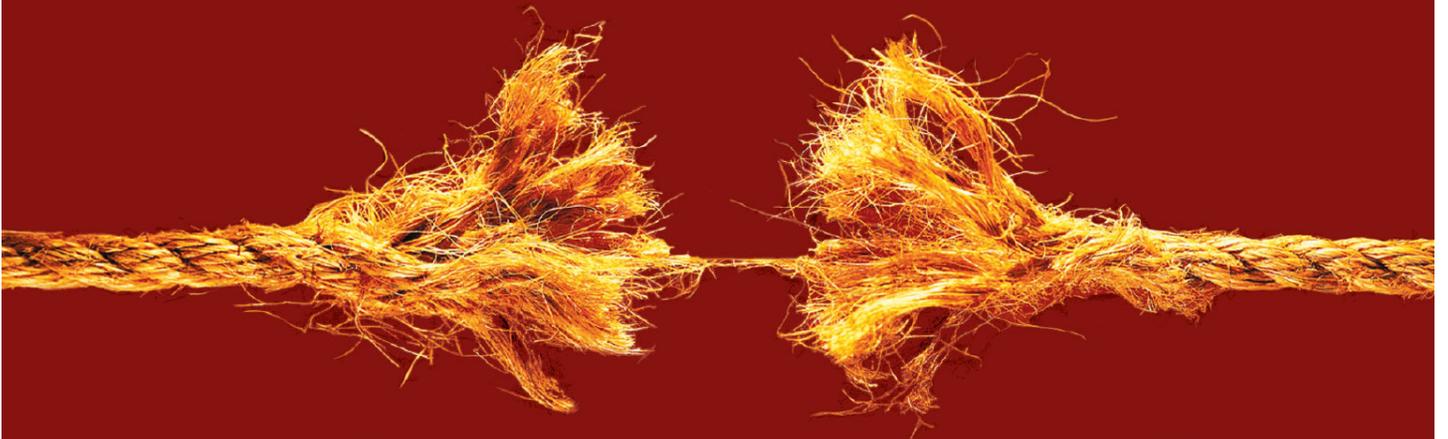


Chapter Five Excerpt:
when you are gripped by fear

finding GOD



when you need
him most

Experiencing God's Power & Presence

CHIPINGRAM

5

when you are gripped by fear

I have a little note written in green ink next to Psalm 46 in the margin of my Bible. It says, “Duke Medical Center, 2/19/92.” Then, in parentheses, “Mom’s dying.” Next to it, highlighted in green, are these words from the psalm: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though the waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging” (vv. 1–3). That note brings back sharp memories and deep feelings. I remember writing it. I distinctly remember our room at the Brown Shoe Inn, where my family took up temporary residence. And I remember what brought us together.

My mom had gone in for a routine checkup to get a second opinion concerning her prolonged battle with a rare blood disease related to lupus. She had taken an overnight bag for her brief flight from Florida and the one day of scheduled tests. These were just “routine,” let’s-get-a-second-opinion tests. She had no idea she would never come home.

My Life Took a Terrifying Turn

Two days later I got a call—you know how it goes—the news instantly jumbled my world. The words were medical terms, but they reached deep inside me. I was gripped by fear. They told me my mother had a systemic infection in her blood. I caught the first flight and found myself at Duke Medical Center in the wee hours of the morning.

We did what families do. We gathered together and waited in a little room next to the ICU. Before long, we knew Mom’s condition was rapidly deteriorating, more frightful with each report. Suddenly, doctors were jarring us with talk about amputating limbs to save her life. But even that desperate option was removed when they had to quickly put her on life support. Hope seemed to drain out of us as we began to discuss and try to figure out whether to pull the plug.

What started out as an ordinary week took an unexpected, wrenching, and terrifying turn. You know what that’s like, don’t you? Times when you have to deal with issues that you haven’t even thought about until then. Life doesn’t respect our reluctance or allow us to escape for long. Life doesn’t seem to care that we don’t want to face a key family member’s death. What we fear and avoid comes anyway.

My mom was the glue of our family; she held everything and everyone together. We couldn’t begin to imagine her gone. Yet, as we sat there in stunned quietness—siblings, extended family, and our father—we had to begin to talk about life and death issues we’d never dealt with in all the years we’d been a family.

