

DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

February 27, 2022 | Vantage Points for God's Victory

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Why will the coming of the Lord Jesus be both wonderful and terrible?

Read Psalm 46.

Pray this psalm will strengthen your courage as you await the Lord's coming.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God is coming to declare Himself king over all the earth.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Embracing or resisting God's will makes all the difference in how you will experience His coming.

MEDITATE

*"Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"
(Psalm 46:10).*

GETTING STARTED

+This section discusses the importance of perspective, a key concept underlying Psalm 46

Q: *How can different perspectives change your understanding of a situation?*

Q: *Can you think of a time when you made an error in judgment because of a lack of perspective?*

A few years ago, I took my family to a baseball game. Our seats were near the top of the stands, so we could see the entire game unfold below us, though not in much detail. It was impossible to see the difference between balls and strikes. Even pop flies barely made it up to our level. From so far above the field, the game seemed to be played in slow motion at times. During the final inning, I took my family down to some empty seats behind home plate. It seemed like an entirely different game from that perspective. The difference between balls and strikes was much clearer. The players seemed to move so much faster. Pop flies looked as though they soared into the stratosphere. After the game, families with children were invited to run the bases. My kids quickly realized that what had seemed like a short jaunt was a long way to run. From our original seats, the bases were tiny white specs. When my son and daughter were on the field, they realized they could both stand on a base with plenty of room to spare.

The way we perceive reality depends heavily on our vantage point. In Psalm 46, the coming of God to assume His reign on the earth is described from three different vantage points. Each of them contains important lessons for us as we prepare for the arrival of our great king.

Q: *How are your daily devotions changing the way you read God's Word?*

Q: *Have you encountered any passage that you realize you have previously misunderstood?*

APPLICATION POINT – This year, you are being challenged to start and/or maintain a strong devotional life. One goal of this emphasis is to help you understand God's Word and its implications for your life. As you grow in your knowledge of the Bible, you will inevitably discover that you have wrongly understood and applied it at times in the past. This often proves discouraging for Christians. Some even use it as a reason to avoid studying or reading the Bible regularly. They would rather remain blissfully unaware of their failure to understand God's Word than reexamine the way they have understood and applied certain passages. For much of my life, I applied the first phrase of Psalm 46:10, "Be still, and know that I am God," to times when I felt anxious over the outcome

of a test or an assignment. I have drawn a lot of comfort from that verse over the years. It was not until I was in seminary that a pastor explained to me that this verse had more to do with God's fame among the nations than reassuring me in times of anxiety.

Do not be discouraged if you find yourself in a similar situation as you become a more serious student of God's Word. There are worse things than misapplying Scripture, such as failing to encounter it at all or having no desire to live by biblical principles. Furthermore, as I spent more time studying scholarly literature about the Bible, I learned that even the people who understand it best often learn they have misunderstood what the Bible is saying. Recognizing an error in how you interpret or apply Scripture is a sign of your growth in God's Word, not something to feel embarrassed about. Finally, as someone who is deeply concerned with seeing the gospel spread among the nations, I have a renewed interest in Psalm 46:10. I can be confident that God will be exalted among the nations. This is ultimately His work. I am just a participant in what He is doing. We should be encouraged to learn more about Scripture, even if we have to let go of some thoughts we have cherished in the past.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Psalm 46 can be divided into three stanzas, each of which concludes with the word "Selah." The key to understanding Psalm 46 is to consolidate what all three stanzas are saying around a single theme. At first, stanza 1 (verses 1–3) does not seem to hold much in common with stanza 3 (verses 8–11), yet both connect with stanza 2 (verses 4–7). Identifying the theme that holds them together will reveal the meaning of Psalm 46. This lesson will present the coming of the Lord to resume His reign on the earth as the key theme linking all three stanzas. Each stanza offers a different vantage point from which to view God's resumption of His reign upon the earth.

1. AS A SPECTATOR AMONG THE NATIONS

2. AS A SPECTATOR AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE

3. AS A SPECTATOR AT THE END

GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine each stanza in Psalm 46 to understand what its vantage point tells us about the arrival of God's reign on the earth. It is important to understand how He will resume His reign upon the earth. It will be both immediate and gradual. Christians are awaiting a day when God will intervene in history, judge the earth, and be acknowledged as the sovereign. We also know, however, that God's reign was inaugurated when Christ was risen from the dead. We already see the effects of His reign creeping into

the present. Every time someone repents in faith and believes, we see God's extending reign over the earth. Every time the people of God come together to worship Him, we see God's reign extending over the earth. Every time one of God's followers resists the allure of sin and seeks the holiness of God instead, we see God's reign extending over the earth. This is important for understanding Psalm 46 because, even though this psalm describes a time when God will come in the future, we can already see this dynamic at work in the world around us.

