

A Mighty Fortress

Psalm 46

By Karl Hennecke

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On a recent trip to Charleston, South Carolina I stood on the walls of Fort Sumter and tried to imagine the bombardment which took place on this sight over a hundred years earlier. A small contingent of men under the leadership of Major Robert Anderson disguised themselves as workmen in order to get past a Southern guard boat as they made their way to the island fortress in Charleston Harbor. The ruse worked and Anderson and some 65 men occupied the vacant fort in the twilight of a December evening.

For the next four months, while the nation moved inevitably towards war, Anderson's men prepared the fort's defenses. At 4:30 a.m on April 12, 1861, a 10-inch mortar belching flame and smoke sent a round shell arching across the water exploding over Fort Sumter illuminating the brick fortification in the darkness and signaling the beginning of the bombardment and of the bloody war between the states. The bombardment lasted for 34 hours and although over 3000 shells were fired on the fort, not a single man lost his life. Anderson ultimately surrendered the fort because provisions for his men ran out, not because the fortress failed to withstand the assault.

During the final two years of the war the fort, now under the command of Confederate troops, weathered 11 bombardments by Union forces. The total number of rounds fired against the fort exceeded 43,000. Although the brick walls of the fort were pounded to rubble, Union attempts failed to force its surrender. The South abandoned the fort when Sherman and his troops approached the city of Charleston. The fort never failed to provide safety for those who remained within its walls.

The sons of Korah proclaimed God as their "refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psa. 46:1). History records the 46th psalm as a favorite of Martin Luther. During the turmoil of the Reformation the psalm inspired his hymn, "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott." Today we sing Frederick Hedge's translation of Luther's hymn.

A mighty fortress is our God, A bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.

"God is our refuge and strength; our helper in troubles which often befall us" (Psa. 46:1; LXX). There are many troubles which plague man in this life. These troubles can do us no permanent harm if we seek refuge within that never failing bulwark. Sin, our own and other's, and its consequences make calamity and the threat of calamity a reality in our lives.

It troubled us when we heard about the bombing in Oklahoma City and the gassing of innocent people in a Japanese subway. These events heighten our awareness of the precarious nature of life on this planet and they produce anxiety for many. These foul deeds make us wonder, "Who is safe?" There are constant threats to our security. Political leaders propose new legislation to "beef-up" security, but we realize that new laws and increased security will not provide absolute security from evil men.

Jesus warned, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still.

A greater threat to man than the threat to his physical body is the threat of sin to his soul and its eternal consequences.

For still our ancient foe dost seek to work us woe. His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate. On earth is not his equal.

We now have the final body count from Oklahoma City. How many would we assign to the "soul count" if we counted Satan's victims worldwide just on the day of the explosion?

True security can only be found in the refuge and strength of God. We covet the extreme confidence expressed in the 46th psalm, "we will not fear." Complete trust in God casts out all anxiety. The vicissitudes of our earthly existence and spiritual struggle are not sufficient to overcome us if God is our refuge and strength.

"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" (Psa 46:2-3). "The city of God" (46:4), is the place of refuge. It is a refuge because there is a "river" there whose streams make it glad, and God is in her midst. Do we appreciate the picture God paints for us here, which contrasts the waters that roar and that are troubled in the world, and the river and its streams which make the city glad? There is no turmoil, anxiety, upheaval in the city because God is there. When we abide there, we enjoy the protection from the raging, shaking, roaring, swelling, and moving that constantly threaten and cause anxiety for

those who do not dwell in the city. This refuge gives strong consolation or encouragement for those who have fled to it (Heb. 6:18). Paul shared this confidence with the sons of Korah because he had learned "whatever state I am in to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:11-13). God's presence, "the Lord is at hand" (Phil. 4:5) and His peace, "which surpasses all understanding" (Phil. 4:6, 7), gives us confidence so that we can "be anxious for nothing."

Did we in our own strength confide our striving would be losing;  
were not the right One on our side the Man of God's own choosing.

"The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (Ps. 46:7). Here we have the identification of God and His relationship with His people. The expression "Lord of hosts," defines God's power and dominion. His authority extends to all creation. The Lord is Omnipotent.

The expression "Lord of hosts" appears twice in the New Testament in its transliterated form, "Lord of Sabaoth." Paul, quoting from Isaiah, wrote, "Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been made like Gomorrah" (Rom. 9:29). James revealed, "...the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth" (Js. 5:4). In both cases the child of God finds comfort because God does not abandon those who trust in Him. "If God is for us who can be against us" (Rom. 8:31)?

The identification "God of Jacob" has reference to the promises made to Jacob and his fathers before him; Abraham and Isaac. In Jacob's dream he saw a ladder reaching from earth to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending on it. The Lord appeared above and told Jacob among other things that "in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 28:12-14).

When we dwell with God we are promised provision and protection. He has provided the sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin. He protects us from ultimate harm promising us an eternal oasis free from the cares and concerns of this life.

