

God Our Refuge and Strength Part 1

By George Gipps (n.d.)

Psalm 46:1

I. The Text Opened

A. Psalm 46:1

1. Psalm 46:1, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."
2. Being the first verse of this 46th Psalm, it is independent from any preceding passage.
 - a) Rather than troubling you with the title, I will begin this message with Luther's comment on this Psalm.
 - b) In his words, "It is a thanksgiving to God for his wonderful benefits, in keeping his church safe from all the enemies of it, those nations which circled them in on every side, who both in hostile and treacherous manner sought their utmost ruin. This therefore the Jews sang to support their faith, and to raise their fainting spirits in all their extremities: which also," (he adds), "let us now sing to the honor of God, powerfully and miraculously preserving his word and church by this Psalm. It explains things against the errors and heresies of giddy brained spirits. Against the power and policy of cruel tyrants. Against the baits of sin, the world, and the flesh, and against all malice of Satan by all his engineers."
3. For all these reasons, this psalm is perfectly suited to our present times, as well as to those former times and conditions.
 - a) Therefore, according to my usual method, I will proceed to propose these three things. 1. Explication of the sense of the words. 2. Observation of their doctrinal truths. 3. Application of it to our own souls.
4. We begin with the explication of the words in order.
 - a) The first word, "God," is the same God whom Luke describes in Acts 17:24, "that made the world, and all things therein: that dwelleth not in temples made with hands."
 - (1) *This is that same God, "in whom we live and move and have our being," (Acts 17:28).*
 - (2) *This is the first word.*
 - b) The second word is "is," as we read it.
 - (1) *Other translations read "shall be."*
 - (2) *And still others read simply, "God our refuge," (including the original text).*
 - (3) *All these differing readings give us the full sense of God.*
 - (4) *Regarding his nature, God is; resolvedly, God shall be; experientially, God our refuge, which is an exclamation with exultation.*
 - (5) *These are ravished affections for the believer which are utter broken sentences with elevated voice, disregarding rules of grammar.*
 - (6) *Experience of God's past mercies give birth to resolution for the time to come, resulting in an exultation of the heart in admiration of God's mercy.*
 - (7) *Let this suffice for the second word.*
 - c) The third word is "our," which some read affixed to God, in this way our God; others to refuge, in this way give the meaning God is our refuge.
 - (1) *Both together they give the full sense, which is, "Our God is our refuge."*
 - (2) *First God becomes our God by covenant, then he becomes our refuge by claim.*
 - (3) *This suffices for the third word.*

- d) The fourth word is “refuge,” as we read it.
- (1) *In other places it is rendered “hope”, and still others, “shelter.”*
 - (2) *Here is the difference between these renderings.*
 - (3) *Hope is that grace in our hearts which connects us to our refuge by which we arrive at a shelter to repose ourselves in.*
 - (4) *All three readings join together to make up the full sense, in this way, “A heart rightly anchored by hope in God, may safely fly unto him, and by so doing, securely shelter himself in him.”*
 - (5) *Ainsworth, a leader of the ancient church, said that “God will be to us a hopeful shelter, and a strength, a help in distresses we shall find very great...”*
 - (6) *This will suffice for the fourth word.*
- e) The fifth word is “strength,” which indicates not just strength in the concrete sense, but also in the abstract – an absolute, infinite, and all-sufficient strength.
- (1) *And as such, it may look either backward to shelter, or forward to help.*
 - (2) *Both are most full.*
 - (3) *In this way, God is so all sufficient in strength that those who fly to him for shelter shall certainly have help from him.*
- f) The sixth word as it appears in the original text is “help” or helper.
- (1) *The former signifies the quality, the latter the person so qualified.*
 - (2) *And both in one make up our fullness or comfort. God who undertakes is fully gifted and qualified for what he undertakes, in contrast to many who bear the name of what they have no skill to perform.*
- g) The seventh word is “trouble,” or “troubles,” in many of the several readings.
- (1) *The former represents the singular number, pertaining to each and any single trouble whatsoever; the latter the plural number (from the Septuagint) pertaining to collectively, in all troubles doubled and multiplied however many they may be.*
- h) The eighth, or last word (or rather phrase) is “very present,” as we read it.
- (1) *But the original language with diverse translations include the verb “find,” indicating, “we shall find very present, great, abundant, yes, too, too present, great and abundant.”*
 - (2) *And all these several readings do not include the full variety of their expositions that Augustine and which generally the ancients followed.*
 - (3) *So in the full sense, “we shall find God a very present, yes, too, too present, great and abundant help for too, too present, great and abundant troubles which we shall find.”*
- i) A third sort join both ideas in one, and take all this together, as the most full sense, in this way, “God’s saints in this life are sure to find very present, great and abundant troubles, yes, too great for them to bear, but their comfort is that they are as sure to find God a very present, great and abundant help in all their troubles, yes, too great to be overcome by them.”
- j) Give me leave to add one thing more to complete the sense, and so put an end to the first general part which is the explication of the words.
- (1) *As the original Hebrew text expressed no verb at all, neither is, nor shall be, nor any other, why do we supply any?*
 - (2) *When we string all the words of our text on this verb, find (which does appear in the Hebrew) and let it run through them all, making one entire rich chain, it reads “we shall find God our refuge, strength and very present help in trouble.”*
- (a) *This is the explanation of the text.*

