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BE STILL, AND OBSERVE THE TEXT

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Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of Transcendental Meditation, appeals to Psalm 46:10 to support his teaching that “God-realization” is the answer to suffering: “Christ said, ‘Be still and know that I am God.’ Be still and know that you are God and when you know that you are God you will begin to live Godhood, and living Godhood there is no reason to suffer.”¹

Popular New Age author and teacher Deepak Chopra explains that the first step to knowing God, the “infinite potential,” is “to sit down quietly, close your eyes and do nothing and listen to the silence within you. As the Bible says, ‘Be still and know that I am God,’ which literally means if you go in the gap within your thoughts, which is the window to your soul, you start to eavesdrop on the cosmic mind.”²

Other teachers suggest that this verse is talking about “Christian” meditation, which is “the tradition of silence, stillness and simplicity....‘Be still and know that I am God,’ as one of the psalms puts it. And to come to this stillness...you take a single word or short phrase, and you repeat this word or phrase continually over and over again in your mind and heart.”³

Christian teachers, as well, say this verse is a call to stop all our distracting activity and focus quietly on God in prayer. Some say that it tells us how to get closer to God and hear from Him during dark times when He seems distant and silent.

Is Psalm 46:10 really telling us to contemplate our own Godhood, or to stop our activities and thoughts and engage in some form of quiet meditation, contemplation, prayer, or worship in order to get closer to God? How should we understand this verse in its context?

Looking at the Text. The first step toward understanding any verse in its context is to observe what the text actually says. We have to discover what a text says (*observation*) before we can understand what it means (*interpretation*) or how it might apply to us today (*application*). That fact is obviously true; yet, we often operate as if it is not. We hurry to get to the “point” of a passage or to apply it to some situation we’re facing, or we just accept what some teacher tells us it says, without taking the time to check the facts. Observation is about discovering the facts, that is, what the text actually says (or does not say). Let’s briefly look at what this involves and then see what we can observe in Psalm 46 that will help us to understand verse 10 and evaluate the various interpretations above.

Discovering the Facts. Observation is like doing the job of a reporter: it is mostly a matter of asking questions. In fact, a good place to start when observing a shorter passage is to ask the questions that any good reporter would ask: Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How? Who is speaking? Who is the audience? What happened? What is the literary style of this passage? What seems to be the topic? What words or thoughts are repeated? What figures of speech are used? Where does this sentence, paragraph, or passage begin and end? Where did this event take place? When did this event happen? Why did the author write this? Why did this person say or do this? How many people were present? How is this person related to that person?

The goal of observation is simply to note as many facts about the text as you can, not to draw conclusions about their meaning or importance. You can do that later when you try to fit all the facts together into a good interpretation. It’s helpful to write down your observations so that you can refer back to them.

There are, of course, many different kinds of things to look for and different questions to ask according to the kind of literature you are observing (e.g., history, prophecy, poetry, gospel, epistle, etc.). A narrative account in Genesis, for example, contains different elements than a theological treatise in Romans. Learning about the different kinds of literature in the Bible will help you to know what to look for in each case.

Observing Psalm 46. You should list your observations first and then return to them to draw your conclusions about their meaning or significance. In this short article, however, I'll have to do both as I go along.

Psalm 46 is a song or hymn, so we should look for literary features such as imagery and other figures of speech, and some sort of structure such as stanzas or refrains. This psalm is divided into three sections by the word "Selah" (vv. 3, 7), which scholars think is a musical term that perhaps means "rest." It is also divided into three sections by three confessions of trust in God's presence (vv. 1, 7, 11). Notice that verses 7 and 11 are identical. The structure of Psalm 46, therefore, can be outlined as follows:

Confession (v.1)
God's presence in cosmic troubles (vv. 2–3)
Selah
God's presence in the city of God (vv. 4–6)
Confession (v. 7)
Selah
God's presence in the earth (vv. 8–10)
Confession (v. 11)

Let's look at the different sections:

Verses 1, 7, 11: In these three confessions God is referred to metaphorically as a "refuge," "strength," "ever-present help," and "fortress."⁴ The text says that God is "our" strength, He is with "us" (*Immanuel* = "God is with us"), which indicates that He is these things to a particular people. The names that are used in verses 7 and 11 are "LORD [Yahweh] Almighty," and "the God of Jacob," which are specific to the God of the Israelites.

