



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Be Not Afraid: Behold the Works of the Lord!

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ AUGUST 6, 2017

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,

³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. *Selah*

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.

⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!"

¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Psalm 46 (ESV)

One of my favorite composers is the Russian Dimitri Shostakovich. Much of Shostakovich's life was spent living under the tyranny of the Stalinist regime. Those who lived under that tyranny were well acquainted with the phenomenon of people disappearing in the middle of the night—the dreaded knock on the door with the person who answered being taken away and never heard from again. At different times in Shostakovich's life, he knew that he was not in favor with Comrade Stalin and he was fearful that the “knock” was going to come to his door. There were times when he would actually sleep out on the landing of his apartment complex with his suitcase packed just in case, so that if his turn came and the authorities came to take him away, his family would not be disturbed. He knew what it meant to live in fear. The Stalinist government seemed overwhelmingly powerful and Shostakovich and his fellow citizens were powerless to deal with this invincible foe.

In the mid-1950's after Stalin had died, Shostakovich wrote his Tenth Symphony. The second movement of that symphony is a caricature of the ruthlessness of Stalin—a “jackboots” kind of movement. But in the fourth movement, he uses a very interesting technique connecting musical tones with letters of the alphabet. Shostakovich used his initials as a little motif so that throughout the fourth movement, you keep hearing that motif over and over again. Occasionally you will hear it screaming out as if Shostakovich were proclaiming, “I survived! You see Stalin, Shostakovich still lives and you are dead!” Even though he was an atheist, Shostakovich was tapping into a very profound biblical principle: tyranny and evil eventually fall.

We live in a fallen world so we have to deal with many very unpleasant things and we have to face foes that might seem unconquerable. They are intimidating and seem overwhelming.

They can be personal like illnesses of all sorts, tragedies, disappointments, the sinfulness of others, family and economic struggles; or they can be worldwide such as the threat of North Korea or ISIS or Iran. But in Psalm 46:6 God says to us, *“The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.”*

The last time I checked, the ancient Babylonian Empire is gone, the mighty Roman Empire is gone, and Napoleon is no more. Slavery in America is gone. The Third Reich, the former Soviet Union that I just mentioned, and Tojo's war—just to name a few—all gone! The difficulty is that when we are in the midst of such challenges, it is hard to see how we will ultimately prevail.

My friends, the spiritual challenge for us this morning is the practical application of faith. If your religious faith is just something that you compartmentalize in your life and say, “It’s a matter of opinion,” then what is the point? Is there a practical application? Does that faith claim have an actual influence on your daily living? The question this morning, the spiritual question, is even when we are in the midst of these struggles, will they ultimately defeat us? How you answer that question will determine the character of your entire life. It will be the difference between whether, at your most fundamental level, you are going to live in fear or live the victorious life of confidence and assurance of God's purpose; His purpose about which you may know nothing. It is not always easy to know the way of God's Providence. We have no idea what God is up to in the midst of any struggle, whether it is personal or worldly, but the question is, “Do we trust in Him or, because we know everything else is fallible, do we live in fear?”

The victorious life is not an excuse for not being diligent in

rising to the occasion to confront challenges. As a matter of fact, there is a common, modern philosophy of, “Oh well, whatever.” No, it is not a “whatever!” In fact, that subtlety is one of the most dangerous attitudes prevalent in the modern world today. The victorious life means that we genuinely trust in God's sovereignty and we genuinely trust in His Providential purpose in all things, from struggles with difficult people, through illnesses, to international threats. The victorious life enables us to truly be at peace at the depth of our innermost soul even while we diligently and courageously confront the challenges of life. As a matter of fact, if we have that basic peace because we ultimately trust in Almighty God, we have that much *more* courage, that much *more* inspiration, and that much *more* energy to face any challenge like a champion.

The psalmist in Psalm 46 captures this wonderfully. Look what he says in verse one, *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”* This is a declarative statement of faith. He identifies Who we ultimately trust and rely upon as opposed to any earthly or man-made resource no matter how effective or ingenious. Because you see, friends, all things on earth are finite. They are vulnerable, they are fallible, they are not permanent no matter how wonderful they might be in their time. The question is, “Why would we ultimately put all of our hope in that which is fundamentally insecure?” We are called by the psalmist to trust Almighty God.

