

# DEEP SOUTH PASTOR'S CONFERENCE WHEN WATERS ROAR

PSALMS 46:1-11

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling. Selah.

There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn. The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

Come, behold the works of the LORD, Who has made desolations in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire. Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth! The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

The innocent headwaters of the Chattooga River meander along for miles. But near the end, just before the river plunges into Lake Tallulah, the waters turn seriously violent. In the words of Psalm 46, *"the waters roar!"* If you're rafting this section, the river becomes a hairy ride full of violent sluices and keeper hydraulics. Over the years dozens of boaters have died in the narrow, turbulent channels... *but I never thought I'd be one...* Not until one particular trip...

It happened at *"Seven Foot Falls"* - a rapid named for obvious reasons. Our boat got twisted in the entrance to the falls. We hit the ledge sideways. The back of the raft flipped into the air and catapulted me over the guys in the bow. I landed in the swirling water at the bottom of the falls. In retrospect I was only underwater for a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity. For a time the churning water held me stationary. Finally, the hydraulic sucked me under, and pushed me out the bottom of the hole. I popped up 20 yards downstream gasping for breath, *but happy to be alive*. Prior to that day I'd always thought when it came my turn to die I'd face death full of faith and courage. But I got to admit, trapped in that whirling current I met a dangerous enemy... I was gripped by a villain called *"fear."*

What about you... *have you ever been afraid* Recently, USA Today ran an article, *"Fear: What Americans Are Afraid of Today."* Here's the conclusion: 54% of us fear being in a car crash... 53% fear having cancer... 50% fear the survival of social security... 40% fear getting mugged in their own neighborhood... 36% fear getting food poisoning from tainted meat... 35% fear coming down with Alzheimer's... 33% fear being the victim of a violent crime... 25% fear natural disasters... and 20% fear a random bombing...

Folks today are surrounded by all kinds of fear. Consult the media and here's what you'll hear: Food sprayed with pesticides will kill me. *Be afraid.* Unfiltered water from my facet will kill me. *Be afraid.* Cholesterol will kill me. *Be afraid.* A lack of cholesterol will kill me. *Be afraid.* Fluorocarbons in the atmosphere will kill me. *Be afraid.* Overexposure to the sun will kill me. *Be afraid.* Cell phone transmissions will kill me. *Be afraid.* Radon gas seeping up from my basement will kill me. *Be afraid.* Saccharin in my coffee will kill me. *Be afraid.* Processed sugar in my coffee will kill me. *Be afraid.* Coffee will kill me. *Be afraid.* People today live in fear. The late advice columnist, Ann Landers, received 10,000 letters a month, mostly from people with problems - and she said that by far the number one problem people faced was fear.

And I've found even pastors struggle against this enemy called *"fear."*

Pastors fear a drop in the offerings... we fear a mutiny on the worship team... we fear getting up to preach with our fly wide open... we fear a church split... we fear trouble from the IRS... we fear getting fired by the elders... we fear demons in the sound system... we fear all the faces... Everybody struggles with some kind of fear.

You can be sure the writer of Psalm 46 was tempted with fear... Bible scholars suggest the psalm was written in the days of Hezekiah, king of Judah. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC the Assyrian empire ruled the world. Assyria's king, Sennacherib, was ambitious, and ruthless, and bent on world domination. His army had conquered Syria and Israel, and his sites were now set on the land of the pharaohs - Egypt. Yet in between Sennacherib's army and the riches of the Nile was the city of Jerusalem.

Understand what King Hezekiah was up against. The Assyrians were probably 200,000 troops. And the soldiers were brutal and blood-thirsty. The Assyrians impaled their conquered foes – skinned them alive like fish – cut off hands, feet, noses, ears – plucked out eyes and yanked out tongues. They piled up skulls outside a city's gates just to inspire terror. Imagine trying to go to sleep knowing the bad-est of all bad guys were camped in your front yard waiting for the light of day to attack your house and ravage your family. You can bet Hezekiah was scared spit-less...

