

## The Antidote | Fear | Psalm 46

April 23, 2023 | Matthew McNutt

[Title Slide] **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian, known for his staunch and vocal resistance to the Nazi dictatorship and Hitler's persecution of the Jews – something that ultimately led to his own execution in 1945, wrote in his book on the Psalms, **“Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power.”**<sup>1</sup>

There is unsuspected power in the Psalms, which is why we are drawing on them today, and in our current series, **The Antidote**. Pastor Nate spoke last week of how the Psalms give us a third way to engage with our emotions; rather than detach from them, or allow them to control us, the Psalms show us how to pray our emotions, to express them in all their raw honesty to God and find the antidote in Him to the aches and longings of our soul. Over the course of these eight weeks we are looking at an array of emotions and feelings common to the human experience; **impulsivity, hopelessness, bitterness, shame, revenge, uncertainty**, and **fear** [Antidote to Fear slide], the emotion we are diving into today.

The **American Psychological Association** defines **fear** in part by saying it is **a basic, intense emotion aroused by the detection of imminent threat, involving an immediate alarm reaction.**<sup>2</sup> They also note that the terms **fear** and **anxiety** are **“often used interchangeably.”**

These ancient, collected Psalms, written by a number of authors between 2500 and 3500 years ago<sup>3</sup>, have unsuspected power when it comes to fear and anxiety.

**Athanasius** wrote in the fourth century, **“When you have fled to God for refuge and are delivered from the afflictions round about you, if you wish to give thanks to God and to recount his kindness toward you, you have Psalm 46.”**<sup>4</sup>

*Psalm 46:1-3 (NLT)* <sup>1</sup> **God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. <sup>2</sup> So we will not fear when earthquakes come and the mountains crumble into the sea. <sup>3</sup> Let the oceans roar and foam. Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge! Selah**

Let's talk about this for a moment, let's make sure the weight of these words are clear. These words take the listener back to the flood, a threat that erased life on this earth; these images of earthquakes, mountains crumbling, oceans roaring and surging all

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 273.

<sup>2</sup> <https://dictionary.apa.org/fear>

<sup>3</sup> *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 791.

<sup>4</sup> Craig A Blaising, Carmen S Hardin, and Thomas C Oden, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Psalms 1-50* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 355.

paint the picture of humanity's existence being threatened in the most extreme way – in Pagan religions, even the gods would cower in fear of chaotic waters.<sup>5</sup> The author of Psalm 46 is painting the most terrifying picture he can.

Tremper Longman writes in his commentary, **“While mountains are images of security and permanence, the waters are forces of chaos. Thus, to envision the mountains being overwhelmed by the waters is a metaphor that points to the ultimate nightmare, or, as we might say today, ‘All hell is breaking loose!’”**<sup>6</sup>

Which, is an emotion each of us can identify with, total fear, anxiety, panic, terror. Hell breaking loose looks different for each of us, doesn't it?

Augustine, who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries, wrote in response to these opening verses of Psalm 46, **“There are many kinds of tribulation, and in all of them we must seek refuge in God, whether the trouble concerns our income, our bodily health, some danger threatening those we love or something we need to support our life.”**<sup>7</sup>

I appreciate Augustine's words so much; why? Because, 1500, 1600 years later, those are still our fears, aren't they? **This Psalm [Psalm 46:1-3]** was written in response to fear of overwhelming enemies. The details may change, but the human condition remains the same. We are afraid of enemies, or terrorists, of danger lurking around the corner. Fear over finances, health, danger. This Psalm was written just as much for us as it was readers thousands of years ago.

**Chapman University** has been documenting and studying American fears for the last decade; they identified the top fears for 2022, here are the top ten<sup>8</sup>: **Corrupt government officials, People I love becoming seriously ill, Russia using nuclear weapons, People I love dying, The U.S. becoming involved in another world war, Pollution of drinking water, Not having enough money for the future, Economic/financial collapse, Pollution of oceans, rivers, and lakes, Biological warfare.**

The 86<sup>th</sup> highest fear was Zombies. That doesn't haven't anything to do with anything today, I just thought it was interesting that enough people think that's a real enough possibility – despite Neil DeGrasse Tyson saying it's impossible<sup>9</sup> - that it made the list, y'know?

