

We're in a series called "Be Still" and we're looking at what are some very popular verses that call us to be still. We come this morning to another favorite verse of many. Psalm 46:10, "*Be still and know that I am God.*" We silkscreen it on to t-shirts, print it on coffee mugs, paint it on plaques and embroider it on pillows. Just go to ETSY.com and see how many things you can get this verse on.

We pull this one verse out of the chapter and apply it to our lives like some sort of spiritual Band-Aid. There's a reason why the "*Be still*" verses are so popular. They speak to a deep longing, a need that is sorely missing from our modern lives that usually race along at a hundred miles an hour and at 100 decibels. Our lives are like their own Fast and Furious movie, never letting up, never letting down, and never letting go.

And so we see this scripture, "*Be still*" emblazoned on a beautiful picture of a serene lake under a setting sun, framed in fall leaves with the water as smooth as glass, and it taps into something that our heart always wants, but seems to never have – peace.

But what does this Psalm really mean? What is stillness really? And can we ever hope to find it in our lives today?

Psalm 46:10 was never intended to stand on its own. Be careful of fortune cookies wisdom taken from verses dispensed out of context.

Coming from the Psalms tells us first of all, that this was a song. This whole chapter was sung as a song of worship. Many of us are old enough to remember when churches had hymnals. A hymnal is a collection of songs of praise and worship that ranged from hundreds of years old to songs that were only a few years old. Most hymnals were arranged thematically with songs for every aspiration, every need and every occasion.

The Psalms, likewise, were the hymnbook of Israel. These were the songs they sang as they went to temple and gathered in the temple courts. These are the songs they sang on the Sabbath, as they celebrated their holy feasts, or assembled in their synagogues.

Psalms is the longest book in the Bible with 150 chapters. That should tell us how important praise and worship is. If you look closely, the Psalms are divided into five different books. For instance, Psalm 46 comes near the beginning of book II. If you look at the top of Psalm 42 you'll see a note that says "Book II." This wasn't added by the translators or editors. It's present in the biblical text itself.

The Psalms are not organized by the type of song. Songs of praise are mixed with Songs of lament. The happy songs right along with the blues. You'll find a song of confession seeking forgiveness for one's own sins right next to an imprecatory Psalm, which calls on God to judge one's enemies for their sins. Neither are the Psalms arranged by author. Although David wrote nearly half of them, all sorts of other authors are scattered throughout.

Psalm 46 tells us it was written by the Sons of Korah. This wasn't a singing family with a show in Branson. This was a song-writing family of Levites whose story is incredible in and of itself. I might have to preach a sermon just on them. It's an amazing story of grace.

The Psalms are not arranged alphabetically, chronologically or by length. They're not arranged by popularity. This is the top 150 countdown of Israel's greatest hits. But there are themes that weave in and out and tie it all together. There is a flow to the book. It's like the greatest concept album ever made, and God's people have been dropping the needle on the record for 3,000 years.

This Psalm centers on the city of Jerusalem, home to the temple, and the focal point of God's presence. It is there in the presence of God that we find our safety and security. Some scholars think Psalm 46 was written after a particular divine deliverance of Jerusalem. Perhaps when God spared the city from the invading Assyrian armies in 701 BC (2 Kings 19 & 2 Chronicles 32). However, Psalm 46 testifies to many kinds of deliverance both from natural disaster and human enemies.

One eye of the worshipper seemingly looks back to the past and how God has faithfully protected his people in previous trials, while with the other, the Psalmist looks to the future and envisions a day when God silences all disaster and stills every weapon.

God is Our Refuge from the Storms of Life

The Psalm is divided into three refrains. We might think of them as three verses or stanzas of the song. The first refrain is found in verses 1-3 and it speaks to how God is our refuge through the natural troubles of life. This opening stanza describes a cataclysmic earthquake and storm.

I will be reading our text out of the ESV.

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
3 though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah*

God is our Refuge from the Storms of Life.

Isaac Duncan, of Carl Junction, was driving around Joplin with two of his buddies on May 22, 2011 listening to the Royals game. The game kept getting interrupted with storm warnings and weather updates. At first they ignored the reports. After all, it was May in tornado alley. Such warnings are a weekly occurrence. However, the weather was getting worse out their own windshield, so they switched from the AM station located miles away to a local FM station.

The reporters were frantic. Power was out. There was no radar. The backup generator was the only thing keeping them on the air. It was really bad. This is when Isaac turns on the video camera on his phone hoping to catch something for his fledgling YouTube channel.

As they drove south down Duquesne Road, they saw something beautiful and terrifying – a wispy veil of clouds churning and turning like a giant mixing bowl. They sped to the nearest place they could find, a Fastrip convenience store. The electricity was already out, and about 20 people were hunkered down in the store.