Where Was God?

I needed God. I had never needed him more. That note in the margin of my Bible reminds me of that time when Psalm 46 became the anchor of my soul. As I read those words in that terrifying setting, I experienced God. I experienced more of God during the days surrounding my mother's death in 1992 than I had ever experienced of him up to that point in my life. He became, in an unforgettable way, my refuge, providing protection, internal strength, and power to endure moment by moment. He provided me—in the midst of fear-filled adversity—with a continual flow of grace and peace. He was a very, very present help in my time of trouble. I sensed his presence in extraordinary ways. He was available—right there. He was even a source of unexpected joy that somehow made its way into one of the worst times of my life, bringing a sense of confidence that no matter what, even in the face of death—perhaps especially in the face of death—God can reveal himself.

Fear

What do we mean by *fear*? One dictionary defines fear as “a sudden attack, anxiety, or agitation caused by the presence or nearness of danger, evil, or pain. It covers a range of emotions: timidity, apprehension, terror, dread.” But most of us don't need a dictionary to tell us what fear is; we know it in far more personal terms. Some of us are gripped by fear when we think about losing our loved ones; for others, it's when we think about the future. Some have fears concerning their marriage. Others are afraid they'll never get married. Some have fears of being alone; others have fears of the dark. Maybe you struggle with panic attacks and no one knows it. Maybe you hate crowds and are overwhelmed by fear in public places. You may be fearful of loneliness; so when everyone leaves, you keep the television on for company. That doesn't always work, because the news of terrorist attacks, biochemical dangers, and nuclear threats can set off a whole series of fearful thoughts. You may have financial fears or job fears. You may have fears about aging parents or about your kids and how they're going to turn out and who they're running around with. You may have fears about how you'll pay the bills. You may have fears about retirement and about where you're going to live and if you can continue to afford your lifestyle. There's no shortage of things that can grip our hearts with fear.

The C-Word

The word *cancer* is enough to strike fear in almost any heart, a word that can turn your world upside down in a moment. Even though medical science has found effective ways to deal with that dread disease, it still is frightful. That's especially so because it can strike six- and eight-year-olds as well as sixty-eight-year-olds. Being a parent, I can't think of many things more frightful than to hear the doctor say, “Your child has cancer.” But that's what happened to Carl and Phyllis Biggs with their twenty-two-year-old son, John.

I know this family from our church very well. I was very close to John, his parents, and his fiancée, Christine. John began to have some nagging medical problems. The doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong. They did gastrointestinal tests and put him through the whole battery of other diagnostic tools that modern medicine has in its arsenal, but they couldn't determine the problem. Then the symptoms worsened, and the cause became apparent. I was called with the news that John had cancer. I hopped in my car and headed over to Dominican Hospital to meet with them.

I did what I expect you would do in that situation. As I drove, I thought, “What do I say to a mom and dad—let alone a twenty-two-year-old young man—who have just found out he has

cancer?” At that point they didn’t know exactly what kind; they didn’t know the implications. They didn’t know if it was one of those cancers with a high cure rate or if he only had months to live. But imagine yourself in a hospital room, looking at your child who has just been diagnosed with cancer. Imagine all the dreams you would be reconsidering. How would you think of the future with such a looming dark cloud on the horizon? Imagine the impact to your family and how your schedule would come to a screeching halt.

So as I drove, I prayed, “Lord, what do I say? I don’t have any resources that can help them, but I know you do. What could you give me that I could give to them?” I didn’t want to give them just words; I wanted to bring them something that would allow them to experience God. I walked in the room and we had some nervous chitchat followed by some quiet moments talking about the situation. Then I sat on the edge of the bed and opened my Bible to Psalm 46.

P S A L M 4 6

A Song against Fear

Psalm 46 is a song of hope and confidence. Like any good song, it’s composed in verses or stanzas. You might notice the little word *Selah* in between each stanza. *Selah* is a musical term telling the singer to pause; but it’s more than that. It’s also a note to the readers or listeners, directing us to stop after each verse in order to reflect on each separate idea or picture the psalmist paints in that stanza. Let’s look at each section to get an overview of what God wants us to see.

