

Psalms 46 — A Very Present Help — The River That Gladdens the City, and the Command to Be Still

Psalm 46: a song of the sons of Korah, set to Alamo — a psalm of confidence in God's presence amid cosmic upheaval and raging nations, built in three stanzas around the refrain 'The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge,' and climaxing in the command 'Be still, and know that I am God.'

Somewhere in the temple's music, a choir of Korah's sons stood up and sang the most fearless thing a frightened people can say. Psalm 46 is not a psalm written from a calm harbor; it is a psalm written with the storm still visible over the shoulder. The earth is coming apart, the mountains are sliding into the sea, the waters are roaring, the nations are in an uproar, and kingdoms are toppling — and against all of it the singers plant one flat, immovable sentence: *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble*. This is the genre scholars call a "song of Zion," a psalm of confidence, and it is the ancestor of every hymn of trust the Church has ever sung. Martin Luther loved this psalm enough to build "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" on its bones — but we ground this essay in the text itself, because the text is braver than any paraphrase of it.

Hebrew Word Studies

***machaseh* (H4268) (מַחֲסֵה) — refuge, shelter, a place of trust — from *chasah*, to flee to for protection v. 1.** This is the psalm's first word about God and its foundation. *Machaseh* comes from the verb *chasah*, "to take refuge, to flee for shelter" — the picture of a small creature running for cover, or a traveler ducking into a cleft of rock as a storm breaks. It is bodily, instinctive, urgent; not the calm choosing of a safe neighborhood but the sprint of the hunted toward the one place that holds. The Psalter loves this root: "he that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High... my refuge (*machaseh*) and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust" (Ps. 91:1–2); "the LORD is... my rock, in whom I will take refuge" (Ps. 18:2). Notice the psalm does not say God *has* a refuge or *gives* one — God *is* one. The shelter and the sheltering God are the same. And notice what it is a refuge *from*: not an easy life, but *trouble* — the storms are assumed, the roaring is real. Alma teaches the same instinct to the Nephites when he pleads that they be "encircled about in the arms of safety" (Alma 34:16), and the risen Lord makes it a lament of love: "how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens... and ye would not" (3 Ne. 10:5). The refuge stands open; the running is ours to do.

***oz* (H5797) (זֹר) — strength, might, power — especially strength that is a stronghold, a defense v. 1.** *Oz* is the second noun of verse 1, and it keeps the refuge from going soft. A refuge could be merely a hiding place — somewhere you cower until danger passes. But *oz* is muscular strength, the might of a warrior or the immovable solidity of a stronghold. Paired with *machaseh*, it means the shelter is not passive: the same God who hides you is the power that holds the walls. Scripture ties this word tightly to God's own name and presence — "The LORD is my strength (*oz*) and song" (Ex. 15:2, Israel's first hymn after the sea), "the LORD is the strength of my life" (Ps. 27:1), and the promise that anchors the weary: "he giveth power to the faint" (Isa. 40:29). It is the word behind "in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength" (Isa. 30:15) — strength that does not look like straining but like trust. The psalm's whole argument lives in this pairing: because God is both the place you flee to *and* the power you draw on, fear has nowhere left to stand. You are neither exposed nor helpless. The Lord said it plainly to a prophet in a dungeon: "thou art not yet as Job... hold on thy way... God shall be with you for ever and ever" (D&C 121:10; 122:9) — refuge and strength, spoken into the worst trouble a servant can be in.

***nahar* (H5104) (נָהָר) — river, stream — a steady, flowing, life-giving watercourse v. 4.** *Nahar* is the ordinary word for a river — the Euphrates is *the nahar*, and the four rivers of Eden are *neharot* (Gen. 2:10). Its very ordinariness is the point. The chaos-water of this psalm is *yam*, the sea, and its roaring *mayim*, the deep — untamed, threatening, the biblical shorthand for everything that resists God's order. But the water inside the city is *nahar*: channeled, purposeful, going somewhere, giving life along its banks. The contrast is the theology. The same substance that is terror as an ungoverned sea becomes gladness as a God-given river. Scripture keeps returning to this stream: Eden's rivers watering the garden, the "river of God, which is full of water" (Ps. 65:9), Ezekiel's temple river deepening from ankles to a flood no one can cross (Ezek. 47:5), and at last the "river of water of life" from the throne (Rev. 22:1). The Savior gathers the whole image into an invitation: "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink... out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37–38) — and the Nephites hear the same promise, that those who come to him "shall never thirst" (see the living water Jesus offers). Zion's security is not a moat to keep enemies out; it is a river that will not run dry, because its source is the God in her midst.

