

1-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Willis, John T. and Willis, Timothy (1999) "Be Still and Know that I am God: Hearing that Still Small Voice in the Heat of Battle," *Leaven*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol7/iss3/9>

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BE STILL, and know that I AM GOD

HEARING THAT STILL SMALL VOICE IN THE HEAT OF BATTLE

BY JOHN AND TIM WILLIS

Psalm 46 is a communal psalm of confidence, confidence in God in the midst of “earth-shaking” events. The psalm seems to fall naturally into three parts. The opening section begins with a statement of faith in God as protector of his people (v. 1). This is followed by consequential statements of confidence (vv. 2–3). The focus shifts in the middle section to the “city of God” (vv. 4–7). These verses contrast the tranquility experienced in God’s dwelling place to the turmoil and upheaval that exist outside the city. The confidence associated with this thought is summed up in verse 7, a refrain that also indicates the literary ending of the section. The same refrain recurs at the end of the psalm (v. 11), which doubly marks the end of the final section (vv. 8–11). In that section again, the speakers extol God’s sovereignty over other nations in times of war, thereby exhorting one another to confidence in God.

The immediate context of the psalm seems to be foreign invasion. The thoughts are expressed in such general terms that no specific date can be determined. This is probably purposeful, as it allows subsequent generations greater latitude in appropriating the psalm for their own crisis situations. Further, the military threat is sometimes expressed here (as elsewhere in the Bible) in cosmic terms, as if the natural world somehow gets involved in human conflicts. This permits even further appropriation of the psalm in times of natural calamity, such as floods or earthquakes.

Verse 10 stands as the climax to the psalm. There is confidence expressed throughout the psalm, confidence based on the belief that God is “with us” (vv. 7, 11). But this verse contains the only direct speech of God in the psalm, serving as God’s personal reassurance to those who have expressed their faith in him elsewhere in the psalm.¹

Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.²

Its location toward the end of the psalm allows it to function as a final response to all the disconcerting things mentioned in the psalm, all the things that threaten to shake one’s faith. In a sense, then, we see God getting to have the final say. This was a privilege usually reserved for a king; so, both in what he says and in the fact that he is saying it, God is claiming sovereignty over all things. And it is primarily because of this sovereignty that the speakers of the psalm are to have confidence.

“Be Still”

The initial imperative of this line, “be still” (root *raphah*), is a command to release one’s hold, to cease exerting one’s energy. An example of a concrete use of the term appears in Song of Solomon—“I held him and would not *let him go* . . .” (Song Sol 3:4). The term is

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used again as the opposite of *hold*, but in a figurative sense, in Prov 4:13—“Hold on to instruction, do not *let it go*.” It is used to refer to the somewhat symbolic gesture of unclenching one’s hands at the hearing of discouraging news—“Because of the news that is coming, every heart will melt and every hand *go limp* . . .” (Ezek 21:7). The hands have been clenched as a show of determined resistance; now the people are to “let go” of their resistance. The term is also used more abstractly in reference to the exertion of mental energy. In 1 Samuel 15, Saul is trying to justify to Samuel his disobedience of God’s command, when Samuel says, “*Stop* [making excuses].” Saul’s words are showing his resistance to the expected rebuke from Samuel, and Samuel is telling him to accept it, to “let go” of his resistance to the inevitable. In sum, a good translation of this term is “let go,” both in a physical sense and in a mental or abstract sense.

While the word for *hold on to* is sometimes used as the opposing counterpart to *be still* in some poetic lines, the true antithesis of *be still* in Ps 46:10 is *fear*. The things that we hold on to are often gripped in fear. When the ground is shaking (figuratively), we reach out in fear, grasping for something that will steady us. This psalm speaks of the danger of war, of attack by foreign invaders. In Israel’s case, those invaders were usually more numerous and more powerful than Israel. The natural response (mentioned by several prophets) would be to work desperately at improving the nation’s military, or perhaps to seek the assistance of other nations. Such a response grows out of fear of the outcome of a conflict. The advice of this psalmist (and of Israel’s prophets) is to “let go” of those other helps, to “let go” of those fears, and rely solely on Yahweh. (Isaiah 7 provides a good prophetic example of this.) This points us to the fact that we cannot take in this first phrase without the second; we cannot “be still” without recognizing Yahweh’s protective presence with us.

