

The psalm sequence at the end of Book II forms a triptych. The first panel is ordinary time. Psalm 70 is an all day, every day prayer, a quick plea for God's immediate help. It is an in-the-moment prayer, applicable in any and all circumstances. The second panel is a lifetime prayer that covers all the days of our lives from infancy to old age. Psalms 70 and 71 share certain themes: dependence on the Lord's protection and provision, the need for deliverance from the hand of the wicked, and a plea, "Do not be far from me, my God; come quickly, God, to help me" (Ps 71:12). The third panel takes in salvation history. Psalm 72 is a messianic royal psalm. It covers the grand sweep and ultimate fulfillment of God's redemptive plan. These three "save me" psalms look at salvation from three different vantage points: the immediate daily grind, a lifetime of struggle and perseverance, and the eschatological fulfillment of God's promised salvation.

My Rock

*In you, Lord, I have taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
In your righteousness, rescue me and deliver me;
turn your ear to me and save me.
Be my rock of refuge,
to which I can always go;
give the command to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.
Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of those who are evil and cruel.*

Psalm 71:1-4

The originality of this psalm comes in the creative weave of themes drawn from other psalms.¹ The beauty of this mosaic prayer is how it integrates personal lament and God's faithfulness over a lifetime of continuous trust. Through it all the psalmist has learned to trust in God. From the day he was born and into old age the psalmist has turned to God for deliverance. This long obedience in the same direction has depended entirely on the Lord's faithfulness. It is a fitting psalm for the end of Book II because it gathers up these major themes of danger and deliverance, trial and testimony, witness and testimony, into a psalm that works as well for the individual as it does for the people of God. There is no superscription for this psalm, but its close affinity with Psalm 70 and its thematic dependence on psalms attributed to David suggests a deep connection with David. If David wrote this psalm he did so with the people of God in mind – he did it for us.

In David's mind the Lord's faithfulness is best understood and experienced in concrete images. The metaphors, "rock," "refuge," and "fortress," along with "turn your ear to me," give a vivid sense of the psalmist's plea and the Lord's deliverance. Images of stability and security are contrasted with the psalmist's vulnerability. The hand of the wicked is right there ready to grasp

¹ Ps 71:1-3 (Ps 31:1-3); Ps 71:5-6 (Ps 22:9-10); Ps 71:12-13 (Ps 35:22; 40:13-14; 22:11; 38:21-22; 35:4, 26; 109:22).

him. The need for deliverance is always acute and never taken for granted. Yet, God is always faithful and faithful forever. The psalmist can *always* go to “my rock of refuge” (Ps 71:3). He will *always* praise the Sovereign Lord (Ps 71:6) and declare his splendor *always* (Ps 71:8). He will “*always* have hope” (Ps 71:14a) and add to his praise *always* (Ps 71b). “All day long” is the psalmist’s pledge to *always* testify to God’s saving ways (Ps 71:15) and to always “tell of your righteous acts all day long” (Ps 71:24). The entire psalm pledges continuous and comprehensive praise for God’s constant and complete faithfulness.

The implications of this “all-ness” in the context of faithfulness and praise are extraordinary. To enter into the spirit of this psalm is to embrace the all-encompassing reality of “always” – always trusting, always praising. This is necessary to know the health and wholeness of relying completely on the Lord, our rock and our refuge. This is the *all* that must not be evaded but embraced by all who desire to please God, because God’s holy claim rests equally on all.² This is the all-ness celebrated in Jesus’ parable of the hidden treasure: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field” (Matthew 13:44).

In Christ, this the *all* that believes that Jesus accomplished *all* on the Cross. And this is the “all” that says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:10). This is the *all* of covenant love (as opposed to a contractual obligation) that is grandly inclusive of *all* we are and will be. This is an *all*-encompassing, timeless commitment. “As long as our lives should last” is the bottom line of a costly vow that carries us *all* the way to Eternity. This is the *all* that knows no limits. “There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven,” but this is the one thing for *all* time and the one thing upon which everything else depends for time and eternity. King David expressed his heartfelt longing when he said, “One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord *all the days of my life*, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple” (Ps 27:4). This is the *all* that gives light to our vision of God. Without it we are in darkness, but with it everything is brought into the light.