1. AS A SPECTATOR AMONG THE NATIONS

■ PSALM 46:1-3

Q: *What kind of natural events are described in this passage?*

Q: *Why would natural disasters be particularly concerning for ancient peoples?*

Psalm 46:1-3 describes the coming judgment of the Lord from the perspective of a spectator among the nations. Psalm 46:2-3 alludes to several cataclysmic events. The “earth giving way” and the “mountains trembling” depict an earthquake. Even in modern cultures that understand plate tectonics and ground faults, earthquakes still cause mass hysteria and concern. You can imagine what would have been the case in ancient Israel. The roaring and foaming of the sea describes a tidal wave or perhaps also an inland flood. These events would be startling on their own, but they are used in the Bible to describe the arrival of the day of the Lord in judgment and the coming of the messiah. For example, in Psalm 18:7, the earth reels and rocks because of God's anger. Similar associations are made in other passages (Isaiah 24:18-23; Jeremiah 4:24; Nahum 1:5). The psalmist portrays the earth being torn apart around him and alludes to the arrival of God in judgment.

Q: *Why do Christians look forward to the day when Jesus returns in judgment?*

Q: *How should Christians understand natural disasters differently than those around us?*

APPLICATION POINT – Scientific discovery has been a gift to the modern age. Our ability to understand and manipulate the natural world for the gain of humanity is greater than ever before. For many people, however, advances in scientific knowledge have coincided with a temptation to be content with naturalistic explanations. They no longer view natural events, such as the earthquakes and floods described in this psalm, as containing any greater meaning than their scientific explanations. Christians see scientific discovery as a gift, but we also know that science is incapable of appreciating the meaning of any event within the larger picture of the world and God’s work in it. In this sense, many people today are worse off than those who lived hundreds of years ago. They may be able to explain plate tectonics or the water cycle, but they fail to see God’s hand at work in the world around them. And that failure leaves them unable to offer satisfying explanations for the most important questions humanity faces. Christians recognize that natural disasters can be explained scientifically and theologically. They are signs that God will one day return in a much greater display of judgment. We must repent from sin and seek God through Jesus while there is still time.

Q: *Why does the psalmist have confidence despite the various calamities he foresees?*

Q: *If the foreseen calamities stem from God’s coming, why does the psalmist look to God as his refuge and strength?*

Although these calamities signal God’s coming in judgment, the psalmist knows he does not need to fear because God is his refuge and strength. The word “refuge” indicates protection from outside forces. The psalmist is on God’s side, so the coming calamities will not consume him. God will protect him from the judgment He Himself is bringing. The word “strength” implies a dynamic aspect to trusting in God. In our weakness, God gives us the strength we need to take action for Him.

Q: *What kind of fear does Psalm 46:2 have in mind?*

Q: *How does the freedom from fear free us to pursue God’s mission on the earth?*

APPLICATION POINT – The Bible often encourages the fear of the Lord and discourages other types of fear. In this passage, the psalmist does not need to fear because he trusts in God helping him through the coming

calamities. It is important for Christians to have an accurate understanding of how fear works within a Christian worldview. There is a type of fear that is good because it protects us. You would fear standing too close to the edge of a cliff because you could fall and be badly injured. This fear liberates us to enjoy God's creation within the limits He sets.

There is another type of fear that is harmful because it imprisons us. This is the fear of the unknown. This kind of fear would keep you from climbing the mountain that same cliff was located on because a massive earthquake might strike and send you falling over the cliff. The Bible encourages us to trust in God's provision to avoid this type of debilitating fear. We can trust in God and resign ourselves to accept whatever He allows to occur within His will.

It is important not to mix up these kinds of fear. We should not fling ourselves over a cliff because we trust in God's provision and do not need to fear what will happen to us. That is not trusting in God. It is recklessness. This is an extreme example, but you get the picture. We should never use our faith in God as an excuse to engage in reckless behavior. We need never fear the uncertainties of life because we know we can trust in God's perfect will.

