

# A City that Cannot Be Shaken

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     The city that regards itself as the axis of the world has been brought to its bloodied knees. So wrote one commentator this week. The world is certainly a different place this week. For symbols of world strength and security have been pierced to their heart, and we with all the world are stunned, are numb with shock and grief and fear. What was thought to be safe has fallen. What was thought to be secure has been penetrated. What was thought to be sturdy has proven to be fragile. And we with all the world are stunned and numb with shock and grief and fear. Fear for our world. Fear for ourselves. Fear for the future. Fear for our children. Our grandchildren. Fear of evil. Perhaps even fear of foreigners.
- [ 1 : 1 1 ]     For if this can happen, who is safe? The steel may have melted, but American steely nerve is resolute. So Mr President reassured the world this week. In the rubble and the ruin, the stars and stripes still flutters over. A defiant USA vows not to be defeated. This is war, we have been told. A war that democracy and the free world pledges to win. How do we make sense of this past week? Without a doubt, this act of audacious terrorism is evil and without justification. It is right to be horrified. It is right to be angry. It is right to be sad and to grieve. God is too.
- [ 2 : 1 3 ]     Its perpetrators deserve condemnation and punishment. But that's no justification for retaliating evil with evil. Indiscriminate vengeance or retaliation must not occur. Appropriate, fair measures of judgement and justice ought to be made. But it's also good as Christians to know that there is a judge who will judge the hearts and souls and minds of each and every person living and dead one day. So whether or not humans can exercise appropriate justice, God will one day. But though horrified, we ought not to be surprised totally. For humanity is fallen and those of us who belong at Holy Trinity in recent months have seen from Paul's letters to the Romans in the early chapters that without any exception of the world. All of us stand under the condemnation of God for our failures and our sins. Terrorism, violence, evil, hatred and murder are not new.
- [ 3 : 2 5 ]     They occur every day. Some of it gets reported more than others. In part because this is the United States. We see it in every graphic detail. So in one sense the world has not changed at all. It's continued in its evil, fallen state. Yet maybe there are lessons here for us as well. For approximately 20 years the World Trade Centre was the world's tallest building. It stood as testimony to humanity's great achievements and ingenuity and construction.

A hundred and ten stories of glory stretching up and touching the heavens. The first skyscraper ever built received the condemnation of God.

I am sure it wasn't a hundred and ten stories high. It was built in Babel, the ancient name for Babylon. And in the eleventh chapter of the first book of the Bible the builders of Babel tried to make their name great and build a tower that would reach to the skies, to God's own place, to the heavens.

[ 4 : 40 ] They may have tried to make their name great. They may well have been boasting in their own ingenuity and ability. But we are told there that God from heaven had to look down and come down to even see what they tried to build.

And the judgment scattered them in different languages upon the earth. Their names are forgotten. We know the name of not one of those who built that great first skyscraper.

Their city is lost. There is now just a ruin in modern day Iraq. And their empire is no more. So perhaps there is a caution in these events.

Let us and the United States not make the same mistake. We are to glory in God and not in ourselves and our achievements. Perhaps in the Bible the equivalent of New York and Washington is the city of Jerusalem.

Its glorious temple was regarded by the inhabitants of the city as being inviolable. It wasn't as grand or tall perhaps as the World Trade Center but it was the glory of the city.

[ 5 : 50 ] A marvellous building of gold and other precious stones to mark the habitation of God in the centre of the city of God's people Jerusalem.

But in time it became a false security blanket for the people of God in ancient Israel. They believed that because the building was there they were safe, their city was impregnable and they could carry on living as they wanted to live.

And so the nation deteriorated into idolatry, immorality and ignorance of their God though they boasted in the building of their God in the centre of the city.

For example we can read in one of the books of the Old Testament Jeremiah, a prophet in chapter 7 of their boats, the temple, the temple, the temple, we're safe.

But it was destroyed, razed to the ground by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. And in many places in the Bible in the Old Testament we can read of the people of God expressing their shock, their numbness, their grief and their fear after Jerusalem had been destroyed.

[ 7 : 07 ] The unthinkable had happened for them. And so if you read the book of Lamentations, if you read the prophets Jeremiah or Ezekiel, if you read Psalm 137 and other places in the Bible, we get a sense that our emotions this week have been shared by others hundreds of years before.

For the building they thought would grant them and guarantee them security fell. It was a lesson that was not learned by their subsequent generations. And though some 70 years or so later the temple was rebuilt, though not perhaps with all its original grandeur, another 500 years later or more, in Jesus' own day, the people had not learned that lesson.

And he warned them in words of prophecy that no stone would be left in its place. They disbelieved him, but it was true. And the second Jerusalem temple was destroyed this time by Rome in 70 AD.