“And Know That I Am God”

One of the greatest obstacles to the kind of faith that overcomes fear is our limited knowledge. When we face crises in our lives, when we fear for the future, one of our most common reactions is to want to know what is going to happen. The fear of those suffering from major health problems such as cancer is compounded by the fact that no one involved can know exactly how the illness is going to progress. The patient and the family want as precise and detailed a prognosis as they can get. This is natural, and it is an indication of fear. The same is true of those looking for employment. The greatest part of the anxiety involved in a job search comes from what is not known. Even those who are unemployed for several months could be much calmer about it if they knew for certain when they would get that new job. So a central part of our human attempt to deal with our fears on our own is gaining knowledge about the future.

Psalms 46:10 calls for gaining knowledge of a different sort. God says, “Know that I am God.” Rather than knowing what will happen and gaining confidence from that, we are told simply to know that God is God. This might seem rather vague to us, but to an Israelite the implications were probably easily recognized.

The phrase “know that I am God” echoes a common refrain of the Exodus story. As Yahweh sends plague after plague upon the Egyptians, he says that through these deeds people “will know that I am Yahweh” (Exod 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; 10:2; 14:4, 18). They come to see his sovereignty over various forces of nature, that Yahweh is king of those forces. These taken together serve to explicate God’s self-identification to Moses in Exod 3:14–16, where he declares, “I am who I am.” Through the plagues he shows that he is the great “I am,” the one who holds authority over all creation. The same omnipotence is demonstrated in other events throughout the Old Testament (e.g., 1 Kgs 18:36–37; 2 Kgs 19:15–19; 2 Chron 20:6–12). The most concentrated usage appears in Ezekiel, at a time when Israel has entered into a second time of “slavery”—the Babylonian exile. Repeatedly God says, “They will know that I am Yahweh their God” by the way he is punishing them (Ezek 5:13; 6:7, 10, 13–14; 7:4, 9; etc.) and in his future act of delivering them from exile (Ezek 28:26; 34:27; 37:13, 28; 38:23; 39:28).

These negative and positive demonstrations of Yahweh's character reflect a second self-identification of God, recorded in Exodus 34. There, Yahweh declares himself to be "merciful and gracious, . . . yet by no means clearing the guilty" (Exod 34:6–7 NRSV; see Num 14:17–19; Jonah 4:2; Ps 103:6–8; Neh 9:17). There are two aspects of his character, one forgiving and one punishing, and in the final analysis, the merciful and forgiving side always overshadows any punishment. This two-sided character of God is manifested over and over again in his dealings with his people. One of the clearest examples is recorded in Numbers 14. God threatens to abandon his people for their lack of faith in the wake of the report of the ten spies. Instead of doing that, though, he punishes them temporarily by forbidding the current adult generation to enter the land. But his overshadowing mercy is recognized in his upholding of his covenant promises through subsequent generations (see Ps 78:37–38). Other well-known examples are obvious in the stories of the judges and in the life of King David. The same theme permeates the communal confession of the postexilic community in Nehemiah 9.

In sum, to "know that he is God" is to recognize that he is the omnipotent Sovereign, and that that omnipotence is exercised in accordance with his merciful yet punishing character. But there is one other aspect of this "knowledge" that is revealed in the Old Testament—that is, that people who "know" God also emulate his character in their own lives. For example, the laws of Deuteronomy teach that God's people are to practice justice (Deut 16:18) and mercy (Deut 24:17–22) in imitation of Yahweh (also Deut 10:14–19). Jeremiah says of the righteous King Josiah,

"He did what was right and just,
so all went well with him.
He defended the cause of the poor and needy,
and so all went well.
Is that not what it means to know me?"
declares the LORD.
(Jer 22:15–16; cf. 9:23–24; 31:33–34)

These and other passages demonstrate how recognition of God's sovereignty evokes not only a response of faith but also a response of righteousness. Elaborations and explications of the thought of this line abound in the

Old Testament. Two of the psalms are particularly helpful in illustrating its message: Psalm 77 and Psalm 37.

