

# When our world falls apart

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Date: 08 October 2017

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Good morning again. Last week we looked at Psalm 8 together. Today I want to look with you at Psalm 46. I actually chose these psalms for a slightly random reason. I teach psalms at the Bible College, and I asked my third years of the psalms we look at in class, which ones would you like to hear me preach on?

And they chose these two. So really that's what I've done. I wrote one on Psalm 8 and I wrote one on Psalm 46. There are a couple of themes. I think they're both about mountains, strangely. You'll see that come up again today.

But really, actually, you couldn't find two more contrasting psalms. Last week our psalm was about the incredible place that we have in God's creation as men and women, as people.

The way that we don't fulfill it, but the way that there is someone who does, and that shows us what that means, and that leads us also back to being the kind of people that we should be. It was a majestic psalm. It was an amazing psalm.

And it was a joy, really. And also, I suspect, it was a psalm that perhaps not many people in our culture, maybe not even many of you, immediately relate to.

[ 1 : 1 5 ]     Now, the idea that men and women were created as the rulers of creation is not something we tend to think very often.

Today's psalm, though, is almost entirely the opposite. It's a psalm that everybody will relate to in one way or another. And it's not a psalm about the majesty of creation. It's a psalm about what you do when creation starts to fall apart, when your world starts to fall apart.

Where can you turn in those moments? Where can you find help in those moments? We all know what this is like, I think, when your world starts to fall apart. It can happen at a personal level, can't it?

Perhaps your world this morning is falling apart in some way for you. I don't know. Very many of you very well. Well, it can happen in those moments. It can happen in an instant, when the phone rings and somebody tells you about a car accident.

Or when you visit a doctor because you've got a headache and he tells you that it's a brain tumour. Your world can fall apart just that easily, can't it?

[ 2 : 2 4 ]     It can happen at that personal level. We see worlds falling apart all the time at the level of societies in general. I mean, you don't even have to look very far, do you? We look around our country, look at the kinds of things that go on here.

The violence, the social injustice, the poverty, the crime. Worlds continually fall apart around here, but not just around here. In every country. It happens in every kind of society.

We see it internationally. We see it all over the world at the moment. There's a province of Spain, I don't know if you're aware, that just held a referendum because they'd like to break away from the rest of Spain.

And the rest of Spain didn't think a lot of that idea, so they sent troops in to keep the peace in the province of Spain that's just held this referendum. And at the moment, Spain looks like it's tearing itself apart.

You'll be aware, of course, of the tensions going around at the moment over North Korea. Who knows how that's going to turn out. Internationally, the world always seems to be tearing itself apart.

[ 3 : 25 ] Sometimes it just happens at a natural level as well, doesn't it? It doesn't always have to be that kind of personal or political catastrophe. Sometimes it can happen because an enormous storm wreaks havoc across a coastline hundreds of kilometers long.

As we've seen recently in the hurricanes that have landed in the Bahamas and in the United States. Or earthquakes, floods, fires, droughts for us really, isn't it?

There are all kinds of occasions when your world can seem to come apart. We all know what it feels like. It happens to all of us. I hope that it's not happening to you right now. These things are better to reflect on when you're not in the middle of it, actually.

It's better to make a plan before time to think about what you're going to do when your world falls apart. So that's what I hope that I'm preaching about this morning. But I'm aware that I may not be. If your world's coming apart in one way or another this morning, then I hope this will be some consolation to you as well.

That's what Psalm 46 is all about. And it begins with an answer. You might like to have your Bibles open there. You can find it again on page 506 in the Bible that's in front of you.

[ 4 : 44 ] It'd be great for you to have it open as we work through it. It begins with an answer. But I suspect this is the kind of answer that can seem a little bit trite in those moments.

I don't know if anybody's ever, if you've ever been going through something like that and somebody's come up to you and given you that kind of advice. I'll just trust God. I'll just believe God. It's okay. Everything will be fine.

God will be a help to you. God will shelter you. It is true. It turns out to be more true, I think, in retrospect than in the moment.

It's going to take a little bit more work than that for us to see exactly what this Psalm is trying to tell us and exactly how this Psalm is trying to help us in those moments. Now, one of the things that can make dealing with Psalms sometimes quite tricky is just getting a handle on the imagery and the symbolism that the Psalms are using.

Do you know what imagery and symbolism are? Can you remember back to high school poetry classes? I don't know. I think you probably all understand the idea of symbolism. If I held up a cross and asked, what does this represent?

