

<sup>1</sup> *God is our refuge and strength,  
an ever-present help in trouble.*

<sup>2</sup> *Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way  
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,*

<sup>3</sup> *though its waters roar and foam  
and the mountains quake with their surging.*

<sup>4</sup> *There is a river whose streams make glad the city of  
God,*

*the holy place where the Most High dwells.*

<sup>5</sup> *God is within her, she will not fall;  
God will help her at break of day.*

<sup>6</sup> *Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;  
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.*

<sup>7</sup> *The LORD Almighty is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

<sup>8</sup> *Come and see what the LORD has done,  
the desolations he has brought on the earth.*

<sup>9</sup> *He makes wars cease  
to the ends of the earth.*

*He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire.*

<sup>10</sup> *He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth."*

<sup>11</sup> *The LORD Almighty is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress. (Psalm 46)*

### **How Do We Take Refuge in God?**

What is your personal fortress? When my kids were little, my in-laws came to the parsonage where we lived and built a tree house for

them. I think they imagined that as a kind of fortress the kids could retreat to and view the world from. Is your fortress like that treehouse, a quiet place where you can view the world and dream and make plans? Or is it a place of solitude where you can escape from the stress of the world? Is your fortress your favorite reading chair? Or your man cave? You know why I'm asking this question, right? We just sang, "A Mighty Fortress is our God." And we have before us the psalm that Luther based that hymn on, Psalm 46, which twice says, "**The God of Jacob is our fortress.**" What do those words mean to us 21<sup>st</sup> century American Christians? To the writer of Psalm 46 and to Martin Luther, the author of that famous hymn, a fortress was more than a place of quiet or solitude. It was a place of safety when you were under attack. It had thick walls and defenses to throw back the enemy. God is our fortress in a scary and dangerous world. Psalm 46 begins by promising us, "**God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.**" That's a real blessing in this world. But how do we make use of that fortress? **How do we take refuge in God?**

## I.

**By trusting his promises.** Psalm 46 says that we will not fear, though the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. What does that sound like? An earthquake? An avalanche? Those aren't real dangers here in Michigan. But tornadoes claim lives every year. Last spring, a flood washed a town away. Natural disasters of whatever kind are part of life in this world. Plagues sweep around the globe, as we well know. So we need God's promises. But that's not the only thing we face. Psalm 46 says, "**Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts.**" Does that sound a little closer to home? In these last weeks before one of the most bitterly contested elections in living memory, in a year when there have been countless demonstrations across the country, nations certainly are in uproar. Hopefully, our kingdoms won't fall. But no matter what, in the end, "**He lifts his voice, the earth melts.**" What can that be but Judgment Day? As that day approaches, Jesus promised wars and rumors of wars. He promised persecutions and false Christs and natural disasters. We live among all those things.

But **“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”** He is the walls that stand around us and the defenses that throw back every enemy. We are safe with him. In the second half of the psalm, God says, **“He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.”** God promises to bring peace to the earth. How does that fit with Jesus promising wars and rumors of wars? All that upheaval is only temporary. When Jesus returns, he will put an end to all war. He will sweep all sin away. Death itself will die and we will live in a new and perfect world forever. So part of the promise is that we only have to hide in the mighty fortress temporarily. Then all danger will end and we will live in safety forever.

That is the final solution to all the danger we face. Between now and then, **“A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon.”** Now, it might not always look that way – COVID and protests and every other tragedy of this life can make it hard for us to see and feel God’s protection. There’s a part of us that questions God’s promises, especially when we face those things. But whether we can see it or not, God is always working for our good. And our greatest good is reaching heaven.

And precisely at those moments when it’s hardest for us to see the truth of God’s promises, we need to look back to the manger in Bethlehem and to the cross and to the empty tomb. The Son of God came and lived a human life in this horrible, sinful world. He faced all that we face and he defeated everything that can harm us or drag us down to hell. To do that, he had to be perfect. To do that, he had to suffer hell on the cross and then die and pay all we owe. Jesus rose to tell us that he has turned away all God’s wrath and punishment. So now, we may still die, but we will live forever. We will rise when Jesus returns and lifts his voice and makes the earth melt. If God sent his own Son to die and rise for us, he will watch over us in every earthquake and plague and all civil unrest. He will bring us home, even if we have to pass through persecution and war and fire and flood to get there.

We call all that **“grace.”** Grace isn’t about us. It’s about God. Grace is God’s undeserved love for us. Grace is an attitude in his heart that

moves him to save us. Grace means that we aren't sinners in his eyes anymore. We are his own children. He loves us and he would do anything for us. He moved heaven and earth to save us. He will keep the devil at bay while we live here. Grace is the guarantee that we will live forever.