Freedom from fear of the unknown is ultimately found in the gospel. The gospel looks forward to a greater glory than we can ever find in this age alone. So, we have no need to fear the uncertainty of life, because our belief in the gospel assures us a greater life to come.

2. AS A SPECTATOR AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE

■ ■ PSALM 46:4-7

Q: *How is the imagery in the second stanza like that in the first stanza?*

Q: *How does the imagery change from the first stanza to the second?*

The second stanza views the coming of God in judgment from the perspective of a spectator among God's followers. God's followers are, in this instance, identified with a city characterized by God's presence. The psalmist likely had Jerusalem and the temple in mind. This stanza reuses some imagery from the first stanza and anticipates the resolution of the third stanza. Notice how the imagery changes from the first stanza, which emphasized God's

coming in judgment from the perspective of the world. In verse 3, the psalmist describes raging floodwaters ready to sweep away everything in its path. In verse 4, describing God's coming from the perspective of God's people, the psalmist describes a gently flowing river bringing life and abundance to the city. In verse 6, God melts the earth, a disaster similar to the earthquake described in verses 2 and 3, but this judgment is directed toward the nations and kingdoms coming to oppose the city of God. Where the psalmist views himself as being in danger in the first stanza, in the second stanza, he rests securely in the city of God while the earth is torn apart around his enemies. What is terrifying in the first stanza is a source of comfort in the second. This is the difference between those who are among God's people at His coming versus those who are outside God's people. No wonder he has nothing to fear when God arrives in judgment.

Q: *What determines whether one rejoices at God's return or is terrified of His return?*

Q: *Why should Christians find comfort in God's judgment?*

APPLICATION POINT – God is returning to judge the world. Whether we experience His judgment as a comfort or a terror depends upon our relationship with Jesus. If we are in Christ, we will rejoice to see God's judgment restoring justice to a fallen world, and we should praise God for the salvation He provided through the Son. The differences between stanzas one and two provide a warning that must be heeded. God's judgment is coming. Whether we experience His justice as a raging flood or a nourishing river depends on our relationship with Jesus.

Q: *How are the nations distinguished from those in the city of God?*

Q: *Who are the nations raging against?*

Where the people of God take solace in the acts of God, the nations rage and quake at God's judgment. Their rage is directed toward those in the city of God, but the city of God has no need to fear because God and His host of armies protect it. This is why the psalmist can describe God's people as both a prosperous but vulnerable city (Psalm 46:4) and a heavily secured military fortress (Psalm 46:7). God's coming coincides with His actions on

behalf of His own people. The people in God's city have no need to fear His judgment or the raging of the nations. The city of God will not be moved, but the ground under those who rage against God simply melts away.

Q: *In what ways do the nations seem to be raging against the city of God today?*

Q: *What does the psalmist's confidence in God's protection mean for us?*

APPLICATION POINT – The Bible requires Christians to live between two contrasting perils. As Psalm 46:6 recognizes, Christians are imperiled by the raging of those who do not acknowledge God's reign over the earth. Sometimes the people of God are simply casualties of the nation's quest for power and greed. At other times, Christians are targeted because of their loyalty to God, the true ruler of the universe. Psalm 46 also recognizes that all humanity is imperiled by the judgment of God. God will one day return to put an end to all rebellion against Him. Since the peril of His judgment has eternal consequences, Christians must seek peace with God even if that peace keeps them from joining the raging world's power struggle or makes them the targets of the nations' rage. As Jesus taught, we dare not fear those who can only kill the body but cannot touch the soul instead of the one who can kill both body and soul (Matthew 10:28). Even if your commitment to God seems to be costing you, it is nothing compared to the cost of refusing to follow God.

3. AS A SPECTATOR AT THE END

■ PSALM 46:8–11

Q: *What are the works of the Lord the psalmist commands us to see?*

Q: *How is war brought to an end on the earth?*

The final stanza invites the reader to view the world-scene after God's judgment is realized. It begins with a command to look upon the works of God. Our minds are trained to think of the works of God in terms of salvation on our behalf, but in this case the emphasis is placed on God's destructive judgment of the wicked. The enemies that raged against the city of God in stanza two are decisively defeated. Their instruments of war and oppression are destroyed and dismantled. All of the earth is in full submission to God. The people of God have been vindicated by trusting in His justice.