The first stanza (vv. 1–3) tells us *what*: God is our refuge, our source of hope in times of trouble. The second stanza (vv. 4–7) tells us *why*: God’s presence is our sure reason for hope. The third, and last, stanza (vv. 8–11) tells us *how*: we can experience God’s presence, even in our most troubled times.

God Is for Us!

Throughout all three stanzas one phrase is repeated. It’s as if God wants to underscore a very important point for us. It’s a crucial little phrase that gets lost in some translations. We can’t afford to lose it. It’s found in verses 1, 7, and 11. In verse 1, what reads, “God is our refuge and strength” would literally read, “God is *for us*, a refuge and strength *for us*.” Verse 7 would literally read, “The God of Jacob is *for us* a fortress.” Verse 11 would literally read, “The Lord of hosts is *for us*.” The point the repetition of this little phrase emphasizes is that we do not have to be afraid because God is *for us*.

God wants you to know that he is for you. He is on your side. He is not waiting for you to mess up. When you’re in trouble and you realize that you brought 80 percent of it on yourself, God doesn’t have his arms crossed with a smirk on his face as if to say, “See, ha! ha! ha! I knew you would fail!” That’s a picture of God some carry with them from childhood, but it’s not a biblical one. God is for you; he is not against you; he is on your side. That may be hard for you to grasp, but it is central to experiencing God when you’re gripped by fear.

Let me ask you this: How differently would you face your greatest fears if you believed that God was on your side? Call to mind your worst fears. Then as we go through the lessons of each stanza, ask God to help you apply what it says to your own heart and mind.

God Is Our Refuge

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging. *Selah*

verses 1–3

The first three verses talk about God, our source of hope. In the face of trouble, God is our place of safety, our source of power, and our constant helper. Since that's true, "Therefore we will not fear." And now, get this: the writer takes the two most indestructible, stable things imaginable and by way of hyperbole says, "If all the pillars in your life, if all the things that you know you can count on are removed, it doesn't matter because God is consistent." God and God alone is your only security. That's the theme. God is our source. We don't have to be afraid because God can handle even the worst imaginable scenario.

God wants to support you in three ways.

First, God is a refuge. This refers to the external issues of life. A refuge is a defensive place of protection, a place where you can run and find safety. God says he wants to be your refuge. Not a big steel building. Not some cave dug out of solid rock and filled with survival food. Much bigger than that. The God of the universe says, "I personally will be your refuge. You can come in to me and I will wrap my arms around you and I won't let anything touch you. I will be for you a refuge."

Second, God will be for you a strength. This is an internal provision. This is the power to endure. God only gives strength for the moment. He is not strength for tomorrow until tomorrow. Unfortunately, we all tend to worry about tomorrow. What about my job? What if this relationship goes sour in a month? What if I don't have . . . ? We get anxious the moment we begin projecting into the future. We get all uptight and fearful. Do you know why? Because we're getting ahead of life. We're forgetting Jesus's words about worry, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt. 6:34).

There is no such thing as hypothetical grace. There is no grace provided a day in advance. God only provides grace for this moment—and that's more than enough, considering the source. How do you know tomorrow is even coming? Our only responsibility is to trust God for today. And God promises he will be your strength in the moment you need it. If you need "x amount" of grace to make it through this hour, that's how much grace you get. If in the next hour it gets tougher and you need much more grace, that's how much more grace you will get. Moment by moment, God will be for you strength.

Third, God is for you an ever-present or very present help. When? In times of trouble. It means he is readily available during the trouble, no matter how unexpected, no matter how hard, and no matter how overwhelming. You can experience God with you whenever you're in trouble. Look at the imagery of the waters used here. Picture an ocean surging in a tumultuous hurricane. The waters "roar and foam." It is dangerous and forceful. The waters are raging; they are chaotic and unstable. Even at times like that, God is right there with you in the stormy waters.

The psalmist's words bring to mind the picture of Jesus asleep in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. The waters were suddenly churned up. The disciples were terrified, screaming that they were all going to die. But Jesus was right there in the same boat with them. He was their present help in their time of trouble. And God is in the same boat with you when you find

yourself in stormy waters. In fact, the next stanza describes how God's presence gives us hope in the midst of our trouble.

God's Presence Gives Us Hope

There is a river whose streams make glad the city
of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.
God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.

