

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 2

Monday, March 9th

Psalm 46

For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. According to alamothe. A song.

- 1 God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
- 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
- 3 though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.
- 4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.
- 5 God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
- 6 Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
- 7 The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.
- 8 Come and see what the LORD has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
- 9 He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields 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 Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Points of interest:

- 'According to alamothe'—no one really knows anymore what 'alamothe' is. The commentaries helpfully tell us that it's probably some sort of musical term.
- 'our refuge and strength'—I believe the 'our' here refers to the Israelites, or even more specifically the residents of Jerusalem, the capital city and the site of the temple.
- 'There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God'—this reminds me of Genesis 1, our passage from the first day of the guide. Everything is an empty, wet chaos until God gets involved; but where God is, things are very good. In fact, this psalm reminds me even more of Genesis 2, when God creates the Garden of Eden (in which a multi-streamed river also features prominently). I think the psalmist is presenting Jerusalem as a new Garden of Eden: a well-situated, pleasant, and peaceful place when everywhere else is pretty scary.

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 2

- 'Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall'—it turns out that natural disasters aren't really the problem. The floods, earthquakes, tidal waves, and landslides from earlier in the psalm are metaphors for turmoil in society, politics, and international relations.
- 'the desolations he has brought'—interestingly, the psalmist is most impressed with, and wants everyone to know about, God's incredible power to destroy. Even more interestingly, it turns out that God uses that destructive power to destroy war. It's like God is the natural disaster of natural disasters; God destroys the destructive power of those earthquakes and floods from earlier.
- 'I will be exalted among the nations'—the psalmist is testifying specifically to the peace God has brought to Jerusalem, but it's a benefit God can give to other nations as well. In fact, the psalmist promises that God will, in fact, bring peace everywhere. After all, this psalm tells us that peace comes wherever God lives; and, as Solomon said in his prayer at the temple, God is far too big to dwell in one little place.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Take a moment today and try to sit still and silent, even if for just a minute. Our lives are so busy and noisy that this can be surprisingly hard to do. It can also be surprisingly refreshing. When we are still, it can be easier to hear from and connect with God. After your moment of stillness, reflect on how it went: Was it hard to quiet down? Did any feelings or thoughts come to the surface? Were you bombarded by a running list of to-do items or reminded of a particular situation you are anxious about? Lift those things up to God.
- *For your six:* Is there tumult in the lives of any of your six? Ask God to give them a respite. Pray that they would have peace and calm.
- *For America:* Regardless of your views on war, ask that God would not only put a complete end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but that God would also restore all the lives that have been affected. Pray that our nation would be able to live at peace with other nations. Ask God that any hatred we have towards other nations or hatred that other nations have towards us would somehow be replaced with peace and love.

Tuesday, March 10th

Psalm 67

For the director of music. With stringed instruments. A psalm. A song.

- 1 May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine on us—
- 2 so that your ways may be known on earth,
your salvation among all nations.
- 3 May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.
- 4 May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you rule the peoples with equity
and guide the nations of the earth.
- 5 May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 2

6 The land yields its harvest;
God, our God, blesses us.

7 May God bless us still,
so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.

Points of interest:

- 'May God be gracious to us and bless us'—as with yesterday, I believe the 'us' here is, at least originally, referring to the Israelites. The psalmist is unabashedly asking God to treat the Israelites like they're God's favorites.
- 'so that your ways may be known on earth'— even as the psalmist boldly asks for God's favor, it's with a curious lack of self-regard. This isn't about them. It isn't about how good the Israelites are, but about how good God is, to the Israelites and anyone else who will turn to him.
- 'for you rule the peoples with equity'—this psalm starts with a request for special favor from God, but the thing the psalmist admires most about God is his lack of favoritism. Apparently, God treats everyone equally, as his favorites.
- 'May God bless us still'—the psalmist seems to have a great plan, for everyone involved. They want God to keep on blessing them until absolutely everyone finally relents and asks God for that same blessing.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Take a few minutes to give thanks to God. Thank him for anything in life that feels like a good thing. Also, try to thank God for some of his qualities that you really like. You probably know how good it feels when a friend tells you how much they appreciate something about you. I think God might be a little like us in this regard. Maybe, like us, God considers it a sign of friendship when we tell him things we like about him.
- *For your six:* Are any of your six in the midst of making some pretty big decisions? Pray that God would give them guidance today and that God's ways and wisdom would be available to them.
- *For America:* Pray that our nation would in fact be glad and singing for joy. Ask God that he would fill everyone today with more of his joy. Ask God to take away any persistent gloom, drivenness, or depression that might be lingering over people. Ask that our nation would be one where people experience a special sense of life, satisfaction and joy that only comes from God.