Q: *How can we responsibly find comfort in God's judgment of the wicked?*

Q: *In what ways do you see yourself and other Christians abandoning God's deliverance to seek protection within their own strength?*

APPLICATION POINT – In Psalm 46, the deliverance of the city of God rested in His judgement. A constant temptation for ancient Israelites, especially among the political elites, was to abandon hope in God during a time of need and depend on the strength of other nations. This urge to abandon God occurs among Christians today. It is challenging to live authentically Christian in today's world, and we often want to do so in our own strength. Some Christians feel safer isolating themselves from the broader culture. Rather than embracing the Bible's missional mandate, they avoid settings where they would have to interact socially with unbelievers. This is abandoning God and seeking deliverance in your own strength. Others hoard wealth and material goods to provide security for themselves in case trusting in God fails them. Again, this is abandoning God and seeking deliverance in your own strength. Others invest in radical diets and fitness programs hoping to preserve every second because they know they do not trust God in the face of death. There is an endless number of ways Christians can abandon God and seek deliverance for themselves. Psalm 46 begs them to simply be still and trust God to provide the deliverance He promised.

Q: *What does the exaltation of God have to do with the remainder of Psalm 46?*

Q: *How does the role of the nations in verse 10 contrast with their role in verse 6?*

Psalm 46 concludes by announcing God's intent to be worshipped among the nations. The reader of this psalm could be forgiven for thinking this statement comes out of nowhere. Previously, the nations and kingdoms were raging against God (Psalm 46:6) and were the subjects of divine judgment. How can God now demand to be exalted by them? We have to quickly trace two lines of thought in order to understand God's demand from the nations' praise. First, there will be a day when every member of every nation that has ever existed will acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord (Philippians 2:9–11). This does not equal universalism, the belief that all will be saved. Some will be forced to acknowledge Jesus's lordship even though they refused to do so during this age, and they will remain under God's condemnation for their sins. Even unbelievers are subjected to God's reign. Thus, even the nations that rage against God's rule (v. 6) will one day be subjugated to His rule (v. 10). Second, although God set apart the nation of Israel as His special covenant people in the Old Testament, He clearly maintains an interest in other nations throughout the Bible. Part of God's promise to Abraham was to bless all the families of the earth through him (Genesis 12:3). Isaiah anticipated a day when the nations will flood to God's presence and seek to follow His ways (Isaiah 2:1–5). In Revelation 5:9–10, the elders surrounding the throne of God announce people from every tribe and language and people and nation have been ransomed by the blood of Jesus. God yearns for the nation's praise, and a day is coming when He will receive it.

Q: *How does the statement “be still and know that I am God” encourage Christian missions?*

Q: *How is God leading you to participate in spreading the gospel around the world?*

APPLICATION POINT – The pairing of “be still, and know that I am God” with “I will be exalted among the nations/in the earth” creates a wonderful foundation for Christian missions. Christ commands His followers to go to the ends of the earth with the gospel on their lips (Matthew 28:19). Most of the book of Acts shows the apostles carrying out that mandate. The New Testament epistles reveal this mission as an enduring need among the followers of Jesus Christ (Romans 10:14–15). We must heed the Bible's missionary call, but we should never think the mission starts with or depends on our efforts. God is the One who works in the hearts of those who will believe in Him. We are the vessel He most often uses to carry the gospel to those who need it, but we should never think we are the ones who will change hearts. We are to carry the gospel forward and then be still while God works.

NEXT STEPS

God yearns to be worshipped by the nations. For now, there is still time for the nations to cease raging against God and approach Him in repentance and submission. Pray for God to be exalted among the nations. Pray for missionaries who are committed to spreading the gospel where Jesus is not known as Savior and Lord. Pray for God's guidance in how you should participate in missions. The goal of your personal devotions is for you to draw closer to God. The closer you come to God, the clearer His desire to be worshipped by the nations will become. If you want a good test to know whether your daily devotions are having their intended effect, examine your excitement regarding local and international missions. The gospel going forward among the nations should stir your heart if you are seeking God's glory.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

-Father, I thank you that I have no need to fear your judgment against the nations because of the grace I have in Jesus Christ.

-Lord Jesus, I yearn for the day when every knee will bow before you and every tongue will confess you as Lord.

-God, help me never to fear the raging of the nations. Those who oppose you are no match for you.

-Father, exalt yourself among the nations! You are worthy of all praise and glory and honor. Use me to make your glory known.