The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

verses 4–7

The message of this stanza is that in the midst of trouble—no matter how cataclysmic—God's presence can be like a river that flows from the very heart of God. That river brings all God's infinite resources to his people, flowing down into the place where they are protected, where there is unlimited supply of whatever they need, where God will back them with his forces and resources. I want you to see that God is promising the same to you in whatever frightful situation you may find yourself.

Okay, maybe you're thinking, "Chip, where do you get this stuff? It sounds great, but how did you get all that from those verses? I don't see anything about an unlimited supply of joy, protection, deliverance, and security. Where did you get that?" Let me show you.

Old Testament Images

The writer was using Old Testament imagery, so we have to understand something of what these images meant to the people of that day in order to see better how it applies to us. Here are the elements of the imagery that have significance.

The city of God refers to Jerusalem. Historically, Jerusalem wasn't just a city that David, king of Israel, picked out because he thought, "This would be a nice place for a capital." It was a strategic decision. People talk about going *up* to Jerusalem because the city itself is situated on a high place. Even if I hadn't known of the city's importance, when I saw it myself, I would have been impressed by its appearance. It is like a fortress. Below stand the pillars and walls of rock going up and up, and then, high above, rests the city surrounded by huge walls.

An adequate fortress city not only had to be elevated and protected by strong walls, it also had to have a source of fresh water. The river of Siloam flows into Jerusalem. Great cities in ancient times endured battle after battle. Sieges sometimes lasted years. The aim was to have a fortress that your enemy couldn't overrun. If you had a fresh water supply and plenty of food, you could stay in there indefinitely.

For an Israelite in that day, Psalm 46 produced the following mental picture: There's a mighty fortress city, surrounded by outward opposition, danger, and a determined enemy. Beyond the walls, the battle is fierce. But even while all that's happening on the outside, a stream continues to flow into the besieged fortress city. With that picture of supply, even though the battle was raging all around, it was safe in the city of God because they had a source of water, which symbolized the sustaining power of the Lord.

The biblical imagery also refers to being in God's very presence, not just in the earthly

Jerusalem, but in the heavenly Jerusalem. The earthly Jerusalem is said to be but a replica of the city of God in heaven. A river flows from the throne of God that gives life-providing sustenance from the very throne of God. So here we see the connection between God's presence and his sustaining provision—not only for this life, but even crossing over into eternity. Not only is God providing his presence; God is committed to help! And when you have God on your side, whom else do you need?

These verses show us his power. Even though the nations are in an uproar and kingdoms fall, God lifts his voice and the earth melts. God has the power to help you—even if your whole world is coming down all around you. The political world around you may be in as much turmoil as the emotional world within you. God is a present help for both.

"The LORD Almighty is with us," declares verse 7. "The LORD Almighty" could be translated literally, "the Lord of Hosts." The terms evoke military imagery—the Lord with all of his armies and all of his resources. So, who is with us? God, in full force, leading all the armies of heaven. This all-powerful God wants to help ordinary people like you and me.

The God of Losers and Failures

As you read the above words of hope and help for people in trouble, you may have been tempted to think, "That's great . . . for some people." You may reason, like many of us do, that God is powerful, available, and willing to help those who are pure, godly, and far more spiritual than you are. But before you jump to that conclusion, note the last line of the stanza. The psalmist adds, "the God of Jacob is [for us] our fortress" (v. 7). Why? Because God knows how some of us think. Our minds tend to work something like this: "God, I feel unworthy of your help. Sure, I could see how you would be a refuge and fortress for those who go to church three times a week or who are leaders, pastors, and missionaries, but not for someone like me." When we understand the implications of "God of Jacob," it blows that kind of reasoning out of the water. God included that title for us.

The title "God of Jacob" actually indicates who is eligible to receive God's present help in time of trouble. It's a huge relief. It means God will be there for people like Jacob! He's not just God, not just the Lord Almighty, but also the God of Jacob. Wonder why that's in here? Why the God of Jacob? Why not the God of Abraham or the God of Isaac? Why not at least the God of Israel? (Israel was the new name God gave Jacob after he got his act together.) God is making the point that he's the same God who was there for Jacob, the liar, the loser, the deceiver.