Wednesday, March 11th

Psalm 86

A prayer of David.

1 Hear me, LORD, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.

2 Guard my life, for I am faithful to you;
save your servant who trusts in you.
You are my God; 3 have mercy on me, Lord,
for I call to you all day long.

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 2

- 4 Bring joy to your servant, Lord,
for I put my trust in you.
- 5 You, Lord, are forgiving and good,
abounding in love to all who call to you.
- 6 Hear my prayer, LORD;
listen to my cry for mercy.
- 7 When I am in distress, I call to you,
because you answer me.
- 8 Among the gods there is none like you, Lord;
no deeds can compare with yours.
- 9 All the nations you have made
will come and worship before you, Lord;
they will bring glory to your name.
- 10 For you are great and do marvelous deeds;
you alone are God.
- 11 Teach me your way, LORD,
that I may rely on your faithfulness;
give me an undivided heart,
that I may fear your name.
- 12 I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart;
I will glorify your name forever.
- 13 For great is your love toward me;
you have delivered me from the depths,
from the realm of the dead.
- 14 Arrogant foes are attacking me, O God;
a band of ruthless people seeks my life—
they have no regard for you.
- 15 But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.
- 16 Turn to me and have mercy on me;
show your strength in behalf of your servant
and save the son of a woman
who served you before me.
- 17 Give me a sign of your goodness,
that my enemies may see it and be put to shame,
for you, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.

Points of interest:

- ‘Among the gods there is none like you’—in yesterday’s psalm, the psalmist compared God to kings or judges. Unlike many of the human kings and judges with whom the psalmist is familiar, God judges without bias and rules without favoritism. In today’s psalm, David

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 2

compares the LORD to other gods. The difference between the LORD and other gods, at least in David's experience, is that the LORD has a way of responding when he's in trouble.

- 'All the nations you have made'—it's not just that the LORD compares favorably with other gods. He is, in fact, the true God of every nation. He made them, after all.
- 'give me an undivided heart'—I'm encouraged by the fact that in the same song in which David speaks of his faithfulness and trust he also admits that he has a divided heart. Apparently, he has a hard time completely believing that God does indeed hear and act. He does, however, trust God enough to admit his weakness and to ask God for help in overcoming it.
- 'you have delivered me from the depths, from the realm of the dead'—like in Psalm 22 from last week, David is trusting God with his very life. The neediness and dependence David expresses here is ultimately a need we all share: we can't save our own lives. Maybe that's why David is so confident that ultimately all nations will turn to God. God is the only one who can help us with our biggest problem.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* You might not wake up each morning feeling, 'I am poor and needy', but pretend for a second you are. Our society places high value on self-sufficiency, and we can live much of our lives without feeling like we need a single soul. God actually welcomes our sense of need. Try telling God that you want to rely on him and ask him to come through for you in an area where you really need it.
- *For your six:* Ask God to protect your six from anyone who is making their lives difficult. Pray that any plans for their harm would come to nothing.
- *For America:* Thank God for all the different nations he has made. Ask him that all the nations of the world that are represented here in America would prosper and thrive. Pray that America would be a place where people from all the many different nations of the world would be able to connect with and find God in a way that makes sense and honors the nations they come from.

Thursday, March 12th

Psalm 87

Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm. A song.

- 1 He has founded his city on the holy mountain.
- 2 The LORD loves the gates of Zion
more than all the other dwellings of Jacob.
- 3 Glorious things are said of you,
city of God:
- 4 "I will record Rahab and Babylon
among those who acknowledge me—
Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—
and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.'"
- 5 Indeed, of Zion it will be said,
"This one and that one were born in her,
and the Most High himself will establish her."

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 2

6 The LORD will write in the register of the peoples:

"This one was born in Zion."

7 As they make music they will sing,

"All my fountains are in you."

Points of interest:

- 'the gates of Zion'—Zion is another way to refer to Jerusalem. Technically speaking, Zion is the name of the mountain on which Jerusalem rests.
- 'more than all the other dwellings of Jacob'—Jacob, remember, is another name for Israel. In the Exodus passage we read last week, God promised that Israel would be his 'treasured possession out of all the nations.' Here, the sons of Korah are saying that Jerusalem is God's treasured possession out of all of Israel. That makes Jerusalem pretty special.
- 'Rahab and Babylon'—Rahab (aka Egypt), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre (Phoenicia, in modern-day Lebanon), and Cush (modern-day Sudan) are all relatively powerful foreign nations. Rahab, Babylon, and Cush are military powers. Tyre is the most powerful trading nation of the ancient Mediterranean. The Philistines are a local group of people with whom the Israelites routinely fought for dominance of the same land: Philistia or Israel, depending on how you looked at it. The giant Goliath, whom David fought, was a Philistine.
- 'This one was born in Zion'—these other nations might be viewed as rivals, but the sons of Korah consider them neighbors instead. More than that, in God's eyes, all of these other nations are residents of Zion. They're not illegal aliens, temporary guests, or even holders of green cards, either; they're somehow actually born citizens of Zion. The sons of Korah go a long way to tell us just how wonderful a place Jerusalem is. Then, they tell us that everyone, from just about anywhere, can be a natural-born citizen of this wonderful place: citizenship is not exclusive.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* This psalm tells us that it's as if every town is God's hometown. Take a moment to pray for the city where you were born. Ask God to bring prosperity to that city, and take a moment to thank God for any of the ways that your upbringing in that city has influenced who you are today.
- *For your six:* Pray that Boston, Cambridge (or wherever your six might live) would be a good place of residence. Pray that God would establish himself in the cities where your six live—that they would be places of safety, peace and unity. If any of your six live far away from family or where they grew up, ask that God would make their city of residence feel like home for the time being.
- *For America:* The people of Rahab and Babylon and those other places lived far away from the temple, and most of them probably knew little directly of the God of Israel. Yet, God recognized them all as his own people, born in the shadow of the temple. Pray that God would recognize and honor any amount of faith that people have in him, whether or not those people go to church. Pray also that God would give them friends with whom they can explore their faith and their spiritual questions.

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 2

Friday, March 13th

Psalm 98

A psalm.

- 1 Sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.
- 2 The LORD has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.
- 3 He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to the house of Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.
- 4 Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
- 5 make music to the LORD with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
- 6 with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the LORD, the King.
- 7 Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
- 8 Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
- 9 let them sing before the LORD,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.

Points of interest:

- 'Sing to the LORD a new song'—none of the old songs quite capture it. They need to come up with a new song to describe just how good God is.
- 'to the house of Israel/all the ends of the earth'—during the past several days of reading the psalms, you may have noticed that a common feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism: saying roughly the same thing several different times. It plays the same role in Hebrew poetry that rhyming or meter does in English poetry. So, for instance, in verse 4, we are told to 'Shout for joy,' and to 'Burst into song.' Well, in verse 3, we get a very interesting example of parallelism: the house of Israel and the ends of the earth are treated as synonyms. God remembers his promises to Israel, and he shows his salvation to all the ends of the earth.
- 'Let the rivers clap their hands'—this joy even goes beyond humanity. Rivers and mountains join in.
- 'for he comes to judge the earth'—it seems we tend to think of God's judgment as bad news, or something to fear. But here, all of this happy singing on the part of Israel, the

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 2

ends of the earth, the rivers, the mountains, and the seas is because God is on his way to judge the earth. I think this yearning for God's judgment comes from a keen awareness that, apart from some intervention, much is wrong with the world. But when a loving and faithful God is truly in charge, he can set things right in a way that's best for everyone.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Are there any areas in your life where you feel like stuck? Any things that you would just like to go differently? Any problems that just don't seem to go away? Ask God to show you his salvation.
- *For your six:* The psalmist remarks about all the marvelous things God has done. God seems eager to reveal himself in big ways. Pray that God would do that for your six. Ask him to intervene in their lives in some remarkable way.
- *For America:* You may have noticed that there are some God-sized problems in the world right now, problems that are too big for even a nation as powerful as ours: global warming, AIDS, financial meltdown, economic collapse, and more. Choose one of these overwhelming problems, and pray that God would show his love, faithfulness, and saving power in the midst of it.

Saturday, March 14th

Psalm 138

Of David.

- 1 I will praise you, LORD, with all my heart;
before the "gods" I will sing your praise.
- 2 I will bow down toward your holy temple
and will praise your name
for your unfailing love and your faithfulness,
for you have so exalted your solemn decree
that it surpasses your fame.
- 3 When I called, you answered me;
you greatly emboldened me.
- 4 May all the kings of the earth praise you, LORD,
when they hear what you have decreed.
- 5 May they sing of the ways of the LORD,
for the glory of the LORD is great.
- 6 Though the LORD is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly,
but he takes notice of the proud from afar.
- 7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life.
You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes;
with your right hand you save me.
- 8 The LORD will vindicate me;
your love, LORD, endures forever—
do not abandon the works of your hands.

