



Praying Psalm 46 for Resilience

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Praying the Psalms is not a new idea.

The most basic internet inquiry proves the point. When asked about “praying the Psalms,” Google offers about nineteen million results for the curious searcher today and includes numerous academic and devotional books, instructional videos from YouTube, blogs reflecting on various methods of praying the Psalms, and more.¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the book of Psalms the “prayerbook of the church;” Martin Luther before him referred to it as a “manual” for

¹ Out of this mixed multitude of resources on praying the Psalms, I am happy to recommend the following, extremely non-exhaustive list: Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1982); Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2001); Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, *Journey Through the Psalms* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006); Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011); Gabby Cudjoe-Wilkes and Andrew Wilkes, *Psalms for Black Lives: Reflections for the Work of Liberation* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2022).

Praying the psalms is not a new idea. There is biblical and historical precedence for the practice. In this article, Poe Hays uses the community confession of Psalm 46 to explore this connection between the Psalms, prayer, and the building of resilience.

prayer, and members of Christian religious orders have long prayed or sung the Psalms as part of their daily rhythms. In her memoir, *The Cloister Walk*, poet Kathleen Norris reflects on the restorative power of praying the Psalms in this way during her time as a Benedictine oblate.²

Even the biblical canon itself bears witness to the notion of praying the Psalms. Jesus prayed psalms from the cross (Matt 27:46, Luke 23:46; cf. Psalms 22, 31). The Chronicler records that David appointed the Asaphites to pray psalms as part of their ministry before the ark of the covenant (1 Chr 16:7–37; cf. Psalms 96, 105, 106). Individuals such as Miriam, Hannah, Jeremiah, and Mary prayed in psalm form if not specific psalms.

Throughout the dramatic changes the world has undergone over the millennia, the Psalms have remained a foundational element in the Judeo-Christian prayer tradition. The reasons for such enduring importance have to do, of course, with the Psalter's canonical status (which means we cannot simply ignore them) and beautiful poetry (which means we do not *want* to ignore them). But praying the Psalms represents more than an example of ecclesiastical influence or aesthetic exercise. Indeed, one can argue that persistence in praying the Psalms is responsible in significant ways for the survival of the Judeo-Christian tradition itself. David Carr highlights this function of the biblical texts as a whole in his book *Holy Resilience*, and Nancy deClaissé-Walford draws out the particular ways the Psalter—as a collection of cultic material that the community regularly used in worship—contributed to the identity formation and preservation of the children of Israel through a long history of exile, displacement, and occupation.³

Praying the Psalms is therefore an act of worship that honors the God to whom the pray-er directs her words, but it can also be an act of resistance and resilience in the face of the ongoing challenges of life in the world. Such prayers take a variety of forms, as the diversity of the Psalter illustrates. In this article, I will use the community confession

² Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverside Books, 1996), 90–107.

³ David Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 129–144.

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RESILIENCE: A FEW NOTES

In a world plagued by literal plagues, as well as by political division and violence, economic exploitation and oppression, systemic racism, natural disasters of all kinds, military invasions and state-sponsored genocides, and more and more—the topic of resilience and how to inculcate it in society is a popular one. The scientific study of resilience is still *relatively* inchoate, however, and has primarily focused on children/adolescents, on Western societies (or at least Western perspectives), and on individuals rather than on communities.⁴ Even as studies are beginning to expand beyond these initial limitations, however, several consistent themes have emerged as characteristics of resilient individuals—individuals who are able to bend in the storms of life without breaking, and perhaps even grow stronger because of the storms they survive. Predictors of this kind of resilience include the existence of supportive relationships (including relationship with a higher power), the capacity to balance realism with optimism, a strong sense of meaning and purpose, and attention to one’s emotional and physical wellness. Working in concert, these kinds of protective factors increase the likelihood of successful navigation of life’s challenges.⁵

Significantly, psychologists and other scholars within the realm of health sciences recognize that resilience is something that can be acquired and developed. In other words, individuals—and, by extension, whole communities—can build up resilience over time.⁶ In the following reading of Ps 46, I highlight how the use of this psalm text

⁴ See, for example, Michael Ungar, *The Social Ecology of Resilience: A Handbook of Theory and Practice* (New York: Springer, 2012), 1–3.

⁵ Ann S. Masten, *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2015), 147–150. For an article that offers insights from several different approaches to resilience studies, see Steven M. Southwick et al., “Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives,” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 5, no. 1 (2014), 1–14, with the discussion summarized on 11–12.

⁶ Steven M. Southwick, Dennis S. Charney, and Jonathan M. DePierro, *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life’s Greatest Challenges* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 3–23.

in the worship of the faith community can serve as a contributing factor to this building up of resilience.