In verses two and three he says,

*Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though the waters roar and foam, though the mountains
tremble at its swelling.*

This describes some of the most intimidating and awful

natural disasters. He talks about earthquakes—have you ever been in an earthquake? It is terrifying—you can do nothing about it; the whole earth shakes. What about a great tsunami—if a big tsunami were coming at you there is not a thing you could do about it! It’s terrifying. The psalmist is coming up with the most terrifying moments he can think of and saying that even in the midst of these, no matter how bad it gets, we still will not fear. Think about the significance of this. He is not saying that God will make us feel better for a while, or that He will boost our confidence a little bit and help us to hope for the best. He is not like the people who say, “This is a dangerous neighborhood so I have a gun to protect myself.” While the gun might offer a measure of assurance, it does not relieve you of the fear; you still fear that something might happen; there is still fear that someone might break into your house. We can have the greatest military in the world, but we still have fears. But Almighty God—we trust in Him! He actually can relieve our fears.

Verses four and five go on to say,

*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
her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when the
morning dawns.*

He is using an image here of life-giving water. By the image of a river, he shows that the power of the Holy Spirit of God brings gladness. He says God is in their midst; God is with them.

Remember the scene in the life of Jesus when the storm blew up on the Sea of Galilee? The disciples were afraid and thought that their boat was about to capsize and they saw Jesus fast asleep. They woke Jesus who said, “Oh ye of little

faith." What did he mean? "Don't you realize who's in the boat with you? Don't you realize that I'm the One who created the seas, created the wind, and created all this? What are you worried about?" It is the same Jesus who promises to be with us to the close of the age. Jesus raised His hand and calmed the storm. Don't you think that with God at your side, there just might be a chance that He will help you with whatever challenge is before you? In verses six through nine, the psalm talks about how the nations struggled with turmoil in the world. Though the past threats are gone, there are modern challenges today, and the question for us is "How will we face them now?"

Friends, I suggest to you that the greatest threat in America is not from without, but from within. I have said for years that if America ever fell it would not be because of a foreign invasion (though we still must be diligent to make sure of that) but from the rot within. We will do it to ourselves. Part of that rot we can identify. It is called *statism*. Statism is the greatest challenge to the American way of life. The struggle is between what we call statism and Americanism. What is statism? The dictionary definition is "the principal or policy of concentrating extensive economic, political, and related controls in the state at the cost of individual liberty." As R.C. Sproul puts it,

A decline from statehood to statism happens when the government is perceived as or claims to be the ultimate reality. This reality then replaces God as the supreme entity upon which human existence depends.

Our Constitution is clear on the purpose of federal government. (I really think the American people need to reacquaint themselves with our Constitution!) You will notice that not only does the Constitution describe what the federal government is

for, but it also describes its limits. You will notice that the Constitution begins “We the people” not “we the government” because “the government” and “the United States” are not synonymous. “The people” and “the United States” are synonymous—such is the nature of a republic.

Americanism, on the other hand, is described as “a custom, trait, belief, etc., peculiar to the United States of America or its citizens.” This lifts up the fact that the United States is very unique among nations of the world. It doesn't mean that some of these traits don't exist in other places in certain forms, but America is a very unique place and those customs, traits and beliefs include these: emphasis on personal responsibility, opportunity, and achievement. We value a strong work ethic, virtue, and good citizenship. We lift up meaningful, practical, and life-changing religious faith which contributes to good citizenship and which is the basis for virtue. We respect the laws, courts, individual rights, and due process. We jealously guard freedom and liberty as expressed in our Bill of Rights. But my friends, the danger of an increasingly secularized nation is this. If there is no God over government then the government becomes God; there is no One higher to whom to appeal. Think about it; in order to live together as a community in this country, we establish boundaries or laws to keep order. To do that, we necessarily must be willing to limit some of our freedoms. The point being we can't do whatever we want whenever we want to do it; if everyone did, we would have anarchy. So, we have to give up some of our liberty in order to have a covenant with each other in how we are to live. We **do not** give up those freedoms absolutely because when tyranny comes and abuses the public trust, we must take back those freedoms and appeal to heaven because that is where our rights came from in the first place.

There is a passage in the Declaration of Independence with which you are all familiar, “*We are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights.*” The Founders recognized in establishing this republic that our rights come from God, they do not come from the government. The second thing that is stated later on in the Declaration which is very apropos today is that since our rights come from God, the Founders appealed “*to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude (or righteousness) of their intentions.*” In other words, they appealed to the authority higher than the king and the parliament. What we must understand, if there is no heaven, then there is no appeal over the government because the government has become the highest authority. Is that what you want? Is that the kind of nation that we want?

At the time of the Declaration of Independence there was a discussion of the difference between *unalienable* and *inalienable*. Now today we use them interchangeably, but what do they both mean? *Inalienable*, the way Jefferson originally wrote it in his own draft, means that your rights cannot be transferred to someone else. John Adams pointed out that the correct word in the spirit of the Declaration at the time was *unalienable*, which means that rights cannot be taken away. That is what the Founders meant by “*We are endowed by our Creator.*” The reason the rights cannot be taken away and are *unalienable* is because God gave us those rights. That is what is in the final version of the Declaration of Independence.

