

God is our Refuge

Rich Nathan
March 21 & 22, 2020
Psalm 46

We have been through another extraordinary week. I feel like I'm running out of adjectives to describe how utterly unprecedented what's happening around our globe right now. Certainly, none of us who are alive have ever lived through something like this. Even world wars like the Second World War didn't touch everyone in the world at the same time.

Back in the 1940's there was a psychologist named Abraham Maslow. You may have studied Maslow if you ever took Intro to Psychology class in college. He proposed that human beings are motivated by meeting our needs. So, he created this pyramid. At the lowest level, he had this category of physical needs.

Slide

Picture of pyramid

Physical needs are things like food and water. At the next level was safety and security.

Slide

Show the picture of the pyramid again

Safety and security include things like the security of our bodies, our concern for our own health, our economic security, and things like our concerns for things like paying our bills and the security of our employment. Those of you who took Psych 101 remember that at the top of the pyramid there was self-actualization.

Maslow's idea was that until you met lower level needs like a person's physical needs and their need for security, you would never be able to get to higher-level needs. We all need security!

You know, we all love stories of miraculous rescue, especially stories about rescue that we read in the Bible. Every child loves to hear the story of Daniel in the lion's den or Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the friends of Daniel who were rescued from a fiery furnace. We love to hear the stories of God parting the Red Sea and saving the Israelites and Peter miraculously rescued from prison. In fact, we like rescue so much that we write movies and TV shows about rescue. "Rescue 911" comes to mind.

The truth is that even though we enjoy hearing stories about rescue and we like watching movies about rescue, none of us really wants to be rescued at all. What we definitely prefer is a safe and predictable life! I don't want to be rescued by a helicopter as I'm hanging from the edge of a cliff. I much prefer the safety of standing behind a fence that's at the edge of a cliff. I

want the predictability of a steady income, knowing that I'm going to be physically ok and my loved ones are going to be physically ok.

But in light of the spread of the coronavirus and the economic problems that we're currently facing and the news that we're hearing 24/7 about new cases and problems in testing and all the rest, I want to bring us all back today to the sure and certain word of God. Right now, you don't need more information about the coronavirus, you need to hear a sure and certain word from the Almighty God. As Isaiah, the prophet, said during a time of crisis in his own country 2600 years ago:

Slide Isaiah 40:6-8

⁶ A voice says, "Cry out."

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All people are like grass,

and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall,

because the breath of the LORD blows on them.

Surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall,

but the word of our God endures forever."

So, what does God's word say to us in these troubling times? That's what I want to talk about today in a message that I've titled "God is our Refuge". Let's pray.

As I said, we all need security. That's what insurance promises us – security. Allstate promises that we're in good hands. State Farm promises that if disaster comes, they will be "a good neighbor to us". Prudential Insurance says, "Let Prudential be your rock!" Chubb Group promises "peace of mind".

Insurance companies are willing to share insurance for any and every eventuality. You can buy insurance in case you are hit by an asteroid. Pick a disaster, any disaster, and there's probably a insurance policy to cover it. You can get a disability policy for your dog. You can get a policy that protects you in case you are bitten by a werewolf.

Here's what we're learning with the coronavirus. None of our failsafe plans are really failsafe at all. And we would have known this if we paid attention to Psalm 46. Here's what we read in verses 2 and 3.

Slide Psalm 46:2-3

² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
³ though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.

In other words, nothing that we try to build on in this world really is secure. The psalmist says that the earth will give way. Sailors used to talk about how they appreciated getting back on terra firma, which meant that they really appreciated getting out of the water and back on dry land, literally back on firm ground.

But the truth is that there is no such thing as “firm ground”. There’s nothing really secure in this world. The earth itself gives way under our feet. That’s why the psalmist says that if we want security in this world we need to know that:

Slide

God is our refuge

Slide Psalm 46:1

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.

Now, people in this time of crisis are trying to find refuge in something other than God, something in this world, something that they can count on – at least they believe they can count on – to get them through the present crisis. The Bible warns us repeatedly against trying to find security and refuge in something other than God.

For example, the Bible tells us, “do not trust in weapons”. Here’s what we read in

Slide Psalm 20:7

⁷ Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.

Over and over again, the Bible tells us, “don’t trust in weapons”. But here’s what we’ve been seeing over the last couple of weeks.

Slide

Pictures (2 of them) of people at the gun store

We have people lined up around the block, trying to buy guns. God forbid that anyone who considers themselves a follower of Jesus and is listening to me right now has bought a gun to deal with this crisis! What do we seek as our refuge other than God? The Bible tells us, “do not put your trust in money”. Here’s what we read:

Slide Proverbs 11:28

²⁸Those who trust in their riches will fall,
but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

I’ve got to admit that I’ve put my trust in my investments, in my retirement account, in my savings. What do we seek refuge in, other than in the Lord? Lots of people in America right now are putting their trust in politicians, in government leaders. But the Bible warns us against that. Here’s what we read:

Slide Psalm 118:8-9

⁸It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in humans.