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<sup>5</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 628.

<sup>6</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), Kindle location 4119.

<sup>7</sup> Blaising, Hardin, and Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Psalms 1-50*, 356.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.chapman.edu/wilkinson/research-centers/babbie-center/survey-american-fears.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.rawstory.com/2013/11/buzzkill-of-science-neil-degrasse-tyson-explains-why-zombies-are-purely-fantasy/>

Here's the thing, though, I really wasn't surprised at the fears on the list. Global and national fears, health fears, money fears, conflict, violence, crime. Last week we did an anonymous survey with students at our church with one of the questions being "What is your generation's greatest fear?" The overwhelming response? And by overwhelming, I mean almost every single student from sixth through twelfth grade put the same thing: rejection. In our world of hyper-connectivity, there is a very real fear of not fitting in, being left out, feeling rejected.

Some also noted fears of failure, of not being able to get into college, fear of gun violence, fear of not being able to have a livable wage.

Where am I going with all of this? **Fear is timeless.** Which is why this ancient Psalm is so relevant to us today.

*Psalm 46:1-3 (NLT) <sup>1</sup> God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. <sup>2</sup> So we will not fear when earthquakes come and the mountains crumble into the sea. <sup>3</sup> Let the oceans roar and foam. Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge! Selah*

God is our refuge, our strength, ready to help – **SO WE WILL NOT FEAR.** What is the antidote to fear? The first part is **radical trust** in God.<sup>10</sup>

Radical trust in God means recognizing that when hell breaks loose, when all seems to be going wrong, that as overwhelming as whatever the source of our fear is, we have someone in our corner far more powerful than anything that can come against us. Why is this radical? Because it goes against everything in our culture, doesn't it? Our culture tells us to fight back, to assert ourselves, that we are the ones that can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, that if finances is a fear than I just need to work more, if we're threatened, throw the first punch.

When I think of Radical Trust, I'm reminded of Jesus' words in *Luke 18:17* "I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn't receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it."

What does "like a child" mean? Why do we need to have faith like a child to pursue God? Here's what I think it means; it's not referring to "childish" faith, I think it's referring to something else.

When our oldest was a baby, Heather and I lived in a two-story log cabin. Yup. I didn't see that one coming, either. There's actually a National Log Cabin day every year, and we used to throw a party for the youth group at our then church on that date. Seemed appropriate. Well, some of the guys were around the side of the house playing basketball, and I was holding Micah, who wanted to see. So, I leaned over the side of the second story porch railing so he could see, which he loved. Heather, not so much.

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<sup>10</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 627.

She kind of freaked out. So did one of the other moms. They were of the opinion that I was putting him in danger.

Later, I was thinking about how it was funny to me that their reactions were so terrified, while Micah – well, it didn't even occur to him to be afraid because he was in his dad's arms. Now, in the years since, I've dropped him, so he's not quite as confident in me as he once was. Turns out I'm not perfect.

What is faith like a child? What is **RADICAL TRUST**? It's reaching a point in which it doesn't even occur to us to be afraid because we are in God's arms – His refuge, His strength. That doesn't mean we're oblivious to fear, but we are no longer fooled by the threat it pretends to be.

John Calvin put it this way in a sermon he gave on Psalm 46 in 1561, “[We] know that in the midst of our fear we will not be oppressed with fear, because we have sheltered ourselves in God and have our refuge in the help he has promised us.”<sup>11</sup>

Radical trust allows us to be in the midst of fearful situations but not be oppressed with fear. Radical trust allows us to have the confidence in God that a young child has in their parent.

How do we build radical trust? Let's read on as the author describes God's protective presence:

*<sup>4</sup> A river brings joy to the city of our God, the sacred home of the Most High. <sup>5</sup> God dwells in that city; it cannot be destroyed. From the very break of day, God will protect it. <sup>6</sup> The nations are in chaos, and their kingdoms crumble! God's voice thunders, and the earth melts!*

*<sup>7</sup> The Lord of Heaven's Armies is here among us; the God of Israel is our fortress. Selah <sup>8</sup> Come, see the glorious works of the Lord: See how he brings destruction upon the world. <sup>9</sup> He causes wars to end throughout the earth. He breaks the bow and snaps the spear; he burns the shields with fire.*

And now, as the hymn builds in intensity, God speaks for Himself:

*<sup>10</sup> “Be still, and know that I am God! I will be honored by every nation. I will be honored throughout the world.” <sup>11</sup> The Lord of Heaven's Armies is here among us; the God of Israel is our fortress. Selah*

God speaks and He commands us to be still. Scripture is overflowing with passages of God telling us to “fear not.” God knows how we're wired, that fear is a constant struggle, that anxiety is constantly attacking us. What I love about this Psalm is that

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<sup>11</sup> Timothy George, Scott M. Manetsch, and Herman J. Selderhuis, eds., *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 353.

