

DEEP CALLS TO DEEP: SUMMER IN THE PSALMS

In Whom Do We Trust?

Psalms 146

July 26, 2026

Every empire assumes its inevitability. Every empire takes its permanence for granted. Every emperor looks at the past and sees only the march of history to his moment of triumph.

All of that was preparation for this. What we have done will endure forever.

Egypt believed it. Babylon believed it. Rome was certain of it. They came. They saw. They conquered. They built in stone. They raised great monuments and carved statues in marble as though the future would never forget.

But the future came without their permission. The walls fell. The names faded. History did not come to a halt when they cried, "Cease!" No, the grass kept growing.

And always within earshot of every ruler who believed his reign was the one exception to the rule, always there have been voices driven by deeper concerns. There have been those asking harder questions. Not how far control could extend or how vast the dominion would be, but who that power served, and who was left behind. Always, there have been those denying ultimate allegiance to temporary powers. Their eyes were drawn to another way.

You can hear that way echoed throughout the pages of Hebrew Scriptures. Scattered throughout this ancient songbook are prayers that turn ancient political theory on its head. While empires measured a king by the height of his monuments or the reach of his borders, the Psalms judged the throne not by the power it projected but by the mercy it produced.

If you flip back a few pages, you will find Psalm 72, in which the psalmist names what a king is really for, writing, "May the king defend the cause of the poor, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor."

The Psalm signals that justice is not incidental to power. It is precisely what makes power faithful, not just strong. Strong leaders may vanquish their enemies and punish dissent. Faithful leaders care for the poor, advocate for the oppressed, and reform unjust systems.

And here, as the Book of Psalms draws to a close, it delivers an even sharper word to any of us tempted to confuse human leadership with ultimate hope.

Psalm 146. The words open the Psalter's final movement. These five psalms. Each of them bookended by the same word. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. And then, between those bookends, the psalmist offers a warning. "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help."

Here the word "help" in Hebrew is *teshuah*. It's the same word translated *salvation* elsewhere in the Old Testament. In other words, this isn't a cynical but obvious observation that human leaders fail; it's a fundamental truth about human limitation. No matter the scale of a ruler's promises, and in spite of our unfortunate habit of idolizing power, salvation remains always and forever beyond mortal reach. There is no help in princes or in any mortals.

Next, Psalm 146 is a little sneaky. It subverts every ancient royal claim by attributing the work of the ideal king to God.

The Lord executes justice.

The Lord gives food.

The Lord sets the prisoners free.

The Lord lifts up the bowed down.

The Lord watches over the stranger.

The Lord upholds the orphan and the widow.

Our ultimate help was never in the halls of power. Our help is in the name of the Lord.

I think there is a deliberate urgency in the rhythm of these verses, the poetic cadence. The Lord executes justice. The Lord feeds the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free. The psalm does not mean only to describe God's character; it intends to form ours. Every time we speak these words, every time we sing these words, every time we pray these words, as these words are etched in our hearts, our eyes turn toward those God never forgets: the hungry, the captive, the stranger, the widow, the orphan.

This is not mere private devotion; it is a shared obligation. The faithfulness of a nation is never measured by its rhetoric, or its public piety, or its casual invocations of divine favor. The test of our collective faithfulness is how we defend the vulnerable.

A society that denies the divine image in defense of dehumanization stands opposed to the will of God. No sacred veneer can conceal this hollow core. No row of flags behind a pulpit can transform cruelty into righteousness. To praise God while you abandon those God loves is hypocrisy that borders on heresy.

When you sing this psalm, you cannot turn away from what God refuses to ignore.

Or put another way, perhaps most simply of all, authentic worship makes indifference to the vulnerable impossible.

So, the psalm leaves us standing in the middle of empire, forced to choose where we place our allegiance, where we look for salvation. People of faith have always borne witness to another way. We do not—we must not—live in the illusion that the right ruler will build the kingdom of God among us, which means we cannot wait for the state to be righteous before we practice mercy. The church does not—the church must not—ask the empire permission to obey our King.

We must fashion a colony within a cruel and broken world. You cannot sing of a God who sees and saves the sidelined on Sunday and turn your eyes away from them on Monday. It must take shape somewhere.

It looks like Streets to Home Indy moving neighbors off concrete pavement into permanent, supportive housing, where they are known not as a problem to be solved, but as people to call by name. This year, while lawmakers were making it a crime to sleep outside, this church and its partners were quietly doing what years of policy had not done: providing stable and permanent housing, one neighbor at a time. 200 neighbors thus far.