⁹It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in princes.

Do we seek refuge in things other than the Lord? The Bible warns us about putting our trust in ourselves. Here’s what we read:

Slide Proverbs 28:25-26

²⁵The greedy stir up conflict,
but those who trust in the LORD will prosper.

²⁶Those who trust in themselves are fools,
but those who walk in wisdom are kept safe.

No matter how much savvy you have, no matter how great you are at planning for the future, how wise you are, the Bible tells us that those who trust in themselves are fools. But those who trust in the Lord will prosper.

50 times in the psalms, God is said to be our refuge. You know, I’m always concerned that people waste their suffering and pain. I’ve said for years to individuals that I’ve counseled and

in my messages that pain and suffering and crises that we encounter are not the worst things in the world. Everyone goes through pain. Everyone experiences disappointment. Everyone suffers – although not in the same way or the same degree. And everyone, right now, is in crisis. The worst thing in the world is not crisis. The worst thing in the world is wasted crisis.

At the end of this coronavirus thing, however long it lasts, we want to emerge as better people. We want to want to be more loving than we are, more compassionate and sympathetic toward each other than we were before the crisis. We ought to want to really have God as our refuge, to be more connected to God than we were before we entered the crisis.

When we speak of God being our refuge, we mean finding God as our ultimate security. That in reality, we're really banking on God to make our lives work, to make our lives secure, to make our lives successful. When we talk about God being our refuge, we mean we're setting our hope entirely on God. We mean that the entire weight of our future and the future of our loved ones is on God to safeguard us, to protect us, to secure us.

You know, there's a kaleidoscope of images that we find in the book of psalms regarding God being our refuge. I want you to see this real quickly in Psalm 61.

Slide Psalm 61:1-2

¹ Hear my cry, O God;
listen to my prayer.

² From the ends of the earth I call to you,
I call as my heart grows faint;
lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

David is saying that God is his rock. God alone is solid. God alone is stable. We don't want to build our lives on Prudential Insurance or on the shifting sands of our investments. God is more stable than you and me. He's bigger than us. God is someone we can build our lives on. We can't bank on ourselves. We can't bank on our government or on our leaders or anything else. But we can rely on God. He is the rock that's higher than I.

And in verse 3 of Psalm 61, we read this:

Slide Psalm 61:3

³ For you have been my refuge,
a strong tower against the foe.

Back in the ancient world, when enemies pursued people, they would run into a strong tower for safety and protection. In verse 4:

Slide Psalm 61:4

⁴ I long to dwell in your tent forever
and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.

In the ancient Middle East, if you were invited into someone's tent in the desert, it was incumbent upon that person to protect you with their life. That's how the Lord relates to us. The Lord was willing to lay down his life in order to save us. And if we still don't get what the psalmist is trying to say, we read in

Slide Psalm 61:4

⁴ I long to dwell in your tent forever
and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.

This is a really wonderful picture of a mother hen spreading her wings over her chicks. God is saying, "I will cover you. I will protect you. I will keep you safe."

What does that mean in an age of coronavirus? We know, both from our experience and from God's word that followers of Jesus cannot expect to be kept safe from all of the dangers impacting everyone. When the earth gives way, it gives way under the feet of Christians and non-Christians alike. Followers of Jesus live in the same world as those who have not trusted in Jesus. We're made of the same flesh. The coronavirus will hit Christians and non-Christians alike. We drive on the same streets. We shop in the same stores. We attend the same schools. We experience all the same threats from our economy and our healthcare system and pandemics as everyone else.

What does it mean that God is our refuge? God protects us from our own sinful inclinations as we trust in him. In our own strength, we would give in to all of our natural inclinations – to anxiety, to fear, to worry, to irritation and anger with family or our roommates or whoever we're having to live with right now. We give in to indulging ourselves in our particular form of escape – whether it's eating or binge watching television or porn or whatever.

If we make God our refuge, it doesn't necessarily mean that we won't go through the storm just like everyone else in the world. It is the case that God does sometimes miraculously intervene to protect us. Many of us can tell stories of the Lord's supernatural intervention on our behalf. But our more common experience is like the story of the disciples in the boat. They were crossing the Sea of Galilee with Jesus. A storm arose that threatened to swamp the boat and

drown all of them. But here was the key to their security and safety. Jesus was in the boat with them.

What it means that God is our refuge is not that we won't go through a storm, but that we won't go through a storm alone. Ever. If you trust in the Lord, if you learn how to connect with God through faith, you'll never have to face sickness alone, you won't have to face the loss of income alone, you won't have to face the future alone. The Lord will be with you!