II. The Doctrine from the Text

A. There are various Doctrines that could be considered.

1. An observation of these doctrinal truths which follow.
 - a) First, we own that only one God made all things (Acts 17).
 - b) Second, we should not rest until we have made this God our God, by his most sure and firm covenant.
 - c) Third, once this is done, we may securely anchor our hope in him.
 - d) Fourth, with our hope anchored in him, we may in all straits and troubles fly to him.
 - e) Fifth, when we fly to him, he will give us shelter and harbor.
 - f) Sixth, this is no questionable, tottering shelter, but a shelter of strength which is all sufficient.
 - g) Seventh, at the same time, this shelter does not keep us from finding troubles very present, great, and abundant, that are beyond our strength to bear.
 - h) Eighth, nevertheless, we have this comfort, that in all of them we are sure to find God a more present, great and abundant Helper, most able and willing to help us through.
 - i) Ninth, this promise is ours if we keep ourselves free from sin by repentance. Otherwise, we will be found out through an accusing conscience.
 - j) Tenth, and even in this we find comfort, that on our repentance for the most heinous sins, we will be met with God's pardon and forgiveness. And as we are of the election of grace, we shall be brought by God to repentance and salvation.
 - k) Lastly, to help us combine these all into one whole, let us gather experiments of what is past to settle our resolution for that which is to come, and from both testify with elevation of both heart and voice that, "We shall find God our refuge, and strength, a very present help in trouble."

B. The First Doctrine

1. This text is full of comfort, if we are as full of faith to use it with the best advantage to our souls.
 - a) Though however excellent all these divine truths are, and however plentifully these differing readings from God's Word abound, I prefer to contain my thoughts within its plain song, shared with you in these three following propositions.
 - b) First, it is the portion of God's church and his children to find in and through this life very present (yes, even "too, too present") great and abundant troubles that must be waded through.
 - c) The Second doctrine will be, it is the wisdom of God's church and children to make God their hope, refuge, and shelter in all these troubles.
 - d) The third doctrine will be, it is the comfort of God's church and children, that in so doing they shall find God a very present (yes, "too, too present") great and abundant help in all these troubles.

(1) We have now covered this first branch, namely, the explication of the sense of the words, and are ready to move unto the second branch which is that of the doctrinal observations, their use and application.

C. Doctrinal Observations

1. These three points are so naturally linked together that a great many texts of Scripture reiterate them.

- a) For example, Psalm 18 does this generally throughout.
 - (1) *And more particularly, verse 4, "The sorrows of death compassed me, the floods of ungodly men made me afraid," in this is the first point.*
 - (2) *Verse 2, "My God, my rock, my fortress, my strength, my buckler, my high tower, in whom I will trust," in this is the second point.*
 - (3) *Verse 3, "I will call upon the Lord, so shall I be saved from mine enemies," and verse 48, "He delivers me from mine enemies," therein is the third point.*
- b) Another example is Psalm 34:19, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous," (the first point) "but the Lord delivered him out of them all," (the third point), and verse 22, "None that trust in him shall be desolate," (the second and third point jointly).
 - (1) *As this is so frequently the case elsewhere in Scripture, we shall occasionally reference them.*

D. The First Proposition and Doctrine

1. And now we enter our first proposition, which is that it is the portion of God's church and children to find in this life very great and abundant troubles.
 - a) The ratifying of this truth shall be noted first in a brief numbering of these troubles.
 - b) Secondly, in deducing certain conclusions which are, 1) the troubles in this life are either temporal or spiritual, and, 2) temporal includes life itself, death, pains, and sickness; poverty with its accompanying lack of convenient meat, drink, clothing, and dwelling; infamy and its accompanying scorn, disgrace, contempt, and slander.
 - (1) *Spiritual troubles include that inbred sexual desire, that snake in our bosom and its accompanying temptations to actual sins, too many presumptions which often lead to gross scandal, resulting in spiritual desertion and God giving us up to Satan's buffetings.*
 - c) It is important to note that all these evils are common to all Adam's offspring, both godly and wicked alike in this life (Eccl. 9:1-2).
 - d) And as Job 5:7 says, "Man is born into trouble as the sparks fly upward."
2. Secondly, this common condition did not flow from our creation by God's sovereign right of dominion but is an act of God's justice upon Adam's fall.
 - a) As a result of Adam's sin, God's passed punishment on all his posterity, by which the whole world of creatures is cursed. "In the day thou eat of it thou shalt surely die," (Gen. 2:17).
3. Thirdly, the consequence of these results in a vast difference between the godly and the wicked, even as vast as there is distance between the highest heaven and the lowest hell.
 - a) Matthew 25:32 says the two shall be separated as goats and sheep.
 - b) "Come ye blessed," (verse 34), and "Depart ye cursed," (verse 41), and "the righteous shall go into life eternal and the wicked into everlasting punishment," (verse 46).
 - c) The great trouble for the ungodly is their temporal evils, as they are insensible of spiritual ones.
 - d) They never tire of sin, but desire to be able to sin infinitely while enjoying all the accommodations of life and their lusts, regardless of their internal hell of conscience and the infernal hell of torments to follow.