READING THE RECEPTION OF PSALM 46 FOR RESILIENCE

The superscriptions in the Psalter are not original to the psalms themselves. Evidence from both the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint (LXX) Psalter shows that superscriptions varied from psalter to psalter within the ancient worshipping community. For example, the Septuagint Psalter (which continues in usage today within the Orthodox Church) includes many more “of David” psalms than are identified as such in the Masoretic Text (MT) from which most English Hebrew Bibles are translated (for example, Psalms 33, 43, 91, and 93–99 are labeled as “of David” in the LXX but not in the MT) as well as an additional psalm with a Davidic superscription related to the fight against Goliath (Psalm 151). Though these superscriptions may not give direct insight into the original authors or settings of the psalm compositions, they do reflect some of the earliest interpretations and applications of the psalms by the worshipping community that collected, preserved, and used these texts.⁷

The superscription attached to Psalm 46 clearly contextualizes the present form of the psalm as part of the worship practices of ancient Israel:

Of the one who directs music – of the sons of Korah –
according to the “young women” (Heb., *‘alamoth*) – a song.⁸

This heading associates the psalm with some kind of musical setting (see 1 Chr 15:20), with the leadership of some kind of musical director(s), and with temple worship (see 1 Chr 9:17–19).⁹ While we must piece together exactly what the elusive superscriptions indicate about the way the ancient community used this psalm and others, the

⁷ See, for example, Brevard S. Childs, “Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16 (1971): 137–150; Louis C. Jonker, “Revisiting the Psalm Headings: Second Temple Levitical Propaganda?,” in *Psalms and Liturgy*, ed. Dirk J. Human and C. J. A. Vos (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 102–122.

⁸ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁹ For more about the *‘alamoth* label and what it might indicate about the earliest musical settings of the psalm, see Rolf A. Jacobson, “Psalm 46: Translation, Structure, and Theology,” *Word & World* 40 (2020): 311.

implication that Psalm 46 functioned as part of corporate worship—part of verbal engagement with a deity, which we might call “prayer”—points to a basic way that it contributed to the building of resilience within this community apart from any of the specific content of the psalm. Namely, by being a text for religious use that directs those who engage with it toward relationship with both God (to and for whom the psalm is uttered) and the human community (who share in the uttering).

The superscription of Psalm 46 highlights the psalm’s status as an artifact of corporate religious practice and, as such, an important resource for resilience. As Kenneth Pargament and Jeremy Cummings have demonstrated, “Religion represents a potent resilience factor,” due in large part to its incorporation of other resilience factors such as social support, a sense of meaning and purpose, and self-efficacy.¹⁰ The superscriptions in the Psalter(s) bear witness to the inclusion of these texts in the religious life of the ancient worshipping communities, which then contributed to the survival of those worshipping communities despite generations of national tragedies and traumas.

READING PSALM 46 FOR RESILIENCE

The opening verses of the psalm proper resound with the confident trust of the worshipping community—despite things literally falling apart around them:

God is our refuge and our strength;
God is always found to be a helper in distressing situations.
Therefore, we will not fear when the earth shake,
Or when the mountains sway in the heart of the seas—
Its waters roar and foam,

¹⁰ Kenneth I. Pargament and Jeremy Cummings, “Anchored by Faith: Religion as a Resilience Factor,” in *Handbook of Adult Resilience*, ed. John W. Reich, Alex J. Zautra, and John Stuart Hall (New York: The Guilford Press, 2010), 207. See also Glenn R. Schiraldi, *The Resilience Workbook: Essential Skills to Recover from Stress, Trauma, and Adversity* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2017), 4–5; Christopher C. H. Cook and Nathan H. White, “Resilience and the Role of Spirituality,” in *The Oxford Textbook of Public Mental Health*, ed. Dinesh Bhugra et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 513–520.

The mountains quake with its noisy pride. *Selah*. (Psalm 46:1–3)¹¹

This initial confession functions in several important ways that ultimately contribute to the building of resilience.

Participating in healthy relationships that allow for affection, exploration, and expressions of doubt and anger is a critical aspect of human development across generations.

First, the first-person *plural* pronoun reminds worshippers that they are part of a larger community. The Hebrew word order of this phrase actually places this pronoun in an emphatic position: literally, “God—to *us* is refuge and strength.” Across myriad diverse studies of resilience, social support emerges as perhaps the most consistent protective factor.¹² Participating in healthy relationships that allow for affection, exploration, and expressions of doubt and anger is a critical aspect of human development across generations. Children raised in contexts of secure attachment are more likely to become parents of children who are raised in contexts of secure attachment. The confidence arising from this kind of relational security creates environments in which creativity and productivity can flourish.¹³

A second way these opening verses of Psalm 46 contribute to the building of resilience is really an extension of the first point: these verses articulate confidence in secure attachment to a God who is able and willing to provide stability, support, and defense in the midst of life’s tumultuous uncertainties. The next section of the psalm builds on the initial confession of God’s protective presence:

The river! Its streams make the city of God rejoice—

¹¹ I will use the English versification throughout.