Do you remember who Jacob was? He was one of the first three Hebrew patriarchs. His name literally means "the grasper of the heel" or "deceiver." Jacob was the guy who was always lying, manipulating, and jockeying for position. Jacob was always doing people in. I believe there's a clear message of grace here. By calling himself "the God of Jacob," God is saying, "I am there for manipulators, schemers, hypocrites, and people who are living double lives. I am there for people whose lives aren't together." So now do you feel eligible? Don't wait to get "good enough" to run to God when you're afraid. Run to him right now and watch how he will not only help you but also change you in the process.

Responding to God

Come and see the works of the LORD,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear,
he burns the shields with 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 Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

verses 8–11

How do you enter in and experience God’s presence when you’re gripped by fear? Picture yourself and your problem, whatever it is, and then picture God with all his power and resources at your disposal. Now, there are two things you have to do to connect yourself and your problem with God and his resources: “Come and see the works of the LORD” (v. 8). You’ve got to come. In the face of fear, you and I have to move toward God. He implores us; he invites us; he commands us. Help and hope are available, but you’ve got to come to him.

Not only must you come, you must come and see. The word *see* here is very interesting. It not only means to see objectively with your eye, but the same word is used elsewhere in Scripture to refer to a seer or a prophet. It’s the idea of looking at life with the inward eye, with spiritual insight. It means you look at the facts but draw back from the facts and say, “What is God doing here? What could God be doing?”

Let’s get practical. When you decide to “come and see,” what are you to see? The works of the Lord. Now, what did that originally mean to the people reading or hearing this psalm in the day it was written? What were the works of the Lord that they could come and see? What were they to recall in their trouble when they were surrounded by an army or some life-threatening situation? They would open the Scripture and say, “Now, let’s see. The works of the Lord are certainly in Genesis. God created all there is; he promised to preserve us as a people; he promised us a land. In Exodus? God delivered the people. Joshua? God delivered the land. First Samuel? God established the kingdom. God chose young David and helped him bring down the giant. They would look at all the battles with the Philistines. They would recount the works of the Lord, his faithfulness in the past. The Hebrew people could look back and remember the stories of how God sent the plagues on Egypt, how he devastated their enemies. They could say, “Hey, God’s come through for us in the past. The same God is eager to come into my situation right now and be my refuge. Okay.”

How can you and I do that? The way we get an accurate view of “the works of the Lord” is from the Bible. But we have to come to the Bible and use our imaginations as we read. That will give you a clear picture of who God is. Seeing what he has done in the past and hearing that the same God is available to you in the present will open your heart to experience his presence.

Now, notice how the tense of the verb changes in the last verses: it goes from what he did in the past to how “he makes wars cease” in the present tense to “I will be exalted in the earth” in the future tense. What are we to come and see? That the same God who did the wondrous works recounted in the Old Testament (past history) has the power to stop wars and conflicts on earth today (present), and the day will come when he has put an end to all conflicts, when he will rule and be exalted over all the earth (eternity future). Come and see who you’re dealing with! God Almighty: the same past, present, and future—God eternal. And he’s going to take care of all of life. His invitation to you is: You come, look, and remember who God is, what he’s done in the past, and what he’s going to do in the future. Then you can truly see what he can do for you.

Our Refuge and Fortress

How does it specifically happen that you experience God as your refuge? Do you have a rush of warm and giddy feelings that wipe out any sadness, grief, or fear? Do you experience a

mystical mist of peace that comes in the room? I mean, how does it work in real life for God to be my strength and my refuge and be available? What does it look like? When fear grips your life, how can you expect to find God and experience his peace?

Before we look at the “how-to” principles of experiencing God as refuge and fortress, I want to introduce you to two people: Martin Luther and Stephen. Their lives illustrate how God does what he promised in Psalm 46.

Luther, the great German Bible scholar and reformer, dared to challenge the corrupt religious and political system of the age. At risk of being burned alive as a heretic, Luther boldly read and taught the Scriptures, siding with God’s Word rather than religious error. His writings were highly influential, even inflammatory, especially when he dared to post his ninety-five theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg. By publicly challenging and contradicting the corrupt practices of the religious establishment, he brought himself under scrutiny that could have resulted in his execution.

Yet even when called before the emperor, Charles V, at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther stood firm and refused to recant. As he was being escorted away by the authorities, a band of his followers (disguised as attackers) rode in on horseback and swooped him off to a German castle where they hid him and provided all he needed for two years. During one of the darkest times of Luther’s life, God literally provided a mighty fortress, continual provision, joy in the midst of adversity, and calm in the midst of the storm.