*Yet the frightened king prayed! He asked God for help...* And three times in Scripture— *three times no less* - just so we don't miss it – God documents His deliverance – in 2 Kings 19, 2 Chronicles 32, Isaiah 37. We're told in the middle of the night an Angel of the Lord came against Assyria. The *angelic avenger* drew his sword, and slew 185,000 troops. By morning light the remainder of the enemy army was in full retreat.

It's then, that someone... perhaps King Hezekiah - maybe the Prophet Isaiah - one of Jerusalem's survivors... looked over the wall at the death and carnage, and *marveled at God's miraculous deliverance. He took up a pen and parchment, and wrote Psalm 46.* Over the years this psalm has comforted many a fearful Christian. It's been said, "*Psalm 46 assures us that God can handle - in His will, in His own good time and way, things which seem like total disasters to us.*"

One of the blessings of a conference like this is the opportunity to lay aside our fears for a few days. It offers us an escape – a diversion. *But we've been dreading today...* We've got to head home to very thing we fear. If you're leaving to face a fear... pay close attention to Psalm 46!

The psalm is divided into three stanzas: In *verses 1-3 God is a refuge.* In *verses 4-7 God is a river.* And in *verses 8-11 God is seen as ruler.* Each stanza ends with the word "*Selah*" - a musical notation. It signaled an interlude – a bridge where the instruments played, while the previous thought was contemplated. It means literally, "*to pause and think about it*". We'll dispel our fears – and excite our faith – if we'll push pause on all our other thoughts - and think of God as *our refuge, our river, our ruler.*

Verse 1 "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*" The Hebrew word translated "*trouble*" means "*tight spot.*" Ever been in a *tight spot*? Options are limited - time is running out. You feel pressured or squeezed. You're under the gun. You're between a rock and a hard place. You're facing a no-win situation. *Perhaps you're in a tight spot today?*

As a pastor, some days it seems like my whole life could be described as a "*tight spot...*" Do I wait or do I go?... Do I show patience or bring down the hammer?... I need to make a decision, but I really don't have a peace... I'm suppose to represent God, but folks ought to know how much I hurt.. The people are coming to me for answers, but all I've got is questions... God called me to plant a church, but my family is calling... Do I take action, or rely on God's intervention?... *For a pastor all of life is a tight spot.*

Once, a dad came home to find his *usually* busy house *unusually* quiet. He walked into the den, and noticed all five kids on the floor in the center of the room. When he saw the object of their attention he let out a shout... In the middle of the den sat five cute, cuddly little *skunks*. Of course when dad shouted it scared the kids – so, each grabbed a skunk and ran into a different corner of the house... This upset dad even more, so he shouted again – which further frightened the kids... So much so, that the scared kids squeezed their respective skunks, *and we all know what happens when you squeeze a skunk... life stinks!*

The psalmist had the same feelings I did when I was battling those raging rapids. He says in verses 2-3, “Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling.” Sometimes circumstances can overwhelm us – situations swirl out of control – life can turn into a stinker! It’s been said, “Life is like fighting a gorilla. You don’t rest when you get tired. You rest when the gorilla gets tired.” The same is true with ministry. A crisis strikes. The pressure mounts. The situation starts to unravel. The disease is pronounced incurable. At times all you can do is hang on. The waters of life don’t always flow gently – at times they roar with trouble.

When men tell me they don’t want to go whitewater rafting because they can’t swim I tell them it doesn’t matter anyway. *Nobody* swims in a raging river. Fall out of a boat in a rapid, and all you can do is reach for a rope. Tumble into roaring waters, and you’re in an out-of-control situation.

