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**“BE STILL AND KNOW”:
CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER AND PSALM 46:10**

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For centuries, Jews and Christians (and others) have sought out wisdom from the Book of Psalms, which is at once a prayer book, a hymnal, a historical record, and a source for theology and ethics. The Psalms were often on Jesus’ lips and always in His heart. On the cross, Jesus cried out in agony, “My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me?” Far from being a mere cry of despair, this was a prayer of faith taken from David in Psalm 22.¹ But these invaluable writings can be abused easily.

Misinterpretation abounds when, instead of seeking to understand what a passage actually says, we engage in the hermeneutical error of eisegesis—making the text mean what we want it to mean. A well-known and sometimes misinterpreted psalm is Psalm 46:10. In this Psalm, God famously commands,

“Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!” (NIV)

This verse is relied on heavily as biblical support for a discipline known as contemplative prayer, or centering prayer. Contemplative prayer is quickly becoming accepted as a spiritual discipline within evangelicalism and is well established in some parts of Roman Catholicism. This is a meditative exercise in which the practitioner seeks to transcend her mind in order to attain a deeper relationship with God. But God, as contemplative leader Thomas Keating teaches, is “beyond words, thoughts, feelings, and emotions.”² In contemplative prayer, one is trained to detach from words and thoughts in order to reach the transcendent place of quietly being with God. For M. Basil Pennington, this state is analogous to sitting silently with a significant other.³ Thus, the Scriptures are mined in order to find an emphasis on absolute stillness. Due to the alleged presence of that theme, “Be still and know that I am God” has become a key text used by contemplative Christians to support their practice.

There are many philosophical and biblical problems with contemplative prayer itself, but we will not discuss them here. Rather, we hope to show that when interpreted correctly, Psalm 46:10 fails to offer significant support for contemplative Christianity.

An Examination of the Passage. The Hebrew word commonly translated “be still” is the verb *raphah*. It often means “relax,” “let drop” (Westerners would understand this as the command, “drop it”), “abandon,” “refrain,” “forsake,” “let go,” “stop,” or “be quiet.” In addition to Psalm 46, *raphah* is used other times in the book. Psalm 37:8 issues the command, “Refrain [*raphah*] from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.” The psalmist in 138:8 petitions God not to “abandon [*raphah*] the works of your hands.” Outside the Psalms, the word was used by Samuel. In the midst of King Saul’s excuses for disobeying God in and after Israel’s conquest of the Amalekites, Samuel interrupts him, saying, “Stop [*Raphah*]! Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night” (1 Sam. 15:16). Then Samuel sharply rebukes Saul for his disobedience and declares that God has rejected him as king of Israel.

These usages of *raphah* are either commands to cease current activity in order to change behavior or listen, or, in the case of Psalm 138:8, it is put negatively, as a plea that God *not* cease caring for His creatures. In our present passage, *raphah* is most often translated “be still,” but the New American Standard Bible translates it as “cease striving.” *The Jewish Study Bible* translates the word in Psalm 46:10 as “Desist!”⁴ The latter sounds more like Samuel’s cry for Saul to “Stop!” than any kind of encouragement to enter into an altered state of consciousness. Furthermore, “Be still” is not the end of the imperative. What follows is of equal importance: “...and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” The subject is not left to focus on stillness, but upon the knowledge of God as judge and ruler of the nations. Following the pattern of 1 Samuel 15:16, stillness here is intended to interrupt and correct wrong behavior by ruminating on God’s specific propositional revelation. If, like contemplative Christians claim, *raphah* is in this case intended to command a sort of transcendent meditative state, then it would be a most unusual and unprecedented use of the word. Such a bold hermeneutical claim needs contextual support, which has not been forthcoming. A brief analysis of the rest of the chapter should yield more insight.