¹² Southwick, Charney, and DePierro, *Resilience*, 107. See also Lori A. Zoellner, Norah C. Feeny, and Nina K. Rytwinski, “The Crucial Role of Social Support,” in *Facilitating Resilience and Recovery Following Trauma*, ed. Lori A. Zoellner and Norah C. Feeny (New York: The Guilford Press, 2014), 291–321.

¹³ Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014) 107–124; Masten, *Ordinary Magic*, 150–153.

The holy dwelling place of the Most High.
God is in her midst, and she will not be shaken;
God helps her at the dawning of the morning.
Nations roar, kingdoms shake,
[God] gives forth his voice, the earth melts away. (Psalm
46:4–6)

These words from the psalmist provide a “script” for the worshipping community to remind them of the special divine-human relationship that exists and, through group repetition over time (remember the first-person plural pronouns!), to build increased trust in its reality. As Brent Strawn has observed, “The Psalms are... not only a witness to the divine-human relationship but an instantiation of the same—a locus where God and humans meet, back then and there and here and now.”¹⁴

The psalm’s refrain captures again this double sense of community solidarity (i.e., “we are in this together”) and divine support (i.e., “God is taking care of us”):

The LORD of heavenly armies is with us,
A fortified refuge for us is the God of Jacob. *Selah*. (Psalm
46:7, 11)

Along with reiterating important truths for the community, which serves to reinforce the confidence that comes with those truths, this refrain could be seen to function like a mantra that facilitates emotional and physical self-regulation. Hyperarousal resulting from fear, stress, rage, or other strong negative emotions prevents the kind of clear, adaptive thinking that accompanies resilience. “As long as we manage to stay calm,” Bessel van der Kolk writes, “we can choose how we want to respond.”¹⁵ Perhaps because of intuitive recognition of this biological reality, healers in societies throughout time and around the globe have employed practices such as meditation, yoga, breathing, and chanting that help regulate the body and its systems, which

¹⁴ Brent A. Strawn, “Poetic Attachment: Psychology, Psycholinguistics, and the Psalms,” in *Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 414.

¹⁵ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 269.

promotes survival.¹⁶ The verbal repetition of core beliefs, such as the one Psalm 46's refrain articulates, can function similarly. If refrains in the psalms do indeed point to antiphonal usage by the worshipping community (as many scholars believe), this usage that would compound the protective factors of religion, relationship, and community ritual in building resilience.¹⁷

The refrain of Psalm 46 is an optimistic one, but it is what psychologists call a “realistic optimism” that coexists alongside the recognition that the community will experience distressing situations, that the earth will shake, and the nations will be a threat. Life is often more challenging than we wish it were, and often in ways that we do not understand.

The refrain of Psalm 46 is an optimistic one, but it is what psychologists call a “realistic optimism” that coexists alongside the recognition that the community will experience distressing situations, that the earth will shake, and the nations will be a threat. Life is often more challenging than we wish it were, and often in ways that we do not understand. The psalmist leads worshippers in acknowledging this reality—but also in embracing a confident hope (or optimism) that God will indeed provide refuge, provision, and victory despite the unescapable challenges of life. The positive thinking embedded within the psalmist's praise in Psalm 46 offers the worshipping community another resource for resilience since this kind of thinking stimulates the production of dopamine—literally making you feel

¹⁶ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 207–231; Peter A. Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 112–131.

¹⁷ See Jacobson, “Psalm 46,” 318; van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 215–217. For another example of how psalmic refrains might function in the context of trauma, healing, resilience, and the worshipping community, see John Garland and Rebecca W. Poe Hays, “Trauma Healing through Psalms 136–139: A Trauma-Informed Canon-Critical Framework,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 46 (2024): 103–130.

better. Individuals who are able to maintain a realistic optimism have proved happier, less stressed, and more resilient.¹⁸

The optimism that Psalm 46 encapsulates feeds an additional protective factor because optimism and other positive emotions builds the capacity to think rationally, creatively, and flexibly.¹⁹ Flexibility is at the heart of resilience: you bend, but you don't break. Resilient individuals possess the capacity to reframe and transform. Notably, Walter Brueggemann and Bill Bellinger point out that Psalm 46:4 reflects a "remarkable transition" wherein "the chaotic and destructive waters in the first stanza now become a nourishing stream, watering and nourishing Zion."²⁰ The psalmist thus leads the worshipping community in refocusing attention from waters of death to waters of life, perhaps even subtly referencing ancient Near Eastern mythology (such as *Enuma Elish*) and the notion that God's work in creation was a taming of the chaos waters (see Genesis 1, Psalm 104).