[ 5 : 59 ] Then you'd probably be able to tell me that this cross represents Christianity, right? And if I held up a crescent moon with a star, I think it wouldn't take very long before you'd tell me that that represents Islam.

So imagery and symbolism work at that kind of level. I can show you something and without telling you what it means, you can have all of these ideas kind of put into your mind.

Now, the trouble with it is that it's often quite culturally relative. It works in one culture. Symbols and images work in one culture, but not always in every particular culture.

So I'm going to try something with you now. If I, I'll mention a couple of words and you tell me if it conjures up anything in your mind, all right? If I say black cats and cauldrons, what are you thinking of?

Witches, right? Everybody's thinking, not everybody actually will be thinking of witches. I'll tell you why you're thinking of witches. You're thinking of witches if you grew up in a culture that was influenced by Shakespeare and particularly by Macbeth.

[ 7 : 06 ] Now, you don't have to have seen Macbeth because so many things have been influenced by Macbeth that you don't actually have to have seen that particular play. But if you've grown up in our kind of Western culture, then there's no way that I can say black cats and cauldrons and you don't start thinking about witches.

But if you've grown up in a different culture altogether, then I know from experience, because I've done this with my classes at college, not everybody will think of those things.

For some people, they won't really think of anything at all. Those pictures won't evoke things in people's minds. Do you understand what I'm saying? So one of the tricks about dealing with the Psalms well is letting the Psalms evoke the right kinds of things in our minds as we read them.

And sometimes it's not immediately what we first think of, because we don't live in the same culture as ancient Israelites. Do you follow what I'm saying? Sometimes ancient Israelites could say things and everybody in the room would have gone, witches, right?

Not witches, but other things, right? But it doesn't work for us because we're not ancient Israelites. So that's one of the things that we have to wrestle with as we come to this Psalm. Have a look there at verse 2.

[ 8 : 17 ] Therefore we will not fear that 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.

Selah. You do have to read those Selahs, by the way, when you read the Psalms. Nobody actually knows what they mean, but they are part of the inspired text, and you should put them in.

Selah. I think it means, ah. Okay, so it's important for us to understand these mountains and the seas in the way that the ancient Israelites would have.

I don't know what these images evoke for you, mountains and seas. I think when Capetonians talk about mountains, for some really bizarre reason that I cannot quite fathom or understand or comprehend, everybody thinks, let's climb them.

I know, I want to run over the mountain. Let's have a marathon. No, I don't get that at all. Mountains, for some people, evoke extreme sports. Seas, for some people, evoke fishing and recreation.

[ 9 : 25 ] I don't know what these things evoke for you, but if you're an ancient Israelite and you read that about the mountains shaking and toppling into the hearts of a foaming sea, there's no way that they would think about earthquakes, for example.

I don't know if that was the first thing you thought of. For them, the sea was much more symbolic than that. Ancient Israelites were not a sea-going people. If you read the Old Testament, you'll notice how very seldomly anybody ever gets on a boat.

And Jonah only does it because he really doesn't want to do the other thing. Right? They're not a sea-going people. They didn't like boats. They didn't do much sailing.

Even in the New Testament, they do get on boats, don't they, with Jesus. But notice where they are. They don't actually go into the sea. They float around on the Sea of Galilee, which is actually just a lake. Like, they're not a sea-going people.

The sea represents something to be feared. And more than that, though, it represents something very specific that I guarantee that you won't have been thinking. It represents uncreation.

[ 10 : 35 ] Uncreation. Now, think about this for a minute. Recall when God created the world. Recall the story of Genesis 1 and the way God did it. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

Do you remember how God made the world? He separated out the waters below and the waters above and made a space in between. He divided the waters from the waters and made a space in between.

And then he divided the waters below from each other, and dry ground emerged in the middle of it. The creation process was about dividing the waters and putting the waters into their place and making a stable spot where people could actually function and live.

The dry ground emerges in the middle of God's creative process. Or think about that time when God decided to destroy his world that he'd made.

Do you remember? He regretted making mankind on the earth, and he decided he would destroy them in Genesis 6. And so what did he do? I mean, apart from Noah and the ark, he opened the floodgates of heaven and the floodgates of the deep, and the waters above and the waters below came crashing down together again.