The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans

Slide Romans 8:38-39

⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And I would add to this list the coronavirus. Nothing – including coronavirus and unemployment – can ever separate you from the love of Christ Jesus our Lord. If you make God your refuge, that promise is true for you.

One very practical way to make God your refuge is to pray the prayer of St. Patrick, the great Christian missionary in Ireland way back in the fifth century. We just celebrated St. Patrick's Day this past week without any parades. St. Patrick wrote a beautiful prayer that I would encourage you to read out loud, especially when you are feeling afraid and you need to find God as your refuge. Let me read to you one stanza from the prayer of St. Patrick.

Slide

Christ shield me today
Against wounding
Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in the eye that sees me,
Christ in the ear that hears me.

I arise today
Through the mighty strength
Of the Lord of creation.

Psalms 46 doesn't just say that God is our refuge. We also read that God is our strength.

Slide

God is our strength

Slide Psalm 46:1

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.

One commentator, Derek Kidner, I think very helpfully, distinguished between God as our refuge and God as our strength. He said that having God as our refuge really implies outer protection. Having God as our strength communicates inner protection. It's the difference between having a cast on your broken leg that gives you outward strength and having the cast removed and discovering that you need to get some physical therapy to build back the muscle in your leg.

God not only promises to protect us outwardly, but he promises to be our inward strength in a time of crisis. In other words, for those who run to the Lord, God promises to work inside of us and give us peace when we feel overwhelmed. To enable us to not quit when we feel threatened or to not shrink back in fear when something is too big for us and too overwhelming. As our refuge, God promises to be with us and not leave us alone!

But as our strength, God promises to keep us from imploding. I think that having God as our strength is illustrated by one of my favorite New Testament passages – 2 Corinthians 4, Paul writes:

Slide 2 Corinthians 4:7-8

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;

The picture that Paul is painting here is of all of this pressure that is coming on him from outside. There's a tremendous amount of weight that's bearing down on him. It's like he's got ten tons of pressure sitting on his chest. It's threatening to crush him. What keeps Paul from being crushed like a soda can that's being squeezed is not his inner strength, it's not that he's so tough. What keeps us from being crushed by the daily assault of bad news – one thing after another – is God's strength supernaturally sustaining us.

Again in verse 8:

Slide 2 Corinthians 4:8

⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;

What will get us through this current crisis is not our smarts, it's not our ability to strategize and plan for our futures. Yes, we want to be smart. Yes, we want to practice social distancing. We want to listen to all the best health care counsel from our State Health Department. And let me

parenthetically say please do not pass on all the foolish conspiracy theories and miracle cures that everyone is marketing right now. Yes, we want to be smart, but Paul says what gets him through crises is not his smarts.

He's perplexed. No one on earth knows what to do right now. We're all just sort of muddling through. Paul says it's not his strength, it's not his smarts. Then, in verse 9 he says:

Slide 2 Corinthians 4:9

⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Paul says that he's not relying on his social skills or social network. Yes, we need each other. We need to stay connected. Ultimately, it's not human help that gets us through crises. It's not that we have such great relationships that we keep going. And again in verse 9:

Slide 2 Corinthians 4:9

⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

It's not my circumstances, it's not my situation, it's not because the coronavirus ultimately turned out to not be as bad as everyone feared or just because we flattened the curve – which we need to do – it's not because the economy bounced back. How in the midst of something overwhelming do we keep going?

The psalmist says we need the inward strengthening of the Lord. Have you ever experienced that inward strengthening? Have you ever said that the reason why I'm getting through this is because God is pouring supernatural strength into me. I couldn't do this on my own. On my own, I know I would just collapse. The only thing that's keeping me from freaking out right now is the strengthening of God. That's the only way I can account for what's happening. I could never have gotten through this other than Almighty God.

Have you ever experienced God as your refuge and your strength? Some of you might not know this, but Psalm 46 was the inspiration for Martin Luther's great hymn that became the battle cry of the Protestant Reformation, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God". Luther suffered persecution and attack. He was regularly threatened. He went through a terrible epidemic in his day, much worse than coronavirus. Martin Luther went through a terrible plague called the Black Death that overwhelmed Europe in his time.

As he read Psalm 46, he found refuge in the Lord. Not only refuge in the Lord, but he found strength in God. Luther also regularly suffered from bouts of depression. He discovered in the Lord, in the midst of overwhelming outward pressure and tremendous inward pressure, he discovered in God a strength and capacity to keep going even in the very darkest days.

Gospel call

Be honest. Do you know the Lord as your refuge and strength or are you trusting in something in this world to save you from this present crisis?