As if the psalmist anticipates challenges to or doubts of her call for optimistic trust in God's protection against the forces of chaos (both natural and human) the psalm's final stanza invites worshippers to remember and reflect on experience—and perhaps on history:

Come and see the wondrous works of the LORD
Who has set out desolations on the earth,
Who stops wars to the end of the earth—he shatters the
bow and cuts off the spear,
The carts of war he burns with fire.
“Let go and know that I am God—
I will be exalted over the nations, I will be exalted over the
earth!
The LORD of heavenly armies is with us,
A fortified refuge for us is the God of Jacob. *Selah*. (Psalm
46:8–11)

¹⁸ Southwick, Charney, and DePierro, *Resilience*, 27–47; Schiraldi, *The Resilience Workbook*, 123–131.

¹⁹ Southwick, Charney, and DePierro, *Resilience*, 32–33, 175–192. See also Masten, *Ordinary Magic*, 154–156; Schiraldi, *The Resilience Workbook*, 211–225.

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann and W. H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 217.

The two plural imperatives with which this portion of the psalm begins implies sensory, experiential knowledge of God's active presence and all the good that presence entails for worshippers. For worshippers who might find themselves doubting the reality of what Psalm 46:1–7 describes in somewhat mythic terms, this direct address calls worshippers to look around them for something more tangible. God *has already* (a perfect verb) brought victory over enemies, the psalmist declares in verse 8, a historical memory into which the present community can tap to build assurance about God's ongoing ability to bring violence to a halt (participles and imperfect verbs).

Psalm 46 is not a historical psalm like Psalms 78, 105, 106, and 136, but it does assume historical memories that reinforce belief in God and identity as God's special people, both of which feed into resilience. The psalmist's general statements about God's presence, protection, and provision can also be concretized in memories of particular manifestations of God's presence (as with Moses in Egypt), protection (as in the entry into Canaan) and provision (as in the wilderness wanderings).²¹ The very generality of Psalm 46's "remembrances" permits worshippers in myriad contexts and times to embrace the psalmist's claims as their own: what God did for [fill-in-the-blank] then, God can and will do for me now.²²

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²¹ O'Kelly, "Stillness and Salvation," 377–380.

²² See Rebecca Whitten Poe Hays, "Singing Stories Together: Relationship and Storytelling as Resources for Resilience in the Book of Psalms," in *Biblical and Theological Visions of Resilience: Pastoral and Clinical Insights*, eds. Christopher C. H. Cook and Nathan H. White (London: Routledge, 2020), 33–34.

God reinforces the relationship with worshippers by speaking directly to them with unquestioned assurance about God's own identity (v. 10).²³ The response to God's speech is the repeated refrain through which the psalmist and her community affirm God's claims (v. 11), thereby grounding themselves squarely in the larger narrative of the God of Jacob's engagement with the world.²⁴

CONCLUSION

Psalm 46 represents a complex interweaving of various protective factors that facilitate the building of resilience in the worshipping community who speaks this prayer to God. The psalmist (and the worshippers who give voice to the psalmist's words) articulates settled belief in and secure relationship with God, as well as a sense of special chosen-ness by this God that provides meaning to life and hope for the future. The psalmist and those the psalmist leads in worship become part of God's story as they pray this psalm—and God's story is a story of strength and stability even when the whole world is in chaos.

Psalm 46 has continued to resource resilience for worshippers long past the closure of the canonical Psalter. It has become a regular part of Jewish prayers and is similarly included in the normal rotation of prayer services in both Catholic and Protestant traditions. It appears in the Revised Common Lectionary as a reading for both Christ the King Sunday and Reformation Day (likely due to its close association with Martin Luther and the hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"). The bold statements of trust, hope, and faith in Psalm 46 have provided comfort for those in the aftermath of disaster and trauma. Psalm 46 gives us words to pray, and these prayerful words in turn give us resilience. ⊕

²³ While God's words (and the two imperatives in Ps 46:8) could be understood as directed primarily to the roaring enemy nations, the preponderance of first-person plural pronouns in the surrounding verses (vv. 1, 2, 7, 11) is more suggestive of address to the worshipping community. The worshipping community is certainly the community that would have actually heard the speech and so benefited from its message (both direct and indirect).

²⁴ Schreiter, "Reading Biblical Texts through the Lens of Resilience," 202.

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