Psalm 77 falls naturally into two parts. Psalm 77:1–9 expresses the thoughts and feelings of someone tortured by grief and doubt. Even the thought of God evokes a moan of despair, as the writer feels separated from him. This all changes, however, in verses 10–20. What causes the change is the writer's shift of focus to past actions of God on behalf of his people. The implication is that the Exodus generation, though it had suffered in anguish for years as this writer is now suffering, remained faithful and eventually saw the awesome power of God's deliverance. Thus, the psalmist uses himself as an example of one who is learning to "be still" in the

Recognition of God's sovereignty evokes not only a response of faith but also a response of righteousness.

midst of distress by recognizing that God is God and that he will eventually deliver him.

Psalm 37 also calls for quiet anticipation, appealing not to specific actions but to widely held truths about God. He tells his audience, "Do not fret . . ." (vv. 1, 7, 8); "Trust in the LORD . . ." (v. 3); "Delight yourself in the LORD . . ." (v. 4); "Commit your way to the LORD . . ." (v. 5); and, "Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him . . ." (vv. 7, 34; see also Psalms 25, 31, 38, 42–43, 62, 69). These exhortations are based on the fact that God is known as one who justly determines the ultimate fate of humans, who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. For this reason, the psalmist also exhorts his readers to live righteously, thus expecting them to emulate God's character in their own lives. They are told to "do good" (vv. 3, 27), and he encourages them to be "righteous" and "blameless" and "upright" by reminding them of how God blesses such people.

Some Contemporary Applications

There are numerous ways in which the principle taught in Ps 46:10 can be applied to our lives today. We all fight battles; we all deal with conflicts of one sort or

another. In each case, facing the conflict is a fearful thing. We can respond to the fear in one of two ways: we can try to work out our own solution, using human powers and abilities, or we can “be still” and turn the situation over to the care of God. The first response will ultimately end in failure, for the enemies we face are always bigger than ourselves; the second response will always end in victory—though perhaps not in the form that we would desire—because God is sovereign.

A beautiful example of these truths was provided recently by a young woman named Mary Catherine Fish. The title of the condensed version of her story is “Letting Go.”³ In it she tells the painful story of how her husband died from a very aggressive form of brain cancer in the first year of their marriage. Through that ordeal she came to a very deep and personal understanding of God. The outcome was not what she desired, but by “letting go,” by being still before God, she came to realize the “peace that passes understanding.” Shortly after her husband’s death, she could write about a feeling of oneness with God and her husband, and she said she had learned that “love does endure beyond pain and sorrow.” We as Christians must not ignore any part of this picture. God does not eliminate pain and sorrow in this life; instead, he carries us through the times when we encounter such feelings, because his love endures.

We all have humbling struggles like this. How we react to these situations is a reflection of our faith. It is natural for us to fight thoughts of despair, anger, and resentment, even guilt over opportunities lost. We fear the pain and anguish that we or someone close to us will suffer; we fear an unknown future that might include the loss of the spiritual, emotional, and/or financial support of others. This verse calls us to turn all that fear over to God, to know that the outcome is within his loving control.

We also fight battles against sin. We find ourselves in unhealthy competitions at work, going up against rivals who use unethical practices to further themselves at our expense. We come across parents who do things that give their kids an unfair advantage over ours at school. We are made to live with laws that permit injustice or immorality. Our natural reaction is to fear the end results of such situations, to anticipate possible negative consequences. But God tells us to “be still” in these situations, to look to him for protection and peace, because he is sovereign and will take care of us.