Verses 2–3: The psalmist says that God's presence ("therefore") gives God's people ("we") courage in the face of trouble. Trouble is described in cosmic terms: "the earth gives way," "the mountains fall," "the waters roar." This is how the Old Testament prophets often described the natural disasters and political upheaval that are associated with God's judgment, especially in connection with the Day of the Lord (e.g., Isa. 24:18–23; Jer. 4:24; Nah. 1:5).

Verses 4–6: The "city of God" (often called *Zion* in Scripture) is described as a holy place where God dwells. His presence makes the city safe. The pleasant waters that refresh or bless ("make glad") the dwelling place of God (often pictured as a mountain, e.g., Zech. 8:3), are in contrast to the frightening, roaring waters that shake the mountains in verse 3. The river is suggestive of the rivers in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:10–14; cf. Isa. 51:3). Verse 6 is suggestive of the creation account: the nations are in "uproar," like the waters in verse 3 and in Genesis 1:2, and God's voice "melts" (shapes) the earth. Some interpreters see this as a description of the remaking of the earth in the Day of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:10).

Verses 8–10: "Come and see" and "Be still, and know" are similar to the exhortations that the prophets used (e.g., Zech. 2:13). Each verse in this section describes something God does or will do on the "earth." "The works of the Lord" are referred to as "desolations." "He makes wars cease" by destroying the weapons of war (His enemies' weapons or His own? Cf. Jer. 47:6). Finally, in verse 10, the sovereign God of Israel who is described throughout the psalm speaks: "Be still, and know that I [the Lord Almighty/the God of Jacob, and no other god] am God." The declaration that He will be exalted is repeated, which emphasizes His sovereignty over the nations and the earth that melts at His voice (v. 6).

Understanding the Meaning. There are many more facts to observe in this psalm, but these are sufficient to help us understand the meaning of verse 10 in its context. The emphasis in this psalm is that God's people, Israel, in the midst of political and natural upheaval, should be confident in their God, the Lord

Almighty, who is sovereign over the nations and the earth and will eventually bring an end to all turmoil. The psalmist paints a picture of God's triumph and exaltation in verses 8–10, and the command to "Be still ["Cease striving" in NASB] and know that I am God" is the essence and culmination of God's bringing it about.

Interpreters are divided as to whether God in verse 10 is telling His people to stop trying to defend themselves against their enemies (cf. Exod. 14:14), or whether He is telling their enemies to stop warring against God's people, or both. In any case God is not telling any individual to slow down, find a quiet place, and meditate on Him. He is telling the nations to stop their futile efforts to control the world and instead acknowledge ("know"), or understand, that He controls it.

Maharishi's explanation of verse 10 is completely backwards. Being a Hindu, he believes that everyone is God, so he changes the wording to fit his belief ("Be still and know that *you* are God," emphasis added) and says that this verse means that we are to meditate on our own godhood. This entire psalm, however, paints a vivid distinction between God and humanity; even the second part of verse 10 distinguishes between God and the nations who will exalt Him.

There also is nothing in the text to indicate that verse 10 is recommending some form of New Age meditation or centering prayer; nor is it an exhortation to relax and quiet ourselves in order to get closer to God. The latter is a noble goal, but that is not what this verse means. Other Bible passages teach us to fix our minds and hearts on God as a part of becoming mature believers (e.g., Phil. 4:6–8), but not Psalm 46:10.

The general principle from this psalm that we can apply to our lives is one that Martin Luther had in mind when he wrote his famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God": that God's people should trust Him and not fear the trouble around them, because He is in control, He is their fortress.

— Steve Bright

NOTES

1. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *Meditations of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi* (New York: Bantam, 1973) 178.
2. Deepak Chopra, interview by Larry King, *Larry King Live*, May 17, 2000, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/000517/lkl.00.html>.
3. Lawrence Freeman, interview by Inner Explorations, "John Main and the Practice of Christian Meditation," video transcript online at <http://www.innerexplorations.com/catchspmys/2.htm>.
4. All Bible quotations are from the New International Version.