This is how it is for a flood victim. Water starts seeping under the door. Quickly you try to stuff towels across the threshold, but it’s useless. You can’t keep out the relentless intruder. Slowly you watch the rising waters cover your carpets - overtake your furniture. *It’s a horrible and helpless...*

I have a friend who didn’t know that his downstairs toilet was the lowest toilet in the neighborhood... until the sewer system backed up. One day his toilet just kept pouring and pouring and dumping sewage into his house. There was nothing he could do to stop it... *That’s when life really stinks.*

This is also the helpless sensation you sense in an earthquake – or as the psalmist puts it, “the mountains shake with its swelling.” There’s nothing you can do when the ground shakes. You’re at the earth’s mercy... There are times in life when we’ve all felt like a whitewater swimmer, or a flood victim, or the earth is shaking all around us... *life is out of control.*

The psalmist gives another illustration of an out-of-control circumstance. “Even though the earth be removed...” Here’s an alternative translation. “Earth” can mean “land.” “Be removed” can be rendered “to change hands.” Thus, some scholars interpret the phrase, “When the land changes hands.” Imagine an angry army – armed to the teeth – storming your town - controlling your streets. They now dictate when you come and go - *and there’s nothing you can do about it!* This was the scene facing Jerusalem.

Of course, we could add to the psalmist’s list of out-of-control situations... *when the economy tanks... when church members can’t find work... when gossip is spreading about me... when my teenager rebels...* I don’t like to compare roaring waters, and earthquakes, and invasions to parenting teenagers, but there are some definite similarities... *When kids become teens so much is now out of their parent’s control!* You lie in bed at night, while the kids are out. Your mind races... *where are they? What are they doing? What if there’s trouble?* And you’re powerless to help. At that moment there’s not a thing you can do...

When my life, or the people I love, are out from under my control I’m prone to fear. And fear can gain a stranglehold on my life or ministry. It saps my energy, paralyzes my initiative, stymies my vision, steals my joy... *Where do we run when the waters roar?* Psalm 46 provides us the answer, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

No matter how deep the waters get God’s feet still touch bottom. Even in raging whitewater His legs are strong enough to stand in the current and anchor my life... No matter how severe a storm kicks up God can shelter me through it... *If I hold His hand... if I lean on Him...* He is the rock that is higher than I! **God is a refuge.**

My daughter use to be a cheerleader – *the best there ever was, I might add.* And of all the cheers she’d do around the house I still remember one.. “Rain can’t rock this house, thunder can’t rock this house, lightning can’t rock this house, and you can’t rock this house.” That’s what the psalmist is saying about God in verses 2-3. It doesn’t matter how out-of-control his life gets – bring on the rain, the thunder, the lightning – it doesn’t matter. The church or life or family you’re building will survive the storm when God is your refuge. God is what we need - where and when we need Him!

Always remember, God is our refuge *in the storm*, not *from the storm*. Notice again verses 2-3, it's not "If the earth is removed" or "If its waters roar" – it's "though the earth is removed... though the waters roar... though the mountains shake..." There're two kinds of faith: *though faith* and *if faith*. **If faith** says, "God, I'll trust You if You bless me... I'll live for You if You solve my problems... I'll obey You if You make life easy..." But that's not real faith. That's the kind of faith that gets washed away in the storm.

Real faith is **though faith**. "God, I'll love You though the earth is removed. I'll serve You though my life is turned topsy-turvy. I'll trust You though I feel forsaken..." The psalmist knows being God's child doesn't insulate us from stress, but it makes us eligible for God's help and comfort in the midst of that stress. Christianity is not *immunity from trouble*, but *community with God*. Make Jesus your refuge, and He comes on board with all His resources.

I've learned when waters roar you have a choice... you can focus **inside** or **out**. Check out verse 4, "There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved..." There was danger outside the city – a vast and vicious invader - but the psalmist fixes on Who abides inside the city - "God is in the midst of her..."

I love what one author says of Jesus, "We see Him... in the midst of the upper room after His resurrection - in the midst of the lampstands walking among the churches in Revelation... He is always *"in the midst"*. He says, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name there I am in the midst of them." Our Lord Jesus doesn't take us out of the mire of this life. He rolls up his sleeves, and jumps into the mess with us. Jesus gets *in the midst* of what you're *in the middle of*...

