

A Psalm of Comfort

This psalm has three parts. The first, in verses 1-3, expresses a general confidence in the power and providence of God. The second part, verses 4-7, expresses a particular experience, in this case the deliverance of the city. The last part, verses 8-11, is an assurance that God will establish his universal kingdom of peace.

So first of all. Here is a general confidence in God. God, if you like, in the tumult. Verses 1-3 READ. Until the last 100 years, man has not thought of the possibility of a world catastrophe. But 2 World Wars, the Nuclear challenges of the Cold War, world hunger and disease and now climate change – all this means that massive destruction is on the agenda.

But the psalmist says we can face all this unafraid. The opening phrase means exactly what it says. Our true security is in God, in God alone - not in God plus anything else. But this confidence and the threat are then spelled out. Refuge: God the unchanging in whom we find shelter. Strength: God within to empower the weak for action. An ever present help in trouble: God's readiness to help and God in himself is 'enough' for any situation.

It is this confidence that enables the psalmist to add, almost in defiance, 'therefore we will not fear.' Even the most impregnable things known to man, the earth and the mountains, and the most restless and menacing things, the sea, will ultimately be undone. All that strikes terror into the hearts of defenceless men, will not make us afraid.

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Remember in Jesus' ministry, how we see His power over the storm on the lake. Our final security, as God's people, is in God. This great truth stands as a fortress in our hearts. Our general confidence in God.

Secondly, we have here a special experience of God's sovereignty: It is God in His city. Verses 4-7. READ. From the upheavals of nature, the psalmist turns to the raging of man, and in this case, a city under siege. In contrast to the sea, whose waters roar and foam, the psalmist now mentions other and calmer waters, those of 'a river whose streams make glad the city of God.' The original reference is to the waters of Siloam, whose gentle flowing Isaiah used as a picture of the quiet, steady, good providence of God. We see the picture repeated in Ezekiel (47:1) and in the Book of Revelation (22). 'The River of Life: Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city.' Under God's gracious rule his city is made glad. This city simply cannot be removed. Why? Because God is within her, she will not fail. God is there to protect her and help her. The nations can be in uproar, like the sea, and the kingdoms can 'fall' like the mountains, but God has only to speak and the earth melts before him.

And the refrain: "The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." The might of God reminds us of the hosts of heaven whom Elijah prayed that his servant would see and rely upon. And the second phrase speaks of his grace. He is the God of Jacob, His chosen one. God is a fortress around His people. The city is protected because God is within it. Here is an example of calm and trust amidst the storm.

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And lastly, a final assurance of peace for God is exalted in all the earth. Verses 8–11. READ. This is a vision of the things that will finally come, although the victories of the present are a foretaste of them. This expression, ‘Come and see’, is not just about the ordinary sight of victory. It is about seeing with the inward eye of faith and insight into God’s plans and purposes. ‘What is God doing in all of this?’

And although the outcome is peace, the process is judgement. These reassuring words ‘He makes wars cease...’ are set in the context not of gentle persuasion, but of a world devastated and forcibly disarmed. This sequence, with tranquillity on the far side of judgement agrees with the Old Testament prophecy of Daniel and with the New Testament in 2 Peter.

So this expression ‘Be still...’ is not in the first place comfort for the harassed, but a rebuke to a restless and turbulent world. It means, ‘Hey, quieten down...’, in fact ‘Leave off...’ ‘Stop it’. It’s just like Jesus’ rebuke to the storm on Lake Galilee, ‘Peace, be still.’

And the result is not in terms of man’s hopes. It is in terms of God’s glory. “I will be exalted among the nations and in all the earth.” The proud resent this, but the humble long for it. Here is their confidence again. ‘If the Lord Almighty is with us, then He is our fortress.’

This psalm has been the source of great comfort to God’s people down through the ages. We may know that great hymn, ‘A mighty fortress is our God.’ It was written by Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation. During the early tempestuous years when he was continually under pressure he found great comfort in this psalm. And we may too.

We also live in a time of crisis. The old order has gone. The social revolution begun in the 1960s continues and grows apace. We hear of

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wars and rumours of wars. People's hearts are failing them for fear. Can we say, 'We will not fear?' Indeed we can. But only if we believe the other affirmations of this psalm. 'I am God' and 'the Lord of hosts is with us.' As John Wesley said with his dying breath, "The best of all is, God is with us."