[ 11 : 54 ] And earth was uncreated in the chaos of the waters. God's creative purpose was to order the world, to put the waters into their place, to make dry ground and a place for us.

And uncreation is when the waters start re-exerting themselves against the way God has shaped his world to be.

Do you follow? It's a symbolic way of looking at the world, and there's no way an ancient Israelite didn't think about this. If you talk to them about the seas and the uncontrolled waters and brotheling and bubbling, then they represent chaos, they represent disorder, they represent death, and they represent a world that's coming undone at the very seams of creation.

By contrast, though, the mountains for an ancient Israelite are just about the most stable thing that you can possibly imagine. For me, they're just about the most stable thing you can possibly imagine.

Last week, I told you about when I first moved to Cape Town, and one of the things I couldn't get over was the mountains and the beauty of the mountains. But, you know, that wasn't the only thought that struck me the first time I sat and just looked at the mountains.

[ 13 : 17 ] One of the thoughts I had as I was looking at the mountains, I thought, just imagine everything these mountains have seen. These mountains were here when there were dinosaurs walking around.

And these mountains saw... These mountains saw the Bantu people migrate way before there was any Europe to even imagine colonizing anything.

They saw the first European fleet land here. They saw the Dutch. They saw the English came. They've seen the wars. They've seen the struggles. They've seen the oppression. They've seen the joys and the wonders.

They have seen everything in all of history. These mountains are witness to... everything. Imagine what they've seen.

And through it all, through whatever happens, through the politics and the wars and the armies and the death and the battles and the life and the joy and the babies and the celebrations and the feasts, nothing changed.

[ 14 : 26 ] About the mountains, I mean. The mountains stood as a striking reminder of the fixed, solid, immovable stability of the world.

So, if I write a psalm about the mountains trembling into the heart of the sea, then I'm not talking about an earthquake, am I?

I'm talking about something much more drastic. I'm talking about that moment when creation itself tears apart and comes undone and your world just comes crashing in.

So, where is God in that moment when that happens? How can he be, as we read at the beginning, a refuge and a strength and an ever-present help in those times of trouble?

Let's keep reading. Verse 4. Excuse me. There's a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.

[ 15 : 41 ] God is within her. She will not fail. God will help her at the break of day. A river, of course, is the other kind of water. A river is not uncontrolled chaos.

The river is peaceful, calm, and life-giving. Again, recall the creation story back in Genesis 1. Do you remember? God created the dry land.

He created everything and he made a garden with a river that broke into four, that flowed out to water all of the earth and to provide for all of the earth.

This was God's way of growing the plants, provision and peace and abundance.

There's a place in our tottering world that actually doesn't shake. God has made a place of refuge and stability.

[ 16 : 40 ] the city whose streams make glad the habitation of God. Sorry, the river whose streams make glad the city of God. That city of God.

What do you think an ancient Israelite would have understood by that? Do you want to guess? God's people, maybe not. Jerusalem is exactly what they would have thought of. Once again, there's no way that you can read this as an ancient Israelite and not think of Jerusalem.

In particular, if you put those ideas together, the river, a mountain, the river, the mountain, the dwelling place of God and the city, there's no way that you don't think of the temple in Jerusalem.

I think of Ezekiel's vision, for example, at the end of the book of Ezekiel. If you're familiar with that, he imagines what God's restored community will be like. He puts an enormous temple on a mountain with streams flowing out to provide abundance and blessing and peace for everybody in the rest of the world.

The author of this psalm is reflecting on the way that he personally could find shelter and help in God's temple in Jerusalem and because God is in the midst of it, he wouldn't be shaken.

[ 17 : 55 ] Now, we're not ancient Israelites, of course, and in case you didn't know, there is no temple in Jerusalem anymore, but there is still a place where we won't be shaken as well.

There's a place where God will be a fortress for us too and you can find it, but it's not the temple in Jerusalem any longer. Where can we look for that place? Well, let me give you a hint.

You'll have to find somebody who talked about something other than the temple as the temple. You'll have to find somebody who even called his own body the temple.

I'm sure you'll recall that same person once told a woman at a well who was drawing water that he could give her living water to drink and he once told a crowd at a festival one day that streams of living water would flow from his side, from the temple of his body and they did actually.

We'll come back to that thought in a minute. I want to draw some other things together before we come back to that. Let's ask a different question. We're thinking about, recall, how it is that verse 1 can actually be true for us in those moments when our world comes crashing down.