This was His approach in saving the world. God became a man. He got as much in the midst as possible. He tackled the issues we face everyday. Recall the name the Angel gave to Joseph... Mary's baby would be called "**Immanuel**" which means, "*God with us.*" Or as the psalmist might say "*God in our midst!*" You'll always find Jesus is in the thick of things.

Note the analogy in verse 4, "There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God..." In verse 3, he's just talked about roaring waters - yet in contrast to *the rising flood* that threatens to drown the city – there is *a stream of encouragement* that flows into the city to refresh its inhabitants. And there was an actual, historical parallel to this imagery... Before the reign of Hezekiah, Jerusalem's water supply was outside the wall. The Gihon spring bubbled up in the Kishon Valley, east of Jerusalem. In anticipation of this invasion the king built a tunnel, 1,777' long – cut through solid rock. The tunnel channeled water from the spring into the city. Even today you can walk up Hezekiah's tunnel. **The river still flows.**

*And the psalmist compares this river reservoir to God.* In the midst of the storm that's brewing on the *outside* – *inside* there's a stream of strength and vitality that flows under the walls of his life. **God is that river** - an artesian spring that bubbles up from the depths of his heart. And here's the key for a pastor who frequently finds himself in *tight spots*. Underneath all the activity and ministry there has to be a spring. There has to be place inside where you drink and get refreshed.

I have a friend, Kenny, who is an expert fisherman. He has trophies of huge bass he's plucked out of the lakes at Stone Mountain Park. I marvel when I see those trophies because I could fish Stone Mountain from now until eternity and never get a nibble. *I figured the fish were state employees - always on vacation.* But let me tell you Kenny's secret... He's got maps of the lake bottoms. Years ago a river flowed around the mountain. Today's lakes were made by flooding out the river beds. But Kenny still knows where those subsurface rivers ran, and the underwater banks that draw those big bass. He sends his lures to school right along those banks, and catches his limit every time. He's a smart guy. And this is what the psalmist does when the floods come, and troubles overwhelm him. He recalls the river that runs under the surface of his life. The heart of a shepherd isn't a lonely cave. The Holy Spirit lives within him – *He lives within us* - to bring us God's joy, love, peace, and strength.

In his book "*Reaching for the Invisible God*," Philip Yancey offers us a suggestion. He says we should view God's intervention in our lives not so much as *coming down from above* - but as *rising up from below*... He writes, "*We tend to view God's interactions...like light rays, or hailstones, or lightning bolts falling to the ground... Perhaps we would do better to picture God's interaction as an underground aquifer or river that rises to the surface in springs and fountainheads.*" I agree!

The last half of Psalm 46 describes how God “*comes down*” to defend Jerusalem from her marauding enemies and end the threat - but prior to their deliverance *from trouble*, God rises up *in the midst of that trouble*. God is a river of refreshment. Jesus promised, “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”

Once, a man was wandering through the desert in search of water. The guy is dying of thirst when he encounters a merchant selling neckties... *What does he need with a necktie?* He pushes on - crawling through hot sands – desperate and dehydrated. He tops a hill and sees a restaurant.... He musters all his remaining energy, and races down the hill. But when he reaches the door there’s a huge sign that reads, “**Neckties required.**” When circumstances are good, and you’re riding high, and your ministry is growing you might not see the need to cultivate these inner, heart resources. But when waters roar, and you’re about to go under you’ll need a spiritual river to slake your thirst, and provide you a supernatural surge.

The rest of Psalm 46 depicts God’s outward deliverance of Jerusalem. Verse 5, “**God shall help her, just at the break of dawn. The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah**” Like Indians in the old Westerns, ancient armies never attacked at night. It was always at first light – at the break of day. But God was ready. The nations raged... But God uttered His voice. The earth melted. Before the Assyrian troops could launch their attack against God’s people – at daybreak - the Angel of the Lord went on the offensive.

It’s another example of God appearing in the nick-of-time. *How often has this happened in our lives?* God stretches our faith - teaches us patience – then when we think it’s too late He comes through!