- e) The godly, on the other hand, consider living in sin to be the most hellish condition, and perfect holiness as the apex of their eternal happiness.
- f) And thirdly, the wicked could be content never to see God's face and enjoy his favor in heaven so that they might never see his frown and feel his wrath in hell; the righteous, on the other hand, acknowledge God's favor better than life itself, in whose presence is fulness of joy, and at whose right hand are pleasures for evermore.

(1) *Let this suffice for the Doctrinal part of this first Proposition.*

III. The Text Applied

A. USE 1

1. Use 1. The first use we address here is to answer the question, "why will God be so harsh to his own children, as this doctrine indicates?"

- a) The answer is twofold.
- b) First, it may seem that he is subjecting his children to a common condition with others in the kinds of their sufferings.

(1) *However, this is not so, for God takes special care of his own in all their sufferings for their spiritual and eternal good.*

- c) A second answer is that God's providence works best with his most wise dispensation.

(1) *In other words, if the godly totally escaped suffering and only the wicked experienced troubles, such multitudes of mercenaries would profess to be Christians that sincerity would not be discerned nor valued; they would desire to escape affliction and so simply take on the name of the Christian.*

(2) *The fact that we must suffer many tribulations to enter the kingdom of heaven staves off hypocrites.*

(3) *Satan was not impressed with Job's service to God as long as God protected him (Job 1:9), but thought that afflictions would have staggered and shattered his faith (though Job proves him wrong, which was a great foil to Satan).*

(4) *So, quite often God sends Christians into trials to see if they will continue to embrace their faith merely and entirely for the sake of Christ.*

(5) *And on the contrary, if the wicked escaped suffering and only the godly were troubled, this would discourage God's children and encourage wickedness.*

(6) *Knowing this, how did Job's friends accuse him of being a hypocrite when God had so afflicted him?*

(7) *And why is it that when the church suffers, it prospers?*

(8) *This possibility moved patient Moses to be unrelenting in his request to God that he not destroy Israel in the wilderness, lest the Egyptians should say that God brought them out of Egypt for mischief, to slay them in the mountains, or that he was not able to bring them into Canaan (Exod. 32:11-12; Num. 14:16).*

(9) *Therefore, God's wisdom orders it, that his justice shall be satisfied by all suffering similar troubles, and his grace and mercy shown by so sanctifying troubles for his children's good.*

2. USE 2

- a) A second use is exhortation, that we do not shun troubles when God sends them, but patiently embrace and approve them.

b) Had we in our own country sympathized with the churches in other countries (Germany and France), (and more lately of Ireland and Scotland), by prayers and tears and aide for them according to their necessities and our abilities, most probably we might have escaped this fierce storm that is now pouring down upon our own country (Ezek. 9:4-6; Amos 6:1, 3, 6-7; Matt. 11:17).

(1) *But regrettably, we are so far from sharing with our brethren's sufferings that we will not own that general charge of all Christians to be crucified to the world, and the world to us.*

(2) *For as yet in our most sad present condition, even when summoned to mourning and fasting, we prefer to please ourselves with the vain delights of the world.*

(3) *As the kingdom of heaven does not focus on meat and drink, pomp and pleasure, or other temporary and earthly satisfactions, so the heirs of this kingdom should not be so taken with them (Matt. 6:32-33).*

(4) *Christ tells us to seek the interests of the kingdom of God first, and all these earthly needs will be given you.*

(a) *You will never have to stoop or strain to gain such empty delights.*

(5) *Not that we are not worthy of the world, but that it is not worthy of us.*

(6) *Not that these things are too good for us, but as kingdom children we are too honorable to place our affections on them.*

(7) *Christ states that our inner nature is evidenced by our outer fruits.*

(8) *Just as the herbalist can distinguish each plant, not only by its fruit but by its leaves, so also, our outward behaviors distinguish the children of the kingdom of God from those in the kingdom of Satan.*

3. USE 3

a) I add a third use, a further exhortation, that we make and keep covenant with God to be our God, and not break covenant with him, so he will not break covenant with us.

(1) *Faith, fear, love, and universal obedience to his whole revealed will is the only effectual means to keep us from the world and under the protection of his covenant, and so I end with this Scripture, "But if from thence thou shalt seek the LORD thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul. When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the LORD thy God, and shalt be obedient unto his voice; (For the LORD thy God is a merciful God;) he will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which he sware unto them." (Deut. 4:29-31).*