It doesn’t always work out that God sends a rescue. God was with us when Mom was in the hospital, but she still died. Sometimes, God gives his people fearlessness in the face of grave danger yet doesn’t deliver them by helping them escape. In the Book of Acts we read of Stephen, a disciple of Jesus in the early days of the Christian movement. Falsely accused of blasphemy, he was hauled before a religious court. He proved himself a courageous young man and thorough defender of the faith, challenging the corrupt religious leaders of his day. He concluded his comments to them saying, “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it” (Acts 7:51–53).

In spite of Stephen’s powerful witness, God allowed the intentions of evil men to be carried out. “While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59–60).

You might be thinking, “Okay, well, that’s neat to hear how this worked for Martin Luther and someone in the Bible, but frankly they’re way out of my league. Psalm 46: Experiences for Spiritual Superstars, I can buy, but do you really think God still treats people like this today?”

I do. God’s protection is not just for spiritual superstars. These were ordinary people who learned to trust and respond to God according to his Word. You may actually be closer to that condition when you’re gripped by fear than at any other time. The reason for this is that most of us learn to trust, not because we’re noble, brave, or godly, and certainly not because we have it together, but when we don’t have any other choice. We are most likely to experience God when we need him desperately. We learn to trust because that’s the only option left to us. When fear has gripped us by the throat, what choices do we have? Do I face whatever it is on my own, or do I face it with the power and presence of God? For me, I’ll take the plan that includes God. I hope you will too. Let me show you how it works so you’re prepared the next time fear strikes in your life.

God Is with Ordinary People

Let me show you ordinary people in our church who have gone through the most terrifying situations with the presence of God in their lives, every bit as real as for Martin Luther and Stephen.

Will South

I was called to the ICU to visit a fellow named Will South before he went in for quintuple bypass surgery. His arteries were not only plugged, they had dried out and deteriorated to the point that the doctors had to replace major sections. They explained it all to Will and asked, "Do you still want to go through with the surgery?"

He said, "Well, sure."

They said, "You need to understand that the chances of success for this surgery are smaller than for a total heart transplant."

He said, "Well, sure. The options are, if I die, great. I know where I'm going. I've had seven strokes. I'm ready. I believe God wants me to do it."

Knowing all of that, I went to meet with Will early the morning of his surgery. Will has been a dear friend. Every Saturday night, no matter how he feels, he and I and another man go into a closet and pray together before the services. Every day Will prays for me. He prays for all of our pastors and all their kids by name, every day. During his hospitalizations he'd say, "God gave me the ministry of intercession when he put me flat on my back." He said, "These have been the most delightful years of my life." Will's attitude was remarkable; he was fearless and totally confident in God.

I didn't want to lose Will. But I confess I went in thinking that this was probably my last time to see Will this side of heaven. Medically speaking, I realized that unless God did a big thing here, this might be it. So I was uptight, but I wanted to encourage Will and his wife, Sarah. Again, I was asking God, "What do I say?" Again, I read Psalm 46. We talked about the psalm for two or three minutes, then Will started asking about my son: "Hey, how's Ryan? Boy, I just love that kid. What instrument did he play this week on the worship team? You know, when I was a kid. . . ." Then he started telling me about how he had chances to lead people to Christ when he was a kid, and he talked about music. Then he asked about my daughter: "Annie sure is growing." He was totally focused on my family: "Hey, how's your wife? You know, Chip, you shouldn't be here. Your schedule is so busy."

I was astounded at his composure. I was thinking, "Will! I'm supposed to be here to encourage you, not the other way around." It was obvious that the Lord was his refuge. Will broke into a big smile and said, "Isn't God good!" I don't mean in a phony way. He was living the real deal. He was just expressing what an honor it was to be in the presence of the living God, especially in such a time of trouble. He was living proof that "a river makes glad the city of God."

I said, "Yeah, Will. God is good."

He said, "I am so hungry. I want some eggs over medium. They said I can't have any tonight, but I told them tomorrow, after I get out of the ICU, man, I want some eggs over medium. Well, hey, Chip, you've got a lot to get going on. I will see you later. Why don't we pray?" So we prayed.