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 2

Points of interest:

- May all the kings of the earth praise you, LORD'—in earlier psalms, the nations are invited to praise God because he rules the earth better than the kings do. Here, the kings are invited to do the praising. This reminds me of the Queen of Sheba (from last Saturday), who traveled all the way to Jerusalem to hear about this god who could help her rule her nation well.
- 'before the "gods" I will sing your praise'—we saw the LORD compared to other gods in a previous psalm. Here, the gods are David's audience. Over the course of these psalms, we've seen news of God's goodness spread from the Israelites to all the nations of the earth. In yesterday's psalm, we saw nature join the singing. Is David inviting even rival gods to join the chorus?
- 'The LORD will vindicate me'—following God hasn't been a completely smooth or easy path for David. Apparently, from his reference to the proud, people are tempted to gloat over some trouble David has gotten himself into. But David believes that these apparent mistakes were in fact acts of faith, and he fully expects that his faith will be borne out in the end.
- 'do not abandon the works of your hands'—this reminds me of our first passage, from Genesis. God has made David, and all people, in God's image, and commissioned us to fill the earth with goodness. God is committed to seeing that purpose through.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Pray that God would give you eyes to see and a heart to care for any of the 'lowly' around you. Try paying attention during your day to people you might not normally see. Maybe even try striking up a conversation with them.
- *For your six:* Ask one of your six if there are any ways you could pray on their behalf. Or ask your six if they would mind praying for you. Pray that you and they would find, as David did, that God is eager to answer when we call.
- *For America:* Pray again today for everyone in our country who is in a position of authority (the 'kings' of America)—executives, celebrities, congressmen. Pray that these kings and queens of American would see and recognize God's goodness and power. Pray that they would hear from God and that he would bless them and answer them.

Sunday, March 15th

Isaiah 2:1-5

1 This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

2 In the last days
the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

3 Many peoples will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 2

The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

4 He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

5 Come, house of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Points of interest:

- ‘This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw’—today, we move out of the Psalms and begin a week of reading the prophets. Old Testament prophets were like God’s special ambassadors to Israel and to other nations. While they did often predict the future, their primary purpose was to interpret current events through God’s eyes. Isaiah, the prophet we’ll spend the most time with, lived in Jerusalem a couple of hundred years after David. Under David and Solomon, the nation of Israel had a brief period of peace, prosperity, and local dominance. After Solomon’s reign, the Israelites fell to bickering among themselves, splitting into two feuding nations (Israel and Judah) which were embroiled in constant warfare, in ever shifting alliances with the smaller neighboring nations. During Isaiah’s time, the political situation was further complicated by growing tensions among Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, the major powers of the region. Israel and Judah were right in the middle of these three great nations, which meant that control of Israel and Judah (and their other neighbors) is what was being fought about. In fact, the battles between these giants often happened on Israelite or Judean territory.
- ‘Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up”’—during the time of Solomon, the temple at Jerusalem was something to be seen: it was an architectural marvel itself, and it was the center of worship of a God who seemed to bring remarkable fortune to the kings who worshipped him. During Isaiah’s time, both politically and artistically, Jerusalem wasn’t really anything special. The big cities of Assyrian and Babylon were far more impressive. But Isaiah is promising here that Jerusalem’s best days are actually still ahead.
- ‘so that we may walk in his paths’—God is like a guide or a trailblazer. He’s up ahead, scouting the way to a life worth living.
- ‘They will beat their swords into plowshares’—peace is one of the things God is leading toward. All of the energy that’s going into military technology and arms production will instead go toward more constructive pursuits. God is leading the nations out of conflict and back to humanity’s original purpose: filling the earth with goodness, order, and abundance.
- ‘Come, house of Jacob’—while all the other nations are streaming toward Jerusalem, the Israelites are lagging behind. Isaiah has to spur them on to keep up with everyone else. They’re the keepers of the temple, but somehow they don’t understand the big prize that’s waiting there.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* When the ‘many peoples’ from this passage are perplexed about where to go and what to do, they seek out God, and he gives them the guidance they need. Think of one

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 2

specific puzzle or problem you're facing today. It could be a big deal that's been on your mind, or it could just be a small question about your day. Take a moment to ask God if he has any advice for you; make sure you pause for a second to listen for an answer.

- *For your six:* In this passage, the Israelites are the ostensible experts about God and his ways, but it's the other nations that take the lead in pursuing him. I bet, even if they're not terribly religious, that your six have plenty of worthwhile thoughts about God and life. Why not try asking at least one of your six if they have any spiritual insights they'd like to share with you? Maybe the item you thought of from 'For you' would be a good place to start.
- *For America:* America is often in the forefront of the world's technological development, in both swords and plowshares, as it were. Pray for God's blessings on our innovation, particularly in peaceful and constructive pursuits. Ask God to support the work of researchers in curing disease, using better forms of energy, and other new technologies that could be a big benefit to us, and to the rest of the world.