

September 15/16, 2001

We Will Not Fear

Psalm 46

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Tuesday morning we watched in horror as three commercial airliners crashed into the World Trade Center and Pentagon. We were a nation under siege. Our normal feelings of safety and security gave way to fear and anxiety. For several hours, nobody knew what was next. I believe Tuesday morning we, as a nation, were forced to rethink where we are headed as a nation. Our coinage for decades has stated, "In God we trust." But we have walked away from that decades ago and said to God, "We don't need you. We don't need you in our government...we don't need you in our schools...we don't need you in the public square." As a matter of fact, we went so far as to say, "God, we don't need your commandments hanging anywhere where somebody might see them, lest they somehow would be negatively influenced." What we have said is that we will be our own god. We will decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. Given enough time and technology, we can handle anything. But, Tuesday morning we began to rethink that. In deciding to be our own god, our national anthem has become Frank Sinatra's song, *I Did it My Way*. And our national poem seems to have become the poem, *Invictus*, by William Henley:

Out of the night that covers me
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods there be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

-William Ernest Henley (1849-1903)

For decades we have believed that. It is not that we have become a nation of atheists; we certainly have not. It is just that we have redefined who God is. We have redefined God as a God who makes no demands—a God who does not cramp my style... a God who keeps his nose out of my business... a God who is impotent in times of national tragedy.

But on Tuesday we were forced to rethink that. Tuesday morning I did not see people flocking to the universities to hear what the professors had to say. I did not see people rushing to government buildings to see what the politicians had to say. I saw people, who 24 hours earlier wanted nothing to do with God, on their knees asking for help. When push comes to shove, we were asked to rethink whether we really want to be our own gods.

Suddenly, we saw a Congress, who had been so determined to keep God out of their business, now standing on the steps of the nation's Capitol singing "God Bless America." Thousands of children were praying in schools. All week long there has been a call to prayer

in public buildings. We have been rethinking some things. I don't know if it will last. But we certainly have something to think about this week.

One of the questions that arises out of all of this is how we should respond and how the government should respond. One of the ways of processing that question is to remember that everything that God has established in our world is designed to teach us something about God and who He is. The government, for example, was put in place to teach us about the justice of God. If you read Romans 13 or 1 Peter 2 it is very clear that the government is put in place to punish evil and to protect good. When they do that they represent God. The book of Romans goes so far as to say that they are ministers of God to carry out justice. Therefore, I think the government *does* have a responsibility to respond to the people and to do what can be done to address it or eliminate it. I think that as a church we can be very supportive of our government's role to do this.

This week, in many of our hearts, we felt anger. I want you to know that there was anger in God's heart this week, because God gets very angry at evil. There is nothing wrong with that. I think we also have to remember that while we support the role of government, we are not the government; we are the church. The church's call is not so much to represent the justice of God as it is to represent the grace of God. What makes us the church is that we are recipients of His grace and that is the message that we proclaim. So, while we support the role of the government, we also must promote a message of grace—a message of compassion, and healing, and forgiveness. To become a nation of hate does no one any good. If that message does not come from the church it will not come from anywhere. Every person who will die in this conflict is a person for whom Jesus died—a person God loves very much! We cannot forget that.

I don't see those two roles as incompatible at all. Let's talk about it on a smaller scale. Let's imagine that a serial murderer was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to death. It is the responsibility of the government to carry that out. For the government to extend grace and let him walk free would be irresponsible—they are bound by the responsibility of justice. At the same time, the church can go into that prison and proclaim the message of salvation. The church can preach a message of compassion and forgiveness, in order for that person to know that Jesus died for his sins and that he can know forgiveness of sins. If that person trusts Jesus as Savior, does that mean that he should go free? The answer is no. No, he or she will suffer the consequences of his or her choices. But there is a coming together of the role of government in justice and the role of the church and grace.

Still the question arises, how do we do that? How do we respond? I think the answer is that each of us individually must find our place of refuge in times like this. We need to demonstrate our peace and our security—that our faith is not in armies or politicians but in God. Then we invite others to join us in this place of refuge.