[ 19 : 25 ] How is it that God can be a very present help in times of trouble? Well, actually, you tell me. Where is God in this psalm? Have a look.

Actually, this psalm tells us where God is six times. See if you can spot any of them. Okay? Just yell it out. Verse 7, where is God?

With us. Well done. God is with us. In fact, that's the same as verse 11, isn't it? He is with us. Okay? Any others? Verse 1, where is He?

He's our refuge. Actually, you're absolutely correct. Verse 1 is a little bit more explicit in Hebrew. It just isn't rendered as nicely into English because it's actually a very hard phrase to render.

It says, in times of trouble, God is found to be very near to us. And that's what they rendered there as your ever-present help in times of trouble. He's near to us.

[ 20 : 26 ] He's with us. Where else is He? Verse 5, God is within His city. Okay?

He's amongst us. Yes? Verse 11, right? Verse 10, I will be exalted amongst the nations and in all the earth.

Okay, I think we've covered it now. Well done. You got there. God is, according to this psalm, near us, present to us, with us, amongst us, and in our world.

Six times in 10 verses, this psalm tells us where God is when our world comes undone. And six times in 10 verses, it answers, He's not up there in heaven.

He's here. He's with us. There's a place where streams of waters flow, where we can find refuge, where God Himself comes to us and dwells amongst us as one of us.

[ 21 : 38 ] And Jesus once told His disciples pretty much exactly the same thing. As they were facing a very scary time in their life, Jesus told them about what would be and what would happen in a short while.

And then He says to them, I've said these things to you so that in Me you can have peace. In Me you can have peace.

In the world you'll have trouble. In the world you'll have trouble, but there's shelter. Do you remember how that quote actually finishes?

What did He say next? I've said these things to you so that in Me you can have peace. In the world you'll have trouble, but don't be afraid. Well done, you're doing very well today.

This smile tells you that I'm happy with you. But don't be afraid because I have overcome the world. That thought actually fits in very well with our psalm and I love that idea because when God comes to our world and when God finds us in times of trouble, actually He doesn't just come as a shoulder to cry on.

[ 22 : 55 ] It turns out not only is God with us, but God is doing something. Did you spot it in our psalm? What is God doing in our psalm? He helps, yes?

The desolation He brings to the earth, that's not what I expected from this psalm, is it? I imagine that's not what you expected either. Actually, throughout this psalm, it reflects those words of Jesus, don't be afraid, I've overcome the world.

Did you spot it in verse five? There's a tiny little hint. God's within her, she will not fail, God will help her at the break of day. I don't know if you know, when was the last time something like this happened in the Bible?

When was the last time we had nations raging and God helping at the break of dawn? Do you know? Can you think of a time when God's helped someone at the break of dawn?

When they asked for more hours? Not quite, because it doesn't happen at the break of dawn. The good thought, when Moses was on the mountain, also a good thought, not the break of dawn. You know, there's only actually, it's a hard question, because there's only one time in the entire Bible when God helped someone at the break of dawn, apart from this psalm.

[ 24 : 12 ] There's only one time. Not the Jacob story either, though another good thought. God helps people a lot, doesn't he, if you go through the Old Testament. When did God help people?

Actually, it's all the time. But there's only one time he did it at the break of dawn, and you do actually know the story. You'll remember when Israel came out of Egypt, right? God raised up Moses to lead his people out of Egypt into the wilderness, and Pharaoh had finally, through the ten plagues, been convinced to actually let God's people go.

But then he has a change of heart after they're out the door, and decides to come after them. So he packs up his army, and they get on their chariots, and they start running after, or riding after, wheeling, whatever they do, after the people of Israel, who now have a head start.

But Israel finds themselves in a sticky situation, because they end up with the Red Sea in front of them, and Pharaoh's army behind them, and they're stuck. The Red, notice, the Red Sea in front of them, and Pharaoh's army behind them, and they're stuck.

And when it looks like it's at its most helpless, and when they're at the very brink of being annihilated, God actually helps them, we're told, Exodus 14, 27, at the break of dawn.

[ 25 : 31 ] And do you remember the way God helped them at the break of dawn? Moses stretched out his staff, and the waters frothed, and foamed, and parted, didn't they?

And dry ground appeared in the midst of the waters. Israel have found themselves in a moment of uncreation, in a moment of tottering and toppling, and in this moment at the break of dawn, they found stability in the midst of a shaking world.