We struggle against temptations to sin. The temptations are often very subtle and cunning and persistent. We are tempted to strike back when wronged, to defend our honor in the face of a challenge; we struggle against greed, ambition, lust, jealousy, bitterness, anger, pride, and a host of other vices; we are tempted by the lure of addictive chemical substances to help us through hard times. In these battles, we fear being perceived as inferior; we fear the consequences that will come if we give in; we fear the shame of being discovered, the sense of separation from God and his people that accompanies sin. Our natural reaction is to look to our own abilities to combat temptation. We turn to self-help theories, astrology, medications, and other man-made solutions in the vain hope that they can give us the power or the knowledge that we need to win. Again, this verse calls us to turn our battles over to the care of God. These spiritual enemies are stronger than we are. They defeat us over and over again.⁴ “For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind . . .” (Rom 7:15, 22–23). We will suffer from guilt and fear and regret as long as we rely on our own abilities to defeat such things in our lives. This verse calls us to “be still,” to cease our own attempts to overcome spiritual enemies and to look to God to fight the battles for us.

This sounds like a simple solution—so why do we usually find it so hard to incorporate this principle into our lives? One likely reason is our human nature. We resist asking for the help of God because humans want to be self-sufficient. This truth takes us back all the way to the beginning, because it is the heart of the sin of Adam and Eve. They wanted to be “like God,” able to live without God’s help, and they thought that eating from the tree of knowledge would give them that ability. The actual result was that they became more dependent on him than before—but the desire for independence remained. God’s will is that we admit our need for him, that we become humble (Jas 4:6) and “be still,” turning over our fears and needs to his care.

Another reason it is difficult for us to let God fight our battles for us is that God does things in his time, not in our time. We want diseases cured, hardships removed, unexpected misfortunes explained—and we want these things quickly. Our society in some sense programs us

to think this way by bombarding us with movies in which problems are resolved within a two-hour time frame. Advertisers offer drugs, diets, self-help programs, and other methods as quick and painless ways of dealing with our hurts and wants. Submitting to God's control seems less attractive, because he does not flippantly promise to give us things in a "quick and painless" way. We are not promised cures or explanations in every case, nor are we told to expect "amazing results" that all can see. Rather, we are promised the comfort of knowing that he is still in control and that he is a merciful God. Our peace, our joy comes from having him "with us" (Ps 46:7, 11).

Life really is like a roller coaster, as many have said. On a roller coaster, some riders—those with little faith in the machine—reach out and grab some part of the car in which they are riding, trying to steady themselves and reassure themselves that they are safe because of what they are doing. In life, those without faith in God reach out to the things they can see and touch—to man-made solutions—to steady themselves and reduce their fears. They are frightened by the thought that their lives are out of their control. But others who ride roller coasters—those who have learned to have faith in the machine—are those who "let go" of the bar in front of them, holding their hands high in the air. They realize that the ups and downs and all the shaking are part of the ride. They know from experience that the restraining mechanisms built into their car will prevent them from flying out and being hurt. They have learned to "let go" and enjoy the ride the way it was meant to be ridden. Those who have faith in God have also learned to "let go" and enjoy the ride. They know that they are not in control of

their lives, but they are not afraid. Instead, they are filled with the joy that comes from knowing that they are in the loving care of the omnipotent God.

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Notes

¹ Some commentators say that the command to "be still" in verse 10a is directed at the earthly rulers and elements of nature (see Brueggemann, Leslie). Two considerations argue against this. (1) The rest of this tricolon lends support to the command of this line, i.e., those being addressed can "be still" because God "will be exalted" over the things that are threatening. It would be very awkward for God to address certain characters in the second person and then immediately speak about them in the third person. (2) In the rest of the psalm, those rulers and elements react appropriately when God speaks, by trembling in fear. Why would they now be rebuked for that and told to respond in another way that would essentially communicate the same fact—that God is their Sovereign? So it is better to understand the speakers of the psalm as the recipients of the divine command.

² Scripture quotations not otherwise noted are from the New International Version.

³ Mary Catherine Fish, "Letting Go," *Reader's Digest*, May 1999; from the book *Beyond the Road's End* (www.beyondbook.com, 1998).

⁴ This point is not contradicted by 1 Cor 10:13, "God . . . will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." It is a mistake to think that this verse is teaching that it is our responsibility to resist the temptation. Instead, God "provides a way out so that you can stand up under it." That "way out" is his power and authority. So our responsibility is to "be still," to stop trying to resist the temptation on our own, and then to "know that he is God," to know that he will defeat those enemies as he has in the past.