It is very interesting that Jefferson was strangely prophetic in using the word *inalienable*. In a secularized nation, when we make it a habit to look to the government as the ultimate reality, believing that the government will solve all of our problems and provide all our needs, we voluntarily give up

our freedoms and responsibilities by transferring them to the government willingly and in so doing, we **give back the American Revolution!**

In our summer reading of Eric Metaxas' book *If You Can Keep It*, he talks about the Golden Triangle. In the Golden Triangle, Metaxas illustrated the Founding Fathers' philosophy that there are three things that are dependent on each other: faith, virtue, and freedom. First, if we are to live in a republic, we are dependent upon each other to conduct ourselves responsibly. We need everyone to be a good citizen. The extent to which a person has internal restraints is the extent to which we do not need external restraints. But, to the extent that we do **not** have internal restraints, we must rely on external restraints. That is, the government must impose restraints upon the people to keep order. Therefore, in order to have freedom, in order to have a republic, we must have virtue. And from where does that virtue come? According to the Founding Fathers, it comes from the religious faith that grounded the people.

What is statism's Golden Triangle? Where is it that we have been moving for decades? It starts with *secularism*; we get rid of faith and we get God out of the picture. Faith is replaced with secularism or humanism. Not everything about humanism is necessarily bad, but humanism says that "human reason is the ultimate authority and the ultimate source of truth; it is human centered." We start with that instead of faith. If it is human centered and not based on any revelation from God, then what follows is that virtue is replaced with narcissism. What is narcissism? It is a self-absorption; the temptation of self-indulgence, and an inflated sense of entitlement. This can only be satisfied, then, if we have statism with a powerful

state in charge to provide our needs. It becomes less about freedom or maintaining a republic and more about depending on the state.

If we look to the government for all of our needs and to solve all of our problems, it will need to pay for them—or incur a debt—for taking care of us. The government will have to coerce the people to provide extraordinary amounts of money to do this. Second, the government will have to control what people say and what people think, which ultimately leads to tyranny.

As Shostakovich and hundreds of thousands of people, hundreds of millions of people throughout the ages, have found out, such is the danger of statism. In an attempt to lift up the importance of virtue in our republic, President John F. Kennedy said something very profound that I feel has been lost in the current mindset of America. He was lifting up virtue as opposed to the narcissistic sense of entitlement and the idea of the government being the ultimate provider and savior that we have now. He said, *“Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.”* There is another statement that is attributed to Benjamin Franklin, but while I was unable to verify the original source, even if he didn't say it, it is still true! *“Man will ultimately be governed by God or by tyrants.”*

God speaks in Psalm 46:10, *“Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”* To the secularist, this is a thundering warning: *“Be still! Stop all of your Godless babble and recognize that I am God, and you are not!”* To the believer, it is a tender word of assurance and strength. *“Be still, and know that I am God.”* It is very natural for us to react emotionally to trouble; we are wired in that way. When we face challenges or experience traumas, grief, and

tragedies, our first inclination is to cry out, to lament, to complain, maybe even to accuse and to be enraged. We may even have a crisis of faith. This is an understandable result of our emotions and our fears. But eventually we get to a point where we realize that this is not satisfactory because it is not leading to our healing and ultimately, if it gets to be a new habit, it then leads to bitterness and never-ending fear. God says, eventually you need to stop. Stop lamenting, be quiet, "be still, and know that I am God. Do not fear. I have got this!"

You see, we fear because we put our ultimate trust in the wrong things. Now of course, we are naturally going to take advantage of the worldly resources available to us: doctors, lawyers, teachers, police, military, the economy, livelihood, relationships, and yes even elected officials. That is good. But at the most fundamental level of your heart and soul, I ask you this question. Who or what do you personally, ultimately rely upon? Whom do you trust?

I do not want you to answer the way you think you should. I do not want you to answer the way you think I think you should. I want you to take advantage of this spiritual opportunity for real, honest self-examination. By the evidence of how you actually live and by the true inclinations of your heart, who or what do you ultimately trust? Finally, my friends, God gives us the best answer in the way that Psalm 46 ends in verse 11, *"The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."*

To Him be all praise and glory, trust and gratitude, for he will be exalted among the nations. He will be exalted in all the earth. Amen



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9751 Bonita Beach Road | Bonita Springs, Florida 34135 | 239 992 3233 | fpcbonita.org