***tseva'ot* (H6635) (צְבָאוֹת) — hosts, armies — the title "LORD of hosts," Yahweh commander of the heavenly armies vv. 7, 11.** *Tseva'ot* means "armies," and "the LORD of hosts" — *Yahweh tseva'ot* — is one of Scripture's great names for God,

appearing in the refrain that anchors this psalm at verses 7 and 11. The "hosts" are the marshaled ranks of heaven: the stars called out by number (Isa. 40:26), and the angelic armies a prophet's servant glimpsed when his eyes were opened — "the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha" (2 Kgs. 6:17). Here is the quiet power of putting *this* name in *this* refrain. The psalm has just watched earthly kingdoms rage and topple, armies moving against the city. And the answer is not that God has a bigger army; it is that God is the Lord of every army, seen and unseen — the commander to whom the roaring nations are one melting word away from silence. When David faced Goliath, this was the name he threw back at the giant's sword and spear: "I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts" (1 Sam. 17:45). The refrain says the same thing to every besieged soul: the one who is *with us* is not a fellow-sufferer only but the captain of heaven's hosts, and the outcome was never in doubt. That is why the refrain can close a stanza in perfect peace and let *Selah* fall after it.

raphah (H7503) (רָפָה) — **to sink, relax, let drop, cease, be still — to slacken the hand, to let go v. 10.** This is the verb behind "Be still," and it is richer and harder than the English lets on. *Raphah* means to grow slack, to sink down, to let the hands drop, to release what you are gripping. It is the word for hands that "hang down" in exhaustion or discouragement (Isa. 35:3), and for letting a matter *drop* or leaving someone *alone*. So the command in verse 10 is not "be calm" — it is closer to "let go," "drop your hands," "cease your striving." Picture a person clutching the rope in a tug-of-war, straining to hold their world in place; *raphah* is the command to open the fingers. And it is bracing precisely because it is aimed at people whose instinct, in trouble, is to grip harder. Elsewhere God uses the same root in tender promise — "I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee," the flip side, *lo raphah*, "I will not let go of you" (Josh. 1:5; Deut. 31:6). So the verse holds both hands: *you* let go, because *he* will not. The stillness commanded here is the deliberate release of self-rescue — the same surrender Christ modeled when he prayed "not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42), the peace that comes not from controlling the storm but from trusting the One who does. The Lord gave this verb, verbatim, to his Saints in their extremity: "Be still, and know that I am God" (D&C 101:16). To be still is not to do nothing; it is to stop doing the one thing that never saved you — carrying it all yourself.

misgab (H4869) (מִשְׁגַּב) — **high tower, secure height, stronghold, refuge — a place set inaccessibly high vv. 7, 11.** The refrain's word for "refuge" is not the same as verse 1's — and the difference is a gift. Verse 1 used *machaseh*, the shelter you run to. The refrain uses *misgab*, from the root *sagav*, "to be high, inaccessibly lofty." A *misgab* is a stronghold set on a crag, a fortress so high the enemy cannot reach it — safety by elevation. So the psalm's two words for refuge give you two pictures: the shelter you flee into at ground level (*machaseh*), and the high fortress lifted clean above the reach of the flood and the armies (*misgab*). Both are God. David, hunted for years, piled this word up in praise: "The LORD is my rock, and my fortress... my high tower (*misgab*)" (Ps. 18:2), and "the LORD also will be a refuge (*misgab*) for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble" (Ps. 9:9) — the oppressed lifted out of reach of those who crush them. That is exactly the comfort the refrain offers a besieged city and a besieged soul: whatever is rising around you — floodwater, empire, grief — the God of Jacob has set you higher than it can climb. The mountains are being *moved* (v. 2, 5, 6) and toppled into the sea; the *misgab* is the height nothing can move. To say "the God of Jacob is our *misgab*" is to say the storm can rise as high as it likes and still never reach the ones he has lifted up.

From the Chapter's Architecture

The Hebrew parallelism carries the feeling. Verse 1 stacks three near-synonyms for safety; verse 2 pairs "the earth be removed" with "the mountains be carried"; verse 9 lays three broken weapons side by side — bow, spear, chariot. The poem builds by doubling and tripling, each line reinforcing the last, so that by the time you reach be still you have been braced three times over. I will not claim a chiasm here; the shape is not a mirror but a descent — from the roaring cosmos, down to the threatened city, down to a single quiet command — and then the refrain lifts you back up to the God who was with you the whole way down.