My Hope

*For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord,
my confidence since my youth.
From birth I have relied on you;
you brought me forth from my mother’s womb.
I will ever praise you.
I have become a sign to many;
you are my strong refuge.
My mouth is filled with your praise,
declaring your splendor all day long.
Do not cast me away when I am old;
do not forsake me when my strength is gone.*

² Webster, Soundtrack of the Soul, 90-93.

*For my enemies speak against me;
those who wait to kill me conspire together.
They say, "God has forsaken him;
pursue him and seize him,
for no one will rescue him."
Do not be far from me, my God;
come quickly, God, to help me.
May my accusers perish in shame;
may those who want to harm me
be covered with scorn and disgrace.*

Psalm 71:5-13

The psalmist is riveted to reality. There is nothing here that is naive or “pie-in-the-shy.” It is all down to earth from birth to death. He sees the span of his years from start to finish under the providence of the Sovereign Lord. A lifetime of trust has validated his confidence, focused his hope, and served as “a public example to people.”³ By the grace of God his life has been a sign to many that the Lord is his strong refuge. For all his enemy talk, the psalmist has been what Christ wants us to be “salt and light” in a fallen and ruined world. The people of God are called “to exert a double influence by arresting decay and a positive influence by bringing light into darkness.”⁴

Along these same lines, the apostle Paul saw himself as a real sign to many. He didn’t need to commend himself to others, since the validity of his testimony was evident among people impacted by the gospel. “You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on the tablets of human hearts.” Like the psalmist, his confidence did not come from himself but from God. “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God” (2 Cor 3:1-5). Given the testimony of trust and praise lived out by the people of God Spurgeon wondered why “so much unbelief remains” in the world.⁵

The psalmist acknowledges what many of us who have reached old age realize. As our energy wanes and our physical strength declines we feel increasingly expendable. I used to have more energy than I had time; now I have more time than I have energy. A younger and more dynamic generation is ready for the old person to move out of the way, especially in a society that values youth over experience and appearance over maturity. David pleads with God, “Do not cast me away . . . do not forsake me when my strength is gone” (Ps 71:9). Augustine adds his own unique pastoral commentary. He essentially says, “Bring it on! Go ahead let your strength fail, in order that you may abide in the strength of God and learn to say with the apostle, ‘For when I am weak, then I am strong’ (2 Cor 12:10).” But don’t forget, Augustine insisted, God “gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on

³ Ross, Psalms, 520.

⁴ Stott, Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (IVP, 1978), 64.

⁵ Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Psalm 71, 209.

wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint” (Isa 40:29-31).⁶

In addition to the threat of old age, David is under siege by enemies who are watching and waiting for the right time to attack him. They seek not only to cause him bodily harm, but to impugn his faith in God. They are quick to leverage his suffering as proof that God has forsaken him. Apparently his enemies identified themselves with the people of God and they used god-talk to condemn David. In their twisted logic they ironically claimed God’s favor in trashing David’s faithfulness to God. The Pharisees did much the same to Jesus, waiting and watching for the right time to expose him as a fraud and condemn him for blasphemy.

David’s response is to seek the nearness of God and the immediacy of God’s help all the more earnestly. He leaves his difficult situation in God’s hands and prays that the shame and harm his accusers intended for him would be visited on them.

My Legacy

*As for me, I will always have hope;
I will praise you more and more.
My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds,
of your saving acts all day long –
though I know not how to relate them all.
I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, Sovereign Lord;
I will proclaim your righteous deeds, yours alone.
Since my youth, God, you have taught me,
and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds.
Even when I am old and gray,
do not forsake me, my God,
till I declare your power to the next generation,
your mighty acts to all who are to come.
Your righteousness, God, reaches to the heavens,
you who have done great things.
Who is like you, God?
Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter,
you will restore my life again;
from the depths of the earth
you will again bring me up.
You will increase my honor
and comfort me once more.*

Psalm 71:14-21

With a bold, “but as for me,” the tone of the psalm changes abruptly. A lifetime of resilient faith, confident hope, and continuous praise is not about to disappear. The psalmist rededicates his efforts to tell of God’s righteous actions and saving deeds. To this high calling he will never tire,

⁶ Augustine, Psalm 71, 318.

no matter how old he becomes. Nor will he ever exhaust all the good things that can be said about what God has done. He doubles down on his resolve to be faithful to the end. The psalmist articulates here what the apostles will emphasize: life is not a sprint it's a marathon and it's not over until it's over. Faithfulness to the end affirms faith from the beginning. And the end in faithfulness to the end may be a long way off, but it is the only end worth pursuing.