God's presence gave Will gladness in the midst of trouble. It was a privilege to see that firsthand. Will got through that surgery; six months later he was back at church helping out, praying, still asking about my kids and caring about how we were doing.

John Biggs and His Loved Ones

God being your refuge, your fortress, and your strength doesn't mean things always turns out the way you want. It means he's enough, regardless of what happens, even when the situation turns out the way you prayed it wouldn't. Let me take you back to the story of John Biggs, the young man I introduced earlier in this chapter who was diagnosed with cancer. John battled cancer for two and a half years, but in the end he died. He died before he got married, before the dreams his parents had for him could be fulfilled. Was God there for Carl and Phyllis Biggs and for John's fiancée, Christine? Was God there for John? You bet.

Phyllis and Carl Biggs, along with Christine, shared their reflections with our church family after John passed away. Their words, composed in wrenching grief, rang with authentic experiences of God's presence. In the midst of pain and fear, God met each of them in a special way.

Phyllis read Psalm 46 many times a day for the two and a half years of John's illness. God truly did become her refuge; he was the strength that got her out of bed every morning. She said, "We lived with the immediate threat of death. We got very familiar with the valley of the shadow of death. But I kept going back to Psalm 46, trusting God to show me, to make some sense of it, and to get us through it; and he has."

Carl said that his son, John, taught him about trust and totally leaning on God. "God was present with John; there was no denying it for any of us close to him. And you know what God taught me through my son? That he was there; that God is here. God is ever-present, and he will take care of us and will look after us—no matter what the circumstance."

Christine, John's fiancée, was caught up in dreams and plans for their life together. But when she finally surrendered herself completely to God, he brought her joy in the midst of pain and confusion. She said, "Now, I think of God more as my fortress, a place of rest where I can go to reflect. It all happened so fast, but God is still my fortress where I can retreat to be still and ask things like, 'How can I learn from this loss? How can I grow from this experience? How can I go on? And, how can I help other people?'"

Be Still

Christine's comments lead us to the second command God gives us in order to fully experience the promise of his presence given us in Psalm 46. It is: "*Be still, and know that I am God*; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." And then the refrain, "The LORD Almighty is with us" (vv. 10–11). Or, more literally, he is for us. Not only are we to come and see the works of the Lord. We are to be still and know that he is God. This passage is often used as a nice devotional sentiment. Meditation is great. Getting quiet before the Lord is wonderful. But that is not what this passage is teaching.

Literally, "Be still" means cease striving. Stop! Knock it off! Get your hands off the deal! Hold off! Surrender! Unfortunately, God has to be blunt with us. Why? Because when we're in trouble, our tendency is to try to do something—anything. We get afraid and we get moving—often in the wrong direction. We jockey for position, we manipulate, and we try to cut deals with God. You know, "God, I'll do this if you'll do that." We get frantic. God gently says, "When you're in real trouble, meet me on my terms. Be still." It's the same kind of phrase Jesus used when he was in the boat with the disciples in the storm. They screamed, "Don't you care that we're perishing, Lord? What are you going to do?" And he said, "Peace! Be still." Instantly, the winds and the waves ceased all movement. That's the idea. Just stop and know that he's God. You're not.

Why can we be still in frightful times? Because God will be exalted. This is a picture to remind us

that the future is sure; God knows how all the battles will end. He's going to be the ultimate victor—and he's on your side. It makes sense to stop and surrender your fear to him. Practically, this takes the form of a prayer of absolute surrender and dependency. You take all the chips of your life, all the cards, and all the strategies, and you push them all to the middle of the table and let God take it from there. "It's yours, God. I give. You call the shots. I need you and I'm in." This is what it means to be still. And when you do that, the Lord Almighty will be with you. The God of grace, the God of Jacob, will be for you a refuge.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In which areas or times of your life are you most tempted to cave in to fear?
2. What does it mean that God is our refuge, our strength, and our fortress?
3. Do you feel disqualified in any way from receiving God's help? What makes you feel that way? How does Psalm 46:11's reference to "the God of Jacob" encourage you?
4. In what ways has God's power and presence sustained you in the past? How does recalling his power and presence help you face today?
5. What would it look like in your life right now to "be still and know" that he is God? How difficult is it for you to do that? Who might help you on this difficult journey?