A Look at the Literary Context. Psalm 46 was a song written by “the Sons of Korah,” who composed many psalms. Martin Luther was inspired by its truths to write his famous hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” in the thick of the theological controversy of the Reformation. Although it does not mention “Zion” specifically, it has affinities with several “Zion Psalms” (76, 84, and 87) that emphasize the security of God’s people as they obey the God enthroned in Zion.

The Psalm 46 hymn opens with a beautiful, clarion exhortation to trust that God protects His people in the midst of even the most disastrous times.

God is our refuge and strength,

an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
 though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging (vv. 1–3).

The theme of trust in God amidst catastrophe carries throughout the psalm.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
 the holy place where the Most High dwells.
God is within her, she will not fall;
 God will help her at break of day
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
 he lifts his voice, the earth melts (vv. 4-6).

In these verses, the psalmist emphasizes the sacred place where God dwells. Although Jerusalem had no river running through it, the symbolism harks back to the river in Eden and forward to the life-giving river of Revelation 22:1–2 (see also Ezekiel 47). God has guaranteed that He will give life to His people and He will not be thwarted by nations in uproar. He speaks and “the earth melts.” God’s people are comforted by the knowable attributes of their transcendent yet immanently powerful Most High God. Thus, they call out:

The LORD Almighty is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our fortress (v. 7).

The faithful are not left in the dark: God Almighty is with them and is their fortress against all danger. Then they boast in the sovereignty of the Lord:

Come and see what the LORD has done,
 the desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease
 to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
 he burns the shields with fire.
He says, “Be still, and know that I am God;
 I will be exalted among the nations,
 I will be exalted in the earth” (vs. 8–10)

Given God’s knowable character, His sovereignty over history, and His commitment to protect His people, God says, “Be still and know that I am God.” That is, shut up and recognize at the depth of your being who God is and what He can and will do. He will be “exalted among the nations” and “in the earth”!

The last verse simply reaffirms God's revealed character as Israel's Almighty and faithful Lord:

The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress (v. 11).

To sum up, this entire psalm reveals several recognizable truths:

1. God is for His people; He is their refuge and help in time of trouble.
2. Neither the natural elements nor the fury of godless nations can thwart God's sovereign will and care for His people.
3. Therefore, God's people should stand in awe ("be still") *in the knowledge* of who God is and what He will do.
4. The mind is to be filled with the truth of God, not emptied of words, concepts, or logical relationships, as contemplative prayer wrongly teaches.

Worldview Confusion. Frequently, interpretations of Psalm 46:10 commit the exegetical fallacy that James Sire calls "worldview confusion."⁵ This occurs when an entirely different philosophical perspective is imposed on a text irrespective of its original meaning. Worldview confusion is at work when anyone interprets "Be still and know that I am God" to advocate a state of being beyond rational and conceptual thought. This interpretation is more monistic than Christian. Monistic meditation, which teaches that all is one, encourages its followers to empty their mind of any sense of duality, individuality, and all conceptual distinctions, since this is what the ultimate reality is taken to be. There is, of course, no place for such lobotomizing in Christianity, since God makes Himself rationally known in words and deeds (John 1:1–18; 2 Tim. 3:15–16).⁶

This psalm, and especially verse 10, is a great gift to the church. It builds our confidence and prepares us for service in God's army of truth (Eph. 6:10–19). But both the worshipper and the soldier need *knowledge* to serve the God who speaks and acts.

They must "be still" to know God's revealed attributes, but cannot fulfill God's command to know with dormant or empty minds. Let us not twist the Scriptures to our own destruction (2 Pet. 3:16). — *Sarah Geis and Douglas Groothuis*

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NOTES

- 1 See James W. Sire, *Praying the Psalms of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).
- 2 Thomas Keating, *Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002), 116.
- 3 M. Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1980), 86.
- 4 Michael Fishbane, ed., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1999), 1334.
- 5 James Sire, *Scripture Twisting: Twenty Ways Cults Misinterpret the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980).
- 6 On biblical revelation, see Francis A. Schaeffer, "Is Propositional Revelation Nonsense?" *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (1972; Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).