Psalm 71 gives us the long view of faithfulness. "Today we emphasize the New Birth," writes Peter Gillquist, "the ancients emphasized being faithful to the end. We moderns talk of wholeness and purposeful living; they spoke of the glories of the eternal kingdom. . .the emphasis has shifted from the completing of the Christian life to the beginning of it."⁷ David is teaching us "to number our days so we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps 90:12). We were never meant to become less dependent upon the Lord; only more dependent. Life is never too long for the long obedience in the same direction. "As for mortals," writes the psalmist, "their days are like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more" (Ps 103:15). The apostle Paul's line sums up David's resilience this way: "I haven't arrived, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil 3:12).

David's long view puts the hardships of life in perspective and looks forward to resurrection life. Christians can hardly hear David say, "Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again," without thinking of Christ's promise of the resurrection. Perhaps David had a more immediate and temporal restoration of life and kingdom in view, but I'm not so sure. The expectation that David believed that death ends all is harder to imagine than believing that David envisioned everlasting life. Surely when the risen Messiah interpreted the Psalms for the disciples before his ascension he made clear the promise of the resurrection. "From the depths of the earth you will again bring me up," does not sound like a person who does not believe that faithfulness has an eternal reward.

My Song

*I will praise you with the harp
for your faithfulness, my God;
I will sing praise to you with the lyre,
Holy One of Israel.
My lips will shout for joy
when I sing praise to you –
I whom you have delivered.
My tongue will tell of your righteous acts
all day long,
for those who wanted to harm me
have been put to shame and confusion.*

Psalm 71:22-24

⁷ Gillquist, "A Marathon We Are Meant to Win," 22.

David ends on a note of high praise to God for his faithfulness from beginning to end. He is committed to proclamation and praise. Prose gives way to poetry and dialogue to doxology. Narrative becomes declarative in anthems of praise. Music is a gift from God that helps us take in the intelligible revelation of God. Worship is a matter of thinking and feeling. It is both intellectual and emotional, because it engages the mind and expresses the heart. As Henry Mitchell, an African-American pastor, liked to say, *“If truth goes into your heart on the arm of emotion it will stay. But if it enters your heart unaccompanied, it will only visit for a short while and then leave.”* Telling the truth about God and singing praises to God are two actions that belong together. When the church teaches with wisdom and sings with gratitude, our minds and our hearts are informed and inspired by the will and ways of God.⁸ The apostle Paul joins the psalmist in declaring the importance of musical praise when he writes, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16).

For all of Calvin’s insight into Psalm 71 he mistakenly imposed his bias against musical instrumentation in the church. David’s reference to the harp and lyre, or in our situation, guitar and violin, triggered an unfortunate misinterpretation of the apostle Paul’s admonition against speaking in an unknown tongue (1 Cor 14:13). “We are not, indeed, forbidden to use, in private musical instruments, but they are banished out of the churches by the plain command of the Holy Spirit, when Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14:13, lays it down as an invariable rule, that we may praise God, and to pray to him only in a known tongue.”⁹ Thankfully, David and the apostles knew no such bias against musical expression. They saw the power of instruments to magnify the Lord and praise his name.

For those of us who are “old and gray” (Ps 71:18) singing and playing our praises to God takes on a profound significance. Just because we are old does not mean we haven’t a song in our heart and melody on our lips. The psalmist knows no such thing as expressionless praise nor silent faith. We open our mouths and tune our instruments to praise “your faithfulness, my God.” We have not given up on telling of “your righteous acts *all day long.*” We are designed for doxology from infancy to the end of our earthly existence. Praise shall always be on our lips, even though those people and things that want to harm us still persist (Ps 71:24). I remember my father’s tenor voice singing hymns of the Word more than I recall him speaking about the Word. He never gave a sermon, but he sang from his soul. One of his favorite songs goes,

All that thrills my soul is Jesus.
He is more than life to me;
He, the fairest of ten thousand,
Is my precious Lord to me.

⁸ Webster, *The Living Word*, 103.

⁹ Calvin, *Psalms*, vol.3, 98.

