaster” like no other in history, and a sign of God’s wrath and judgment. The waters in stanza two, however, are peaceful and serene: they comfort, cheer and “make glad” the hearts of those walk along their banks. Another psalm comes to mind, the best-known and best-loved song in all of Scripture:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
*your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*⁷⁵*

“The city of God,” of course, is Jerusalem—which, when under siege by King Sennacherib, looked for all the world as though it would be spoken of in the future only in the past tense: “Jerusalem was...a great city, once; the city of God.” But God heard Hezekiah’s

prayer and swore an unbreakable promise: “I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.”⁷⁶ This city can never, ever fall—why? Because it is “the holy habitation of the Most High.”⁷⁷ “God is in the midst of her”—really, truly present with her, in the very midst of her. Therefore, “she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.” “Nations rage,” as they always have and will. “Kingdoms totter”—what else is new? Here’s what ultimately matters, what we can always count on and be sure of as citizens of the city of God: “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”⁷⁸

“*The city of God* is one of the great themes of the Old Testament, and especially of the Psalms, where the present psalm and the next two [Psalms 47-48] form a memorable group. God’s choice of Zion, or Jerusalem, had been as striking as His choice of David, and the wonder of it keeps breaking through; for it is only as God’s abode that it is either strong (5) or of any consequence; yet as such it will be the envy of the world (68:15f.) and the mother-city of nations (87). Indeed the Old Testament already points toward the New Testament’s vision of Zion as a heavenly community rather than a mere locality on earth (cf. on 48:2).”⁷⁹

This heavenly community, while no “mere locality on earth,” is, however, definitely and definitively located and locatable on earth: “It is also taught among us that the only holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.”⁸⁰ “We are not dreaming about some Platonic republic...but we teach that this church actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world. And we add its marks, the pure teaching of the Gospel of the sacraments.”⁸¹ Like God himself, the city of God — the Church — is really present and can be found where God directs us to find it: In His Word, in His sacraments — the life-giving waters that nourish it and all who live in it.

“Just as, according to Gen. 2:10, a stream issued from Eden, to water the whole garden, so a stream makes Jerusalem as it were into another paradise, a river—whose streams make glad the city of Elohim... When the city of God is threatened and encompassed by foes, still she shall not hunger and thirst, nor fear and despair; for the river of grace and of

⁷⁵ Psalm 23:1–4.

⁷⁶ Isaiah 37:35.

⁷⁷ Psalm 46:4.

⁷⁸ Psalm 46:7.

⁷⁹ Kidner, 175.

⁸⁰ AC VII, 1.

⁸¹ Ap VII/VIII, 20.

her ordinances and promises flows with its rippling waves through the holy place, where the dwelling-place or tabernacle of the Most High is pitched.”⁸²

The very mention of “threats,” “foes,” “hunger,” “thirst,” however, reminds us that even within the utter safety and security of the city of God (the Church) the presence of God is hidden — hidden under suffering, hidden under ordinary-looking external means (words, water, bread, wine), hidden by the insignificant appearance of its citizens and their status in a power-hungry and glory-obsessed world.

“In contrast with the mighty and turbulent river mentioned by the prophet [in Is. 8:6-8], which symbolizes the mighty world power Assyria, stands a quiet and insignificant streamlet which runs from the fountain of Siloam to the east of the holy city. Trivial as it may seem in contrast with the mighty Euphrates or Tigris, it may, nevertheless, in its own way symbolize the insignificant appearance of the kingdom of God in the eyes of the world. What the world despises makes glad the people of God, “the sanctuary which is the dwelling place of the Most High.” God’s city has a quiet and joyful confidence all its own...That which makes the difference between the mighty nations and the seemingly insignificant one is the indwelling of God in the latter. It is this that makes her inviolable and unassailable. When the night of danger and distress is past, then the morning of God’s help regularly dawns...He can offer His help so effectively because He is in the very midst of His people.”⁸³

If stanza one of Psalm 46 leads us to Christ — “a very present help in trouble,” who took upon Himself all the sin, suffering and trouble of the world and everyone who has ever and will ever live in it — then stanza two of Psalm 46 leads us to the Church, where God in Christ has chosen to dwell and make Himself found: “The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.” This, as Reardon says in his reflections on the psalm, “is no modest or understated theme” in Scripture; in fact, it is an inexhaustible theme.