The great reformer, Martin Luther, was a man characterized by fear and anxiety to such an extent that it caused severe health problems. As a matter of fact, at times in his life he was literally paralyzed with fear. He could not even function. Then Martin Luther discovered Psalm 46 and he discovered God as his refuge. Out of that psalm, he wrote the great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*. Psalm 46 is a reminder to ourselves that God is our refuge in times of trouble.

Psalm 46:1 says, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." A refuge is a fortress—a place of safety. We have experienced just a taste of what it would be

like to have our borders invaded. The nation of Israel has lived with that fear as long as they have been in existence. During the time of the psalmist, a great fear was that the enemies which surrounded their border would invade. In those moments they needed a place of safety...a place to hide... a fortress.

The psalmist understood that there is a fortress that goes beyond the fortress built with human hands, and that was God. He says that God is our refuge, our fortress and our strength. “Strength” is a word that means our inner strength. He says that God is a very present help in trouble. The word “trouble” is an interesting Hebrew word which means that everything feels like it is pressing in around you. It feels overwhelming—like you are being smothered. The psalmist says that God is our help.

When I read verse one, some questions come to my mind that maybe come to your mind, as well. One is a question that I have heard all week: “If God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble, where was he Tuesday morning?” I have heard a lot of people ask that question. I find the question itself interesting. We, as a nation, have said to God very clearly, “We don’t need you. Stay out of our government. Stay out of our army. Stay out of our public business. We can handle it ourselves.”

But, as soon as tragedy strikes, we wonder why God doesn’t bless us. That is a little bit like a husband who goes out and sleeps with many women and wonders why, when he comes home, his wife does not want to be intimate with him. It does not work that way. If we expect the favor of God, then let’s be a people on our knees. Let’s acknowledge that God is God. Let’s be one nation under God.

Also, when I think of the question, “Where is God?” or “Where was God?” my answer would be, “Just about everywhere you looked.” As a matter of fact, if you watched the television this week, that is about all you saw—people all over the nation on their knees before God. And you know what? God was there. He didn’t have to be. We have told Him to get lost. We have told Him that we don’t need Him. But I believe that every moment when people bowed their knee before Him, He was there—because He is a God of grace. He gave us what we didn’t deserve this week.

One of the questions that we struggle with in a tragedy such as this is what Billy Graham called on Friday the “mystery of evil.” There are questions that we cannot answer. There are things that we cannot understand about a sovereign God. We do know that God made us in His image, which means we have the ability to act out of our will for good or for evil. This week we have seen both. The evil we have seen is never what God wanted. What God wanted and offered was Paradise. What we chose was rebellion, and we have been continually choosing it, right up through Tuesday. Evil people do evil things, and there are consequences to those choices.

When Martin Luther was struggling with his fear, the major source of fear was his fear of God. I am not talking about a reverence for God; I am saying that he was terrified of God. The more he understood about the holiness of God, the more he recognized his own sinfulness and the more terrified he became of God. He began to look at the rituals of the church and recognize that they were powerless to make him righteous before such a holy God. He would spend between 6 and 8 hours a day in the confessional trying somehow to come to grips with his own sinfulness before a holy God. When it came time for Martin Luther to preside over his first communion service as a priest, he froze. He became literally paralyzed with fear and he could not function. Another priest had to come and take over his responsibilities, as they

led him away. He was reaching the point where he could no longer function in life. Then he opened up his Bible to the book of Romans. He began to read that salvation is not something that we merit through church rituals by being good. It is a gift of grace. God, in His mercy, sent His own Son to die on a cross for the sins of the world. He was buried and rose again. Those who place their trust in Jesus as Savior receive forgiveness of sin and eternal life as a gift from God. That message set Martin Luther free.

This week, as I have watched thousands and thousands of people coming together to pray, one question I ask is, “Which God are they praying to?” There is only one God who can deliver the goods at a time like this. It is also true that there is only one door to this place of refuge. There is only one door into this fortress. There were thousands upon thousands of people who knelt and asked God for refuge. But only those who go through the door that God has provided, Jesus Christ Himself, will experience it.