It suddenly grows very dark and very noisy. You hear screams and people crying out, “Jesus, Jesus,” and “Heavenly father, help.” One man shouts, “Get away from the window,” and a little girl cries, “I’m scared.” Someone takes charge telling everyone to “Get down, low on the ground.”

On Isaac’s video you can only hear the devastation – the wind whipping against the structure, the shattering of glass, and the noise of massive destruction. It’s too dark to see much of anything. The whole group seeks refuge in the store’s freezer. You hear a scream, “Dad!” Soon, the sound of wind and chaos drowns out the screaming. Then voices emerge. “I love all you guys, it’s going to be okay.” Finally, the wind subsides and you hear, “Is everyone okay?”

Slowly the survivors emerge from a hole torn in the cooler. It was the only thing left standing.

Where do you seek shelter from a storm? In these parts, we have tornado shelters. We have one in our basement. It’s the size of medium sized closet with enough room for about four people sitting in chairs. Even if the whole house gets wiped off the map, it’s designed to still be standing.

God is our tornado shelter for life. The word used in the Bible is refuge. A safe place where you can find shelter from the storm. It can be a literal storm, a tornado that comes along and takes everything you’ve worked your whole life for and tosses it about like a house of cards. More often it’s the metaphorical storm– emotional turmoil, mental anguish, relationship conflict. Where do you run for refuge when life gets overwhelming? What truths do you turn to? We need protection from the storms of life.

That security comes from our relationship with God. Prayer anchors us to an immovable hope. Scripture secures our footing to something that will not slip. The Holy Spirit, our comforter, wraps around us with an assurance that cannot be blown away. And Jesus, our Savior, tells us there will never be a storm we have to endure alone.

In the face of uncertainty, there is nothing more certain than a faith that is secure in the love and grace of God. In Him we find the restoration of emotional strength and the replenishment of spiritual wisdom. This is how the follower of Jesus can find peace in the midst of the storm.

God is a Fortress from our Enemies

God is more than a refuge from the storms of life. He is a fortress from our enemies. The song's second stanza takes us from verse 4 through verse 7.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
 the holy habitation of the Most High.
 5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
 God will help her when morning dawns.
 6 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
 he utters his voice, the earth melts.
 7 The Lord of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah.

It's a picture of political turmoil and sabre rattling. The nations are raging. Kingdoms are tottering. The balance of power could tip at any moment. This is not just an ancient story. It's as modern as yesterday's headlines. 100,000 Russian troops amassed on the Ukrainian border. China test launches a new hypersonic missile that can reach around the globe. In the face of international conflict, God is our fortress. And he is a fortress that supplies all of our needs.

In verse 4 that supply comes from a river. *"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of God."* This is interesting for two reasons. First, in the opening stanza, the waters were a source of chaos and tumult in the raging storms of life, but now under God's watchful care, water has become a life-giving river that brings joy to God's people.

But there's a pesky geographical problem. One of the great fears of an ancient walled city like Jerusalem was a siege. An army surrounds the city and doesn't let anything in or out. Sure, the citizens are safe behind the walls, but they are slowly starved into surrender. Jerusalem was extremely vulnerable to this tactic. It was built on top of a mountain range. It didn't grow its own food. And it didn't even have its own water supply.

Babylon was on the Euphrates River. Nineveh on the Tigris, Thebes on the Nile, and Rome on the Tiber, but Jerusalem has no river, no stream. It's only natural water supply, the Gihon Spring lay actually outside the original walls of the city. In 2 Kings 20, King Hezekiah had a tunnel dug through 583 yards of solid rock to bring water from the Gihon Spring into Jerusalem so they could survive a siege.

This is how we know this song is no longer singing about the earthly city of Jerusalem, it's looking forward in to the eternal, heavenly city of God. At the end of Revelation, the apostle John sees a vision of this city. *"And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."* And in describing the city, John tells us this in the opening verses of Revelation 22, *"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life."* In this city of

God, there is a river, and this river brings joy. It brings life, and all God's people can drink freely from its streams.

This Psalm takes us from present day, when nations can do things that make headlines that shake us to our core, when a coworker can do more than ruin your day at work. They can undermine all you've worked so hard to do, shame you in front of your boss, and embarrass you in front everyone you work with, and make your life miserable, when a nemesis can seemingly make it their mission in life, to be a thorn in your side. This Psalm takes us from that to a day where no enemy can threaten us ever again.

There will come a day when God utters his voice and the earth itself will melt before him. This speaks to the refining fire of the justice of God which will renew and restore all things. That is the God who is on your side, no matter what enemy you face.

The God Who Wants You to Know Him

With all that in mind, listen to the song's third and final, victorious stanza.