“The wording of this refrain [in Psalm 46] accentuates what we may call its ecclesiological theme; that is to say, the voice in this psalm is the voice of the Church, the holy city, which is the dwelling place of God. Hence the importance [cf. Luther, and our discussion of the little word “our” above] of the first person plural all through this psalm: “we,” “us,” and

“our.” God is “our” refuge and strength, “we shall not fear, The Lord of hosts is with us,” and so forth. This is the same voice that prays, “*Our Father*.”

“This is no modest or understated theme in Holy Scripture, this image of God’s people as a holy city, the Church. Thus our psalm touches the rest of the Bible at a hundred points, all the way to the Book of Revelation, where John’s final vision is one of the holy city which is the definitive dwelling place of God: ‘God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved.’

“As in the book of Revelation, our psalm speaks of a stream of living water in connection with the holy city...This stream is at once the primeval river of Paradise, the holy font of Baptism and the water of eternal life.

“The twofold refrain says that God is ‘with us,’ in Hebrew, *‘immanu*. A close look at that word shows it to be most of the name of the Messiah, ‘Immanuel,’ which literally means ‘with us God’. ‘God with us’ is, of course, Christ our Lord, abiding in our midst all days, even to the end of the world.”⁸⁴

Reardon’s connection of this psalm with Christ, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Church is reminiscent (again) of Bonhoeffer’s little book on the Psalms and especially its precious little section on “The Church” in the Psalms:

“Psalms 27, 42, 46, 48, 63, 81, 85, 87, and others sing of Jerusalem, the City of God, of the great festivals of the people of God, of the temple and the beautiful worship services. It is the presence of the God of salvation in his congregation for which we here give thanks, about which we here rejoice, for which we long. What Mount Zion and the temple were for the Israelites the church of God throughout the world is for us—the church where God always dwells with his people in word and sacrament. This church will withstand all enemies (Psalm 46), its imprisonment under the powers of the godless world will come to an end (Psalms 126 and 137). The present and gracious God, who is in Christ who in turn is in his congregation, is the fulfillment of all thanksgiving, all joy, and all longing in the Psalms. As Jesus, in whom God himself dwells, longed for fellowship with God because he had become a man as we (Luke 2:49), so he prays with us for the total nearness and presence of God with those who are his.

“God has promised to be present in the worship of the congregation. Thus the congregation conducts its worship according to God’s order. But Jesus Christ himself has offered the perfect worship by perfecting every prescribed sacrifice in his own

82 *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, trans. By James Martin. Volume V: Psalms, F. Delitzsch. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982 (reprinted), 94.

83 Leupold, 365.

84 Reardon, 89–90.

voluntary and sinless sacrifice. Christ brought in himself the sacrifice of God for us and our sacrifice for God. For us there remains only the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in prayers, hymns, and in a life lived according to God's commands (Psalms 15 and 50). So our entire life becomes worship, the offering of thanksgiving. God wants to acknowledge such thanksgiving and to show his salvation to the grateful (Psalms 50 and 23). To become thankful to God for the sake of Christ and to praise him in the congregation with heart, mouth, and hands, is what Psalms wish to teach us."⁸⁵

STANZA 3 (VV. 8–11):

A summons to consider [real] visible evidence of all this in a recent disaster of the enemy.

Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Notice how stanza three begins: "Come and see!" "Come, behold the works of the Lord!" While there are a lot of dots to connect from Psalm 46 to the fourth Gospel, it's hard not to think of the words of Jesus to the first disciples as they sought the ultimate "work of the Lord," the Messiah: "Come and see!";⁸⁶ or John the Baptist's words just previous to this: "Behold, the Lamb of God!"⁸⁷

With its reference to "desolations on the earth" and the cessation of war "to the end of the earth," there is clearly a strong eschatological flavor to this final stanza of the psalm. We go from Christ (vv. 1-3) to the church (vv. 4-7) to the consummation of all things (vv. 8-11). "This is a vision of things finally to come," notes Kidner — *but*, lest we rush too quickly forward, "the victories of the present are a foretaste of them."⁸⁸

Leupold slows us down, and reminds us again that behind this psalm are real, remarkable, historical events, even as there is real, visible, tangible evidence of God's work throughout history and throughout His creation:

"The writer now indicates that there is tangible evidence of all that he has claimed for the Lord. Whether this evidence is directly visible from the city walls or on the part of those who go a short distance from the holy city, or whether the writer is asking men to visualize the scene that has been reported to them as being actually visible down in the vicinity of Lachish, is of little moment. For when you consider the matter rightly, it is clear that there are some great "works of the Lord" in evidence...There are "astounding things" that were wrought, not in some secluded corner of the world, but out in the open where the facts as such can be readily checked by any investigator. The world learned soon enough what had befallen the hosts of mighty Assyria when they grew presumptuous against the Lord God of Israel.