The psalmist invites us in verse 8, “**Come, behold the works of the LORD, who has made desolations in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire.**” Who wins the outside war is never in question. God always prevails in our circumstances. He breaks the bow. The only question is who’s going to prevail on the inside? *Fear or faith?*

This is why verse 10 is vital. Underline it... “**Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!**” When Jerusalem was attacked *there was never a question in heaven as to what God would do!* God is God – He loves and protects His people! What made it an issue in the mind of King Hezekiah, and the Jews, was fear... This is why God tells them, “**Be still, and know that I am God...**”

Fear grows in the noise of conflicting voices. Listen to the noises and you’re destined for confusion. Skeptical people, a sensationalistic media, a doubting society – give sanction to our fears. In the noise fear takes root. Only when I come to the quiet, and let God speak, will faith grow. I like the quote, “**The more we train ourselves to spend time with God and alone, the more we discover that God is with us at all times and in all places.**”

The Greek philosopher, Sophocles, said, “**To him who is in fear, everything rustles.**” In other words, God gets lost - faith is quenched – fear takes - when we’re caught in the *hustle*, and *bustle*, and *rustle* of life. God is always in control – in good and bad times - but the noises of this world drown out that realization. *We’re reminded... only when we’re still.*

Here’s the irony... as I’ve already mentioned, fear becomes a threat when my life spins out of control. I’m prone to fear when the storms come, and the waters roar, and I can no longer navigate... *when I lose control.* But verse 10 implies that faith also grows when I lose control...

Losing control is inevitable. The reality of life is none of us are in control. At some point we all face forces greater than ourselves. Here’s the difference between faith and fear - *fear grows* when control slips from hands that desperately want to maintain it - whereas, *faith grows* when the hands trying to hold on to control, voluntarily give it over to God. Fear and faith are nurtured by how we respond to the out-of-control situations we face. When life goes haywire, faith knows that **God is ruler** over every situation. Verse 6, “**He uttered His voice, the earth melted.**”

Engineers that design the long, tall, suspension bridges realize these structures conjure up fear in many drivers. Some State DOTs offer a driving service to get *bridge-a-phobic* drivers safely to the other side.



For example, the Chesapeake Bay Bridge in Maryland is 4 miles long and stands 200 feet over the bay. Every year state workers take the wheel of 1000 cars, and drive scared motorists across the span to the other side. And this is the key to getting over our fears... We need a driver! We need to voluntarily take our hands off the steering wheel of life, and let Jesus drive. Faith relaxes – it chills out – it stops fretting, plotting, manipulating... Just be still, and know that God is God.

Before Moses parted the Red Sea he told the Hebrews, “**Stand still...**” Before Ruth was adopted into God’s family, Boaz told her, “**Sit still...**” Before God defeated the nations that rose against Jehoshaphat, He told the people of Judah, “**Stand still and see the salvation of the LORD...**” I hope we get it? Before God acts, He asks us to be still before Him.

Psalm 46 closes in verse 11, “**The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.**” Recall the name the angel gave to Jesus at His birth, “**Immanuel**” which is translated “**God with us.**” Now here in verse 11 the psalmist ends His praise, and shouts, “**the LORD of hosts is with us!**” It’s like a battle cry. The psalmist shouts, “**Immanuel.**” He looks over the walls and sees the defeated Assyrian troops, and their corpses littered across the valley – and he credits Immanuel!

Apparently, the baby born in Bethlehem had already been to battle! I believe Jesus was the Angel - the Messenger of the Lord - who delivered Judah. And if the Assyrian army is no match for Jesus... then neither are the troubles that plague you, your family, and your church...

“**Selah**” – pause and think about it... *Is God your refuge?* Have you turned control over to Jesus? Do you believe *He rules over all situations?* And if you’re a child of God... in a tight spot... if troubled waters roar... remember that God is with you in the midst of your struggle. Look inside. Drink deeply. *A river of living water flows beneath the surface of your life.*

When the waters roar... be still... ***God is a refuge, a river, a ruler.***