So perhaps the events of the two temples of the Bible and the events of this week ought to caution us. Where do we place our trust? Let us not make the mistake of ancient Israel or the Israel of Jesus' day or perhaps some people of our own day.

We must trust in God and not in ourself or any building or any city. But having said that, there is one city that stands forever.

[ 8 : 41 ] There is one city that cannot be shaken or moved. There is one high tower which will never fall. And the psalm we read directs us to it.

You may like to reopen that page in the Bible, page 450, to see Psalm 46. The Black Bibles are under the seats in front of you.

Psalm 46 begins with a confident assertion. God is our refuge and strength. A very present help in trouble.

God is those things. God is the protector, the shelter, the one who provides refuge and protection for his people. He is a very present help, the psalmist says.

The words very present help suggest two things. One is that God is on red alert. I think it's called code delta. That is, he's at the most imminent stage of action to help us, to help his people.

[ 9 : 47 ] But also the suggestion of him being our help, the word suggests a sufficient help. He is able to help us. He's not just helpless in offering us help.

For example, at the airport security checks, which are meant to help to provide safety in the United States, clearly they have failed in the days past.

But the help that God offers is sufficient to provide security for us and safety for us. It's not a deficient help, but a sufficient help for his people.

And therefore the psalmist says in verse 2, we will not fear. We will not fear. Because implicit in that statement is an acknowledgement that God is greater than anything.

That God's power is greater than any other power. And therefore we will not fear. And he goes on to imagine a far worse catastrophe than anything we've seen in recent days on the television.

[ 10 : 48 ] Though the earth should change. Though the mountains shake into the heart of the sea. Though its waters roar and foam. Though the mountains tremble with its tumult. That's far worse.

Far greater cataclysmic catastrophe than anything we've seen on CNN this week. More frightening by far than the events of last Tuesday.

But even in that midst, the psalmist says we will not fear. Because even if the world collapses, the mountains fall into the sea, the waters rush over the land, God is still our refuge.

It doesn't mean evil things will not happen on earth. It doesn't mean that we will not face catastrophe or strife or be the objects of evil. But even in the midst of that, God is our refuge.

And that is a far greater promise and far better for us than a sort of wishful thinking that evil or difficult things will never happen. They do and we know it.

[ 11 : 55 ] But in the midst of it, God is with us. And that is a sufficient promise of protection. Whatever should happen in this world, even if this whole world in the universe is blown to smithereens somehow, God is our refuge and our strength.

You see, God's not absent from an evil world. He's not remote from evil. But there in its midst, in all its gloomy and gory detail, God is our refuge and our strength.

Then the writer turns to the city in verse 4 onwards. Possibly this is written at the time when Jerusalem was under siege. He writes in verse 4, There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of the city. It shall not be moved. God will help it when the morning dawns. The safety of this city is not because of human might, not because of military defence, not because of any great capable anti-missile attacks or defence mechanisms or anything like that at all.

The safety of this city is because of God and no one else. The safety is because of God's presence. He is in the midst of the city.

- [ 13 : 23 ] He goes on to say that the nations are in an uproar and kingdoms totter. It could be a description of almost any decade of world history. But even when that is happening and the city will stand firm because God is present in the midst of his city.

And so he says in verse 7, The Lord of hosts is with us. A military name for God. The Lord of armies, literally. The God of Jacob is our refuge.

And the word for refuge there is a different one from verse 1. This word for refuge means high tower, a place of sanctuary. Something that perhaps is well worth remembering this week.

When one of the world's highest towers collapses, God is our high tower. You see, the unshakable city in the end is God himself.

The high tower is God himself. You see, this city is God with us. It's no earthly city. It's not New York or Washington.

- [ 14 : 26 ] It's not Jerusalem. It's not Kabul. It's not Melbourne. Or any other city of the world, ancient or modern. The city is God. And we fool ourselves if we ever think that any earthly city is safe.

Even ours at the remote ends of the world. This is a description of God's heavenly city in the end. The Bible's last pages describe it further.

A place without crying, evil, sin, death, distress, pain. A perfect place. It is God's heavenly city.

And no city on earth in our age will ever be that. It is God's city that he builds and he brings to us his people at the end of history.

It's an eternal city. It is a safe city. An impregnable and inviolable city. It will stand forever. It will not be moved.

- [ 15 : 30 ] For God is in its midst. God with us. The key to this city is not steel and concrete. The key to this city is not self-righteousness or human glory.

The key to this city is not democracy, the free world or capitalism or an American dream. The key to this city is God with us.

That's why it's safe. That's why it's secure. And that's why it will stand forever. Because this city is God with us. And the name God with us is a name that is applied to Jesus Christ in the New Testament of the Bible.