Tuesday morning when I heard the news of what had happened, in an instant I was able to step into my place of refuge and find peace. I did not have to wait in line. When I was driving home Tuesday night, I went by the gas station and saw about 12 to 14 cars lined up, waiting for gas. People were in a panic over gas supply and gas prices. I had just been reading Psalm 46 and I was assured that, in moments of tragedy, I don’t have to wait in line. The access is immediate through Jesus Christ into His place of refuge. He is an ever-present help in time of trouble.

The consequence of that is in Psalm 46:2: “Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change.” The psalmist is talking now about a worldwide catastrophe beyond anything we could even begin to imagine. When he talks about the world changing, he is talking about a massive earthquake. He says, “We will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea *{meaning the mountains crumble and fall into the sea}*.” He goes on, “Though its waters roar and foam *{a tidal wave so huge that, in the next verse, it takes out the remaining land mass}*, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.” The psalmist describes the worst catastrophe this world could possibly see, and he says he will not be afraid because God is his refuge.

Verse 4: “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling places of the Most High.” Whenever they built a fortress they had to build it in such a way that they had access to food and water or they could not survive. They were typically built on some stream or river. Even if you go across the plains of Nebraska, you find that both Ft. McPherson and Ft. Kearny were built on rivers. If you study their history, you find that they were surrounded by gardens and fields where they provided their own food and water. If they had to hunker down in a fortress, they could survive. It was the same thing in the ancient world. That is what he means. There is a never-ending flow of water that flows through this fortress, meaning that God is adequate to meet our every need. We will want for nothing in this place of refuge.

Verse 5: “God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.” Can you imagine what it would be like to be in this ancient fortress? It is pitch black in the middle of the night but, suddenly, you hear the swords clanking. You hear the armor and the horses and you know that your fort has been surrounded in the darkness by the enemy and that they will attack at first light. That is what he is talking about. At dawn or at first light, he will not be afraid because the fortress will hold.

“The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered; He raised His voice, the earth melted. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.” The “LORD of hosts” is the Lord Sabaoth. Sometimes we see that word and think it is just a misspelling of Sabbath, but is not. It is a different word, and it’s a line that appears in the hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*. “Lord Sabaoth” means God Almighty. He is the God that cannot be conquered; the God that cannot be defeated.

We still have a tendency in this country to believe that it is our might (our army) that is going to deliver us. But it won’t, because the ultimate enemy is the evil that lies within the human heart and no army can change that. It is only the Almighty God who can change a human heart. Verses 8-11:

Come, behold the works of the LORD, who has wrought desolations in the earth. He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariots with fire. ‘Cease striving 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 stronghold.

When the psalmist says “cease striving” the Hebrew actually says just “cease.” It does not mean so much “be quiet and meditate” but, rather, it means “stop trying to be God.” That is how the whole sentence reads: “Cease and know that I am God. I think we, as a nation, have been forced to think about that this week. Do we really want to be our own gods? Do we really want God out of our business? Or do we want to be a nation under God?”

We are a nation at war. I don’t know what tomorrow holds. I only know that we need a place of refuge. I don’t know what the future of our nation will be, but I know that for a nation to change it starts one person at a time. Let me ask you a question. Given the events of the past week, do you want to be your own god or do you want to know that He is God? Do you want, through Jesus Christ, to find a place of refuge in the midst of the battle?

Dorothea Day has written a poem in response to William Henley’s *Invictus*, which she calls *My Captain*:

Out of the light that dazzles me,
Bright as the sun from pole to pole
I thank the God I know to be
For Christ, the Conqueror of my soul.

Since His the sway of circumstance,
I would not wince nor cry aloud.
Under that rule which men call chance
My head with joy is humbly bowed.

Beyond this place of sin and tears—
That LIFE WITH HIM! and His the aid
that through the menace of the years,
Keeps, and shall keep me, unafraid.

I have no fear, though strait the gate,
He cleared from punishment the scroll.
Christ is the master of my fate;
Christ is the Captain of my soul.

What will it be for you? Will we once again be a nation that can say, “In God we trust?”