A few weeks ago, one of the people leading that work told me about a man who moved off the streets for the first time in many, many years. A few days after being given the keys to his apartment, he asked to see her. And when they met, he confessed that he had slept the first few nights out on the patio. The bed inside he'd left neatly made, ready when he was. But it took him days to trust this new life enough to move into it.

Listen. You cannot arrest someone into transformation. While the state answers desperation with a fine, the faithful answer with a key and a bed and a home. That's our work. This is what allegiance to another King looks like. But you should know before you sign up that this kind of allegiance has always carried a cost.

Henry Ward Beecher understood that the church could not become a colony of God's kingdom while it blessed what God condemned. When he became the founding pastor of this congregation in 1839, Indiana called itself a free state. But under federal law, with lax follow through, slave catchers crossed the Ohio River to hunt down anyone a slaveholder claimed as property, escaped or not. Indiana law did not permit the accused to testify in their own defense.

And so, the pastor of Second Presbyterian Church began speaking out. Plenty of respectable people told Beecher this is a political matter. Leave it to the Congress. Leave it to the courts. Leave it to the princes of the day.

And Beecher refused. He knew that this was no policy dispute. It was a sin against God. It was hypocrisy bordering on heresy. And the church did not have the luxury of staying neutral. And so, here is what happened. Beecher did speak out from the pulpit of Second Presbyterian Church. And as he spoke out, some walked out. Some stopped giving to support the ministries of the church. Some stood up in the middle of a service to challenge him. But he just kept preaching.

He understood that the state may sanction what divine law forbids. But the church must never go along with it. I tell you this story to remind you it is not simply our history. It is our inheritance.

Do not put your trust in princes. That single verse of warning changes everything about how we build our lives and our life. As people of faith, we serve the common good because we trust God, not because we idolize politics. We speak truth to every human leader because we worship none of them. Whenever the church exchanges moral witness for political influence, it gains far less than it loses.

Generations ago, Reinhold Niebuhr put it plainly: goodness armed with power is easily corrupted; love without power is easily crushed.

Terrified of being crushed, we run to power every time, building our little empires around personalities who promise security or guarantee success. They cannot.

They never could. No mortal was ever meant to carry what belongs to God alone.

Still, every age bows before something—before a party, or a platform, or a promise, a leader strong enough to quiet our fears. But the tragedy is not only that we have placed our trust in mortal hands. It is that while our eyes are fixed on the princes, we lose sight of the neighbor, the one right in front of us, the one whose life intersects with ours, the one whose life matters to us.

Princes do not last. All flesh is grass. Empires rise and collapse. Political machinery grinds down. Systems meant to measure human worth turn to ash. And yet, God does not relent:

Bread for the hungry.

Release for the bound.

Homes and names for every soul abandoned by the powerful.

Honor for the crushed.

And so, the promise is not only that kingdoms will pass away. It is that mercy never will.

In the fullness of time, we witness the words of the Psalmist come to life. He feeds thousands on a Galilee hillside. He eats with tax collectors and sinners. He touches lepers. He welcomes strangers. And when he arrives in Nazareth, before a hometown crowd in the community that raised him, he stands before them and asks for the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah so that he can read where it is written there, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, freedom for the oppressed." In the final week of his life, in the temple, he turns his eyes from the powerful to the widow's mite. And in a final act of grace, he promises paradise to the criminal dying on the cross next to his. Three days later, the grave that swallows every empire could not hold him either. He rose because the kingdom this psalm proclaims is stronger than the grave that claims every human ruler.

Every prince secures the throne by force and fear. And our Lord refused. He called us to live with open hands and compassionate hearts.

Now, if the ones we are told to worship cannot finally
save us, and if the ones we are tempted to fear cannot
finally destroy us, we are free.

We are free to love without counting the cost.
We are free to serve without needing the recognition.
We are free to oppose injustice without despair.
We are free to speak when silence is ordered.
We are free to seek the good of our nation without
mistaking it for the kingdom of God.
We are free to entrust the work of our hands
to the God of our lives.
The Lord reigns. Not the prince or the party
or the nation.

The grass will grow over every certainty of every empire.
But the mercy of God—unconquered, unbought, and
unbroken—will have the final word.

This is no threat. It is freedom.

Praise your Lord.
Open your hands.
Love your neighbor.
Trust your King. Amen.