"To make the sketch more drastic, it is stated that the deserted field of battle looks very much as if the God of Israel had gone out in person and had broken the bows of war, shattered the spears, and burned the wagons of war...in the fire. For the field and the adjoining territory were still littered with the weapons and supplies of war...On the very day the psalmist wrote, the smoke of these fires has been hanging all over the area. If this does not prove that the Lord controls the destinies of war, what does? If this is not a sufficient token that 'God is our refuge,' what is?"⁸⁹

Lest we are tempted again to "spiritualize" this psalm in its connection to mighty works of God in Christ and the astounding things He has done in and through our Savior, let us recall John's eyewitness testimony to the visible evidence of God's real presence in Christ: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."⁹⁰ The disciples saw Jesus with their own eyes, heard Him with their own ears, touched Him with their own hands:

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us — that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."⁹¹

85 Bonhoeffer, 40–42.

86 John 1:39.

87 John 1:36.

88 Kidner, 176.

89 Leupold, 366–367.

90 John 1:14.

91 1 John 1:1-3.

What Jesus said and did, right down to His real, physical death on the cross and His real, physical resurrection from the dead and His real, physical ascension into heaven could “be readily checked by any investigator” — and, in fact, was.⁹² And the consummation of all things, lest we forget, which is envisioned in the third stanza of Psalm 46, can easily stand up to investigation as well — and will: “Behold [“Come and see!], he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.”⁹³

Bob Dylan may well have been meditating on the end of Psalm 46 when he wrote his soul-shattering song “When He Returns:”

*The iron hand it ain't no match for the iron rod
The strongest wall will crumble and fall
to a mighty God
For all those who have eyes and all those who have ears
It is only He who can reduce me to tears
Don't you cry and don't you die and don't you burn
For like a thief in the night, He'll replace
wrong with right
When He returns*

*Truth is an arrow and the gate is narrow that it passes through
He unleashed His power at an unknown hour that no one knew
How long can I listen to the lies of prejudice?
How long can I stay drunk on fear out in the wilderness?
Can I cast it aside, all this loyalty and this pride?
Will I ever learn that there'll be no peace, that the war won't cease
Until He returns?*

*Surrender your crown on this blood-stained ground,
take off your mask
He sees your deeds, He knows your needs even before you ask
How long can you falsify and deny what is real?
How long can you hate yourself for the weakness you conceal?
Of every earthly plan that be known to man,
He is unconcerned
He's got plans of His own to set up His throne
When He returns*

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There is a harshness to Dylan's song about the second coming that may seem inconsistent with words in

verse 10 of Psalm 46: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Hanging on my office wall is a beautiful picture containing these words, set against a serene background of a lush country field, a shady tree and an open sky peacefully dotted with puffy white clouds. I “still my soul” often every day with the help of that picture and those words. In defense of Dylan, however, we are reminded by Kidner that in Psalm 46:

“[T]he injunction ‘Be still!’ is not in the first place comfort for the harassed but a rebuke to a restless and turbulent world: ‘Quiet!’—in fact, ‘Leave off!’ It resembles the command to another raging sea: ‘Peace! Be still!’ [Mark 4:39]. And the end in view [in Psalm 46] is stated not in terms of man's hopes but of God's glory. His firm intention, ‘I will be exalted,’ is enough to arouse the resentment of the proud [Dylan: “Can I cast it aside, all this loyalty and this pride?”] but the longing and resolve of the humble: ‘Be exalted, O God, above the heavens’ (57:11) ...The refrain comes back with added force, if such a God is ‘with us,’ and if one so exalted is ‘our high stronghold.’”⁹⁴

Notes Delitzsch on this stanza: “The mighty deeds of Jahve still lie visibly before them in their results, and those who are without the pale of the church are to see for themselves and be convinced.”⁹⁵ As Paul reminds us, someday every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.⁹⁶ In the meantime:

“The recitation of the mighty acts of God [so prevalent in the Psalms] plants deep in the memory of God's people the evidences of his care, protection and providential rule. Those who are wise enough to remember and look at the world around them have tokens of God's constancy toward his people. Every victory, every subjugation of a hostile nation, and every stroke on the canvas of history of redemption brings more clearly into focus that the Lord's very plan for mankind includes the cessation of wars and the era of peace. His wars and his judgments of the nations have as a final end the removal of evil instigators, troublemakers, rebels, and expressions of hostility in whatever form. The God of peace will make ‘wars cease.’”⁹⁷

The ultimate war, of course, is the “War of the Lamb” against the puffed-up powers of sin, death and the devil. In the final chapter of his book *The Politics of Jesus*, titled “War of the Lamb,” John Howard Yoder stands alongside John in the book of Revelation and reminds us that, as Christians, we alone have the God-given

94 Kidner, 176.

95 Delitzsch, 95.

96 Philippians 2:10–11.

97 Expositor's, 353.

92 See Luke 1:1-4.

93 Revelation 1:7.

wisdom, in Christ, to discern the ultimate meaning of “every stroke on the canvas of history,” since we alone know where history began, where all history is headed and in whom all history is centered. “The question laid before John by his vision of the scroll sealed with seven seals [Revelation 4-5],” says Yoder, “is precisely the question of the meaningfulness of history.” This, of course, “is not an idle philosophical curiosity. It is a necessary expression of the conviction that God has worked in past history and has promised to continue thus to be active among us.”⁹⁸

Yoder continues:

“But the answer given to the question by the series of visions and their hymns is not the standard answer. ‘The lamb that was slain is worthy to receive power!’ John is here saying, not as an inscrutable paradox but as a meaningful affirmation, that the cross and not the sword, suffering and not brute power determines the meaning of history. The key to the obedience of God’s people is not their effectiveness but their patience (13:10). The triumph of the right is assured not by the might that comes to the aid of the right, which is of course the justification of the use of violence and other kinds of power in every human conflict. The triumph of the right, although it is assured, is sure because of the power of the resurrection and not because of any calculation of causes and effects, nor because of the inherently greater strength of the good guys. The relationship between the obedience of God’s people and the triumph of God’s cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection....

“Not only does the New Testament church claim knowledge about the meaning of history or the meaning of meekness in history; it relates this very specifically to the coming and the ministry of the man Jesus. If we had only the book of Revelation we would not necessarily know what is meant by this Lamb in whom all sovereignty is said to reside. What therefore matters ultimately is how this Lamb relates to the rest of the human history of the people who praise him. The answer lies of course in the person of Jesus himself, of whom this same early church said in another context that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”⁹⁹

In times of desperation and despair, we remind ourselves of God’s mighty and merciful acts in Jesus that work all things together according to His good purposes. We question how desolation on the earth could lead to restoration. Instead of seeking understanding,

let us pray for an increase in trust as we all the more eagerly and patiently await Christ’s return when “wars cease” and all will be made new.

Fittingly, the last chapter in Bonhoeffer’s little book on the Psalms is called “The End.” We give him the last word:

“The hope of Christians is directed to the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. In the Psalter this hope is not expressed literally. That which since the resurrection of Jesus has divided itself in the church into a long line of events of holy history toward the end of all things is, from the viewpoint of the Old Testament, still a single indivisible unity. Life in fellowship with the God of revelation, the final victory of God in the world, and the setting up of the messianic kingdom are objects of prayer in the psalms.

“The Old Testament is not different from the New in this respect. To be sure, the psalms request fellowship with God in earthly life, but they know that this fellowship is not completed in earthly life but continues beyond it, even stands in opposition to it (Psalm 17:14f.). So life in fellowship with God is always already on the other side of death. Death is, to be sure, the irrevocable bitter end for body and soul. It is the wages of sin, and the remembrance of it is necessary (Psalm 39 and 90). On the other side of death, however, is the eternal God (Psalms 16:19ff.; 49:15; 56:13; 73:24; 118:15ff.). We find this life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and we ask for it in this life and in that to come.

“The psalms of the final victory of God and of his Messiah (2, 96, 97, 98, 110, 148-150) lead us in praise, thanksgiving, and petition to the end of all things, when all the world will give God the honor, when the redeemed people of God will reign with him eternally, when the powers of evil will fall and God alone will rule.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Yoder, 231.

⁹⁹ Yoder, 231–233.

¹⁰⁰ Romans 8:28.

Additional RESOURCES

Devotional

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