What happened? So Israel walked through on dry ground in the midst of divided waters, and Pharaoh thinks, hey, that's a good idea, and chases them.

Do you remember what happened? God has the waters close up again, crashing, it breaks the bow, it shatters the spear.

verse 8, come and see the works of the Lord, the desolation that he's brought on the earth, he makes wars cease to the ends of the earth, he breaks the bow, he shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire.

[ 26 : 53 ] It turns out, surprisingly, actually, that all of that tumult and all of the war is something that God was doing.

Come and look at the desolation that he's wrought on the earth. God does bring peace. How does he do it? By overcoming evil.

It's not how you think. What is God doing in the midst of this toppling, shaking, tottering world, and the moments when everything seems to just drag itself and tear itself apart, and everything is hopeless, and everything is broken, and everything is in chaos and tumult, and reality itself is coming undone.

What is God doing? He's fighting. More than that, he's fighting for you. He's fighting for you.

He's right there with you. He's in the middle of all of it. He's fighting for you, and he's helping you. at the break of dawn.

[ 28 : 09 ] But sometimes, in fact, nearly always, isn't it, it can take a lot of faith to see that, because it doesn't really look that way.

And perhaps, perhaps that's exactly why this psalm has been written. Perhaps this psalm is trying to get us to see what's really going on in our world at those moments when it's being torn apart.

Notice that at no point in this psalm, and in fact at no point in the Bible, does it claim that your world won't actually fall apart? sorry to say, but most of the time, it doesn't actually seem like God is fighting for you.

Most of the time, it often doesn't feel like God is with you. You don't get to build a creation for yourself that doesn't fall apart.

Our world totters, and our mountains continually slump into the foaming seas. And the message of this psalm isn't that if you find refuge in Jesus, then nothing will ever shake in your world again.

[ 29 : 32 ] That's not what's going on here. That's not what this psalm is saying. In this world, you will have trouble. Nations rage. Kingdoms shake, says our psalm.

The take home of this psalm isn't trying to tell you that you'll never feel like things are coming undone again. That's not what it's doing. It's trying to give you a different perspective on the world when they do.

And it's trying to show you something that's equally true. The mountains do feel like they're falling into the seas sometimes. But in the midst of that, there's something else that's true as well that you need to keep an eye on.

To see that, just think about who it is that's moving in this psalm. In this psalm actually nearly everything moves. Mountains, seas, nations, even God.

God is not still in this psalm. God is wreaking desolations on the earth and shattering bows and breaking spears. Actually nearly everything moves in this psalm.

[ 30 : 45 ] Do we? Do we move in this psalm? That's the question. We might, mightn't we? We could stand on the mountain and topple with it.

But I think that's the point. You don't have to. You don't have to. Verse 10. Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted amongst the nations.

I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Even when it doesn't look like it, you can trust that God is with you.

God has come to you. God suffered alongside you and yes, even in your place to give you a place of stillness and peace that you can trust when your world comes apart.

When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, you've taught me to say it's well, it's well with my soul.

[ 32 : 10 ] The story of that hymn is actually quite famous and I expect you will have heard it at some point. It was written because a man just over 150 years ago reflected on this psalm at a particular moment of his life.

He just lost his wife and his 11 year old, nine year old, five year old, and two year old daughter in a shipwreck. One year earlier than that, he'd lost his four year old son to scarlet fever.

And a couple of months after that, he lost literally everything he owned in the to the great fires of Chicago in 1871. His house, his business, his law firm, everything. He had everything stripped away from him.

There is no more undoingness than that. And he sits there and he thinks about what that means. And he writes, though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, let this blessed assurance control.

that Christ has regarded my helpless estate and has shed his own blood for my soul. There's a river where blood and water flowed, streams that make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

[ 33 : 38 ] It won't shake because God dwells there. Let's pray. Father, we do often find ourselves yearning for peace and stability in our broken worlds, and we know that that's so hard to come by.

Often our worlds do fall apart. Often it feels like you have abandoned us, and we don't know where to turn, and everything in our world shakes. help us, Father, to trust what you've told us.



Help us to trust that you are God in those moments, that you will be exalted amongst the nations, but more than that, that you've come to us, that you've come with us, that you've come for us, that you've shed your blood for our souls, and that we can find stability and peace and assurance in your sovereign goodness, even in those moments when it doesn't feel like it.

Help us to remember that in the shakingness of our world, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.