

How Coveting Toilet Paper Became a Thing
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 Psalm 46

I've seen enough apocalyptic disaster movies to know that the plots of most of them follow a predictable formula. Most revolve around humanity's struggle to avoid extinction in the face of a global catastrophic shortage of some resource. In "The Road" it was a shortage of food. In "Waterworld" melting ice caps covered the continents with oceans, creating a scarcity of dry land for people to live on. In "Mad Max" it was water that there was not enough of. Or gasoline, depending on which Mad Max movie you're talking about.

In no movie ever was the key to the fate of the human race discovered... in the toilet paper aisle of your local supermarket. And yet, here we are. The coronavirus pandemic has triggered panic buying and price gouging of--toilet paper. One explanation for why coveting toilet paper has become a thing may be that we are genetically wired to hoard stuff as a natural survival measure. Like the way squirrels prepare for winter by gathering and storing acorns. The possibility of being quarantined indefinitely triggers a fear of deprivation of essentials like food, water, and bathroom tissue.

But there is also a psychological reason behind the impulse to suddenly stockpile toilet paper. Sometimes when we are confronted with a threat over which we have no control, we grasp for some other thing over which we can have some measure of control. So, if you are powerless against a pandemic for which there is as yet no cure, stockpiling toilet paper can make you feel that you have some control over your circumstances. Even if that over which you do have control is irrelevant with regard to the real problem.

Psalm 46 is a guide to coping with the vulnerability we feel when the world seems like it is spiraling out of control. And that response is right there in the very first word of the Psalm.

God.

The first verse uses three words to explain why God is the solution to whatever we fear. "God is our *refuge* and *strength*, a very present *help* in times of trouble."

Many of the Psalms describe situations of being helpless when confronted with distress and danger, and 48 of them mention God being a refuge in those times. A refuge is a place of safety and protection. Like a sanctuary or a fortress; as in the hymn, "A mighty fortress is our God." To claim God as our refuge is to trust God to be our protection when we feel threatened.

The second word of that verse tells us *why* God is our refuge. That word is strength. God is our refuge and our strength. Whenever we feel powerless and weak, we can remember that it is not by our own strength that we can prevail, but the strength of God; the God who created all

things and so is stronger than anything that imperils us. God is always in control, even when we feel like we are at the mercy of events that are beyond our control.

Lastly, God is “a very present help in times of trouble.” In times of trouble, it can *appear* that God is absent. That we are on our own, left to our own devices. But this psalm reassures us emphatically that God is very present when life tells us that we are on our own.

Therefore—in other words, because God is our refuge, our strength and our very present help—we have good reason for not being paralyzed by our fears. Even though the earth should change. Though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, and its waters roar and foam.

To frame this picture in its proper perspective it helps to understand that Ancient Near Eastern people believed the world we live on to be suspended in an immense ocean, with mountains anchoring it securely in place. Mountains were also believed to support the sky over their heads. So, the mountains shaking and trembling would have described more than just any ordinary natural disaster. It would have been like every disaster movie from Armageddon to World War Z all rolled into one conglomeration of catastrophes. It’s a terrifying image of the worst thing that could possibly happen.

But even though you are confronted with the worst possible circumstances in life; even though your world is shaken and you have no control over what happens next—there is a good reason to not be totally overcome by fear. Why? Not because there is not a bona fide cause to be fearful. Not because we have a plan to save ourselves and are all stocked up on toilet paper and Lysol. The reason not to fear has nothing to do with it not being so bad, or us being able to ride things out on our own resources. It is because God is our refuge, our strength, and our ever present help in trouble.

The next group of verses in Psalm 46 present a side by side contrast between two states of mind. The first pair of verses reads,

"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 Jewish people imagined God’s dwelling place to be the city of Jerusalem, where the holy Temple was located. But these verses aren’t really about a literal geographic location where God is found. What’s being described is the composure that is found in acknowledging God’s presence wherever you may be. The language of these verses radiate with a sense of security. A river that brings gladness. A place of stability that is not easily moved by events around it. Help that comes with the dawn, no matter how dark the night before has been.

Now listen to the difference from the tone of those images and what is described in the next verse:

"The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter."

Being in an uproar and tottering in the face of a crisis is a far cry from being immovable and assured of God's very present help in times of trouble. "The nations" referred to the Gentile peoples in Hebrew scripture. From the Jewish perspective the "nations and kingdoms of the world" represented those who did not take refuge in God, but trusted in idols of their own making which had no power to deliver them.

We still have our idols that we turn to when we are fearful about the future. They bear names like Possessions, Power and Privilege. Lately, it would seem that Charmin and Cottonelle have joined that pantheon. When the mountains shake and the seas roar in our lives, fear drives us in the direction of the idols that we rely upon. When fear is unchecked by faith in something beyond our own survival skills, it kills our capacity for compassion towards others and kindness in our relationships.

It's worth noting that this Psalm portrays God a warrior going into battle. But the fight is not against a human enemy. It is a battle to silence the instruments of conflict and war. God is pictured as breaking bows and shattering spears.

Social distancing has become the watchword during this pandemic. Let's not forget that social distancing is a double-edged instrument; one that lessens the odds of both our getting the disease and our giving the disease to others. Social distancing then, is an expression of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Fear generates a kind of unholy social distancing; where we become so obsessed with our needs that we feel justified in distancing ourselves from seeking the welfare of others. Where competition with our neighbor for our own personal benefit takes priority over cooperation for the benefit of all.

The Psalm concludes with the invitation to, "Be still and know that I am God". It's a comforting invitation. But in the original Hebrew it is more like an admonition. The *Be Still* in that verse is more accurately translated in the imperative voice. Something like "Stop doing what you're doing" and know that I am God! Which makes perfect sense, because as long as we are reacting to the chaos around us out of fear we are refusing to truly know God as our refuge.

So, what is it that you and I may be doing in this crisis that we need to stop doing so that we can be restored to the serenity and sanity that is only found in the refuge God offers? For some, it might mean to stop burying our head in the sand about the seriousness of what is happening

and by disregarding prudent cautions putting ourselves and others at risk. Others may need to stop and take a step back from the hysteria of hoarding things like toilet paper in order to feel in control of our destiny. Whatever it might be for you, the answer is the same.

Be Still!

Be still, so that you can know—know it in the depths of you that are deeper than those biologically programmed fears—that God is your refuge. Not the toilet paper aisle in your local supermarket.

Be still and know that God's strength is stronger than the storm swirling around you.

And, as fear is conquered by faith in God as your refuge, may you discover the courage to offer refuge to others.

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