8 *Come, behold the works of the LORD,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.*
9 *He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.*
10 *"Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!"*
11 *The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah*

This isn't just the calming of one storm. It isn't just the ending of one war. It is the ending of all of them. Wars have ceased to the end of the earth. It is with that promise that God invites us to "*be still, and know that I am God.*"

I am going to apologize ahead of time, because I'm about to ruin this verse for some of you, so I'm sorry. To borrow from Inigo Montoya in the Princess Bride, this verse does not mean what you think it means."

These words, "*Be still and know that I am God,*" is not just a promise spoken to those huddled in the shelter seeking refuge from chaos raging outside. That's why we like this verse on our t-shirts and our coffee cups. It's comfort for the troubled soul.

But these are more words of warning, than they are of comfort. The verse before is about God ending all the wars of earth, breaking the bow, shattering the spear, and burning the chariot. This is God saying to those who draw the bow, who wield the sword, and who drive chariot, "Be still." "Stop your fighting, and know God while you still can. Stop fighting, before you have no

choice, and you are made stop. Know that I am God now, before it is too late and then every knee will bow and every tongue will confess.”

“Be still.” This is very similar to Jesus’ command to the raging Sea of Galilee, *“Peace, be still.”* He’s talking to the sea. Not the disciples. The word used here literally means to “grow slack, to release, to let go. Drop the sword, relax the bow. Let go of the reins. The NASB translates it this way *“Stop striving and know that I am God.”* The Christian Standard Bible says, *“Stop fighting, and know that I am God.”* This is not so much a call to relax. It’s a call to surrender to God.

These are still words to us, but just maybe not in the way we think they are. Because in all of our fighting with each other and our raging against life, we are fighting against God. We are fighting against our own spiritual lives.

So, be still. Be still our useless rivalries, Be still our petty jealousies, Be still our selfish squabbles. Quit competing for the glory, stop shifting the blame, put down your sword, put down your angry retort, don’t hit the post button. Withdraw the snide comment. Put your bitterness back in its sheath. Be still.

Let me paint you a picture of what “be still” looks like. Remember a time when you took your young child, or your grandchild into your arms. You pick them up in the middle of a meltdown. Maybe they’re angry. Maybe they’re hurt. Maybe they’re just throwing a fit because they didn’t get their way. You wrap their arms around them, and you try to pull them close, but they’re fussing and fuming and fighting. They thrash and twist and turn. They resist every effort to calm them down.

But then comes that moment of surrender. The moment when they realize their fighting does no good. Their thrashing is getting them nowhere. Finally, the arms and legs go limp. The heaving shoulders stop trembling. The screaming subsides. A heavy sigh leaves the lungs. The lip stops its quivering. They go slack in your embrace you pull them close. Their arms wrap around your neck. They lay their head on your shoulder. They are finally still. They have ceased their fighting and find rest in your presence. You whisper in their ear, “It’s okay. I love you. Everything’s going to be alright.”

That’s what this command is for us to be in the arms of our heavenly Father. Quit your fighting. Quit your fussing and fuming and draw close to the presence of God. It’s okay. God loves you. You’re going to be alright, because He has everything under control.

Let me bring all of this to a close. What is our response? What should you do about this right now this morning?

It begins with a little word that appears 74 times in the Bible, 71 times right here in the book of Psalms, and three of them right here in Psalm 46. It shows up at the end of verse 3, the end of verse 7, and it is the very last word in the song in verse 11.

Now, if you're using the new NIV, the word isn't there at all except in the footnotes. I think that's a disservice, because it is there for a reason.

The funny thing is we're not sure what this word means exactly. It probably wasn't even a word that was sung. It wasn't a lyric. Rather, its presence in the text is an instruction. It is the word *Selah*. Its true meaning is a mystery to us, and scholars have come up with all sorts of definitions. But it's how we know there are three refrains or stanzas in this song, because each one ends with this instruction – *Selah*.

Some think it is an instruction to praise. One Hebrew lexicon defines it as "to lift up, exalt." Many Bible scholars believe it is a musical notation, indicating a pause, a moment of silence or a musical interlude. Our best clue is found in the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, since it was written at a time when ancient Hebrew was still in widespread use. In the Septuagint, *Selah* is rendered as "*intermission*."

How does this help us? Imagine a worship service in the temple courts where this song is being sung. You sing the first stanza, and then you get to this instruction, *Selah*.

The voices grow silent, but the music keeps playing quietly in the background. It's not time for a guitar solo, or for the worship leader to show off their vocal chops. It's a time for mediation and reflection. There is an intermission in the singing to give the worshipper time to reflect. It's like taking the time to chew your food and savor the flavor before you swallow. God wants you to digest what is being sung. Instead of singing the same 7 words over and over again as we are so wont to do today, maybe the best thing to do is to be still and listen. We sing to God in our worship, but let's listen to see if He's saying something back. Be still in our singing. Be still in our minds. Be still in our emotions, and take time to know the God who invites us to know Him.