

An Old Man's Cry for Rescue

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[0 : 00] Well, we sung the words, we're now going to read them together from Psalm 71. And we read together from that psalm, if you have one of the visitor's Bibles, I think that is page 484.

And we're going to read the whole psalm together. Psalm 71 at verse 1. In you, O Lord, do I take refuge.

Let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness, deliver me and rescue me. Incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge to which I may continually come.

You have given the command to save me for you are my rock and my fortress. Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel man.

For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from before my birth. You are he who took me from my mother's womb.

[1 : 09] My praise is continually of you. I have been as important to many, but you are my strong refuge. My mouth is filled with your praise and with your glory all the day.