Hebrew, Emmanuel. God with us. So the key to this city is Jesus. That's how we become citizens of this city. Through Jesus.

He is its gatekeeper or doorkeeper. He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in. And the Bible makes it clear that we do not deserve to be citizens of this city.

- [ 16 : 35 ] We don't become citizens by filling in a form. We don't even become citizens just through baptism. We don't become citizens because we deserve it or earn it.

We become citizens of this city through faith in Christ. And through the mercy and grace of God, we already are citizens of God's heavenly city.

A safe and eternal place. But without the mercy of God, this would be a city totally unpopulated. So the writer of this psalm ends the psalm by inviting, indeed urging its readers, to see what God is doing.

Come and see, he says in verse 8, the works of the Lord. See what desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth. He breaks the bow.

He shatters the spear. He burns the shields with fire. All the armaments of the world destroyed by God. For in the end, we must remember that peace will come only through God.

[ 17 : 40 ] And no human institution, no human nation or government or president, no association of human nations, whether NATO or the UN or any other, will ever bring peace on earth.

Only God, in his time, will bring true and lasting peace. That's not to say we should not work for peace. But we fool ourselves if we think we can achieve it.

Only God brings the peace that we crave. And so the psalmist says in the famous words of verse 10, be still. Not just being calm and sitting still, though that's certainly part of it.

But put down your arms. Put down your restlessness. Put down your love of yourself and human glory. Put down your putting yourself up first, whether person or nation.

And submit to almighty God. Be still and know that I am God. Not you, not your nation, not your government, not your political system.

[ 18 : 45 ] Not anything else. But the God of the Bible is God. So this is saying to us, we are to submit ourselves to God. To humble ourselves before him.

For I am exalted among the nations, God says. I am exalted in the earth. Not human glory or human achievement, or human bravado, or the human spirit.

But I, the God of the Bible, I am God. I am exalted, he says, in this world. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.

Late on Tuesday night, our time, New York, and then Washington, were brought to its knees. The United States of America brought to its knees. Indeed, our world brought to its knees.

And there's no justification for that evil act. But it's what we do on our knees that matters. If on our knees, we humble ourselves before Almighty God, then that is good, not evil.

[ 19 : 56 ] If on our knees, our faith in humanity is destroyed, that is good, and not evil. If on our knees, our confidence in government, buildings, security, or human achievement is destroyed, that is good, not evil.

If on our knees, we begin to take the US dollar seriously, that is what it says, in God we trust, that is good. God is the one who brings good out of evil.

And it's what we do on our knees that matters in the end. Even with CNN's fantastic footage, it is hard to quite imagine the terror of knowing you're about to die.

Whether you are standing at a building seeing a plane flying straight for you, whether you are herded to the back of a plane and told you had minutes to ring your loved ones, whether you saw a building collapsing above you and knowing that you're about to die, it is hard quite to imagine the terror of that.

But the Bible makes it clear that more terrifying still is to stand before the judgment throne of God without Jesus as our advocate.

[ 21 : 16 ] But for those who trust in Jesus, the Bible reassures us time and time again, we have nothing to be terrified of, nothing to fear at all, even if evil does assail us and even if death does approach us, we have nothing to fear in Jesus Christ.

For Jesus is God with us. He's the doorkeeper of God's safe city and by his death he's unlocked the door of heaven and by his grace we can enter in.

The events of this week are sobering indeed. They're a sober reminder of evil that is rampant in this world. That's not new. It is a sober reminder that all humans are fallen and sinful.

That is not new. It is also a sober warning to us about where we place our trust and our security because it is oh so easy to place our trust in things that are good but not God.

To place our trust in ourselves, in military strength, in political alliances. or to place our trust in the human spirit that we've heard so much about this week.

[ 22 : 35 ] But only God is the ultimate refuge. Only God is the invincible high tower. Only God warrants our trust. And what a refuge he provides, what strength he gives, what comfort he offers, what assurance he extends to us and what security he is.

on the final day of history, events more cataclysmic than we've seen this week will occur. On the day when the old earth and heaven as we now know it will be rolled up and cast away, what will prevail then will not be the human spirit or free democracy but the sovereign rule of God.

what will fly defiantly over that crumbling world then will not be stars and stripes but a cross, the cross of Christ. And what will be sung on that day will not be a star-spangled banner or a national anthem but will be praise and glory to God and to Jesus Christ.

God is our refuge and our strength. He is a very present help in times of trouble. Therefore, we will not fear.

So be still. Know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations. I am exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us.

[ 24 : 10 ] The God of Jacob is our refuge. the power■■■■ of the Lamb because it is that He is and that there are He is in the thing for him.

He came in his and into the room and came in Afghanistan in the van and we can also and and we know him to