God makes all that ours by making a promise to us: **The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.** God was never more with us than when Jesus came to this earth to save us. God is always with us, in love and forgiveness, in power and protection, until we reach eternal life. That promise from God conquers our fear, so we can say, **“Therefore we do not fear, though the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.”** Faith is the answer to the question, how do we take refuge in God? We trust all those incredible promises that he makes. We trust them when we watch the news and wonder where our country is headed. We trust them when we find out that we've tested positive for COVID. We trust them when we feel guilty and sinful because we failed to master our sinful flesh again today. No matter what happens, no matter how scared we are, no matter how guilty we have been, Jesus is still our Savior. God is still our mighty fortress.

## II.

But how do we trust in those promises? I were caught in the middle of an earthquake the was falling away beneath my feet and the mountains were sliding into the sea, I think I might be a little scared. How can we cling to those promises? There is only one way: by the power of God himself. **How do we take refuge in God? By hearing his word.**

There's one line in this psalm that makes that clear: **“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.”** What does that have to do with the word of God? It's simple: there is no river in Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the site of the temple, is the city of God. But it's perched on a ridge high above the nearest river. Every Jewish person who heard this psalm in ancient Israel knew that. So they knew that river that makes the city of God glad was not a literal body of water. So what was it? Well, the Old Testament the prophets often use the image of water in the desert to refer to the good

news of God's grace. Jesus himself uses that image when he tells the woman at the well that he can give her living water that will well up inside her to eternal life. The river whose streams make glad the city of God is the gospel.

My friends, what could make God's people more glad than knowing Jesus loved them and lived and died for them? What could make us more glad than knowing that? The truth is, the city of God means more than just the physical city of Jerusalem. Again and again, in Old Testament God uses Jerusalem to stand for those people who truly trust in him. At the very end of the Bible, John sees a vision of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. That new Jerusalem is the Christian Church. We are the city of God.

The message of his love makes us glad. It's what gives us our faith. We don't decide to trust Jesus. God comes to us in the message and he gives us faith. And that message then has power that enables us to cling to God's grace when life is scary and painful here. And also when we're guilty and we see how little we deserve God's love. The message of God's love conquers fear and guilt and sorrow and it moves us to trust in our Savior.

That's why God said those waters *make* us glad. Doesn't that mean that we weren't glad before we drank from them? Guilt and fear and sorrow are part of life in this world. I'd be lying if I said that hearing the gospel magically makes you feel better. You and I will have to wrestle with those things until we see Jesus. Why is that true? Because for now, we are two people at once: we are sinners and saints. We are believers and unbelievers at the same time. The believer in us truly does trust in Jesus no matter what. The believer in us has no fear or guilt. But the unbeliever is always right there. So, again and again, we sin. We doubt. We tremble. But in those horrible moments of weakness, there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. They make us glad over and over again. They keep making us glad. So sometimes, life here is a tug of war between the message of God's love and the hurts we experience. But the power of God is in that gospel message. That power does work,

sometimes little by little, but it does work. God does comfort us and give us courage. Even here.

When we finally stand with Jesus, that river's work will be done and we will be free. We'll never fear anything again. We'll never feel guilty again. We'll never weep over anything ever again. Between now and then, God comes to us in the gospel to make us glad. He gave us the written word so we can read it at home and hear it at church. He gave us communion so that we can receive Jesus' true body and blood for the forgiveness of all our sins. He gave us baptism to wash away all that we are guilty of and to claim us as his own. He gave us confession so that we can go to our pastor with those sins that trouble us and hear the good news of God's love applied directly to those sins. He gave us the fellowship of believers to pray for us and encourage us. He gave us the holy ministry so that there is always someone charged with watching over for our souls. In all those ways, the river of the gospel comes to us makes us glad.

Drink from that river. That's what God calls us to do. His power will work every single time we hear the gospel, whether we realize it or not. That is what Luther rediscovered 500 years ago. Martin Luther was deeply troubled by his sins. He was also disturbed by the world he saw around him. All through his life, he was certain Jesus must be about to return because things were so bad. Sound familiar? The most important moment of his life came when he discovered the gospel. God loved him. God did not want to punish him. God forgave him. God wanted to be with him, to guard and protect him in every trial of this life, and then God wanted to bring him home. When Luther learned that, he had entered the mighty fortress. He lived the rest of his life there while the devil howled against him and one enemy after another tried to destroy him. But he died peacefully, confessing his faith in Jesus, because that was God's plan for his life.

I don't know what God's plan for your life and my life is. I can't promise that we will all die peacefully in our beds. But I can promise that God will always be with us. He will protect us from every evil of this life. And he will bring us home to heaven because that is what Jesus won for us. A mighty fortress is our God. Amen.