God's words, **Be still**, is a command with a promise. **“Be still, and know that I am God!”**

What is the antidote to fear? How do we build the **radical trust** to get us through times of fear? **Be still.**

We know, from a practical standpoint, that taking a step back to breathe, to slow down, is good for us. We make better decisions, it lowers our heart rate, it calms our emotions. Conversely, reacting in the moment, in the heat of fear or anxiety, rarely helps. How many of us have had to deal with the mess of reactionary, emotionally heated decisions?

But there's more to it than that; there is a more significant spiritual impact to being still. These two simple words contain power, that “unsuspected power” that Bonhoeffer spoke of. One commentator writes that the ancient Hebrew they come from **“has the sense of ‘cease and desist,’ like a parent separating two struggling children or a teacher breaking up a fight in the schoolyard.”**<sup>12</sup> He goes on to write, **“Only when we cease our own frantic activity can we begin to experience God's acting for us. Only then, says the psalmist, can we know that he is God.”**<sup>13</sup>

That imagery makes so much sense to me; to cease from struggling in a schoolyard. It works on a number of levels – my fear is a struggle, a battle. At the same time, as adults, we look at schoolyard fights as minor compared to what we face – sorry kids, spoiler alert, things do not get easier the older you get – but from God's perspective our fear shows a lack of understanding, we are making these schoolyard issues all consuming when there is no need!

**Basil the Great**, a fourth century bishop, wrote in response to this Psalm, **“Do not flee what you do not need to flee.”**<sup>14</sup>

In other words, God has got this! **Be still**, and know that He is God.

What does this look like practically? Everything in our culture screams at us to keep moving, to keep going, to keep consuming media – there is no silence. We never just wait, do we? We're always going somewhere, doing something, and playing on our devices in between. We play games, listen to podcasts, watch shows, have projects. We take satisfaction in our busyness, our maximizing of every moment – and then wonder why we're breaking down, why we're overwhelmed with fear and anxiety.

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<sup>12</sup> Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1: The NIV Application Commentary*, 633.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Blaising, Hardin, and Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Psalms 1-50*, 356.

Take time to just stop, to be still. Set aside fifteen minutes and just read Psalm 46. Read it over and over. Or read it once and reflect on it. If you're like me, it won't be easy at first – but it gets easier. Your body can learn to be still. Jesus speaks to this:

*John 14:27 (NLT) “I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid.*

Jesus promised us the gift of peace, peace that frees us from fear, peace that enables us to be still. And being still comes with the promise of knowing God.

Here's what I want to challenge you to do this week; whether or not you are in a time of fear or anxiety, we can all benefit from knowing God, of growing radical trust through being still.

Take fifteen minutes a day this week to reflect on Psalm 46. Turn off the music, the tv, the work, whatever is going on around you. Set aside fifteen minutes; maybe in the morning, maybe before bed, your lunch break, mid-afternoon. Identify a time now and put it on your calendar – don't just hope it will happen.

Read Psalm 46, read it over and over if you want. Reflect on these questions – take a picture of the screen so you have them:

- How did this Psalm make me feel?
- How does the Psalmist portray God?
- What do verses 4-7 tell me about who God is?
- What do verses 8-11 tell me about what God has done in the past?
- What does it mean or look like to “know that I am God” in times of rest and stillness?
- What fear do I need to release to God?

Next week, check in with us. Next Sunday, fill out your connection card and let us know what you learned about being still and knowing God.

Let our words be the words of David in Psalm 56:

*Psalm 56:3-4 (David) (NLT) <sup>3</sup> But when I am afraid, I will put my trust in you. <sup>4</sup> I praise God for what he has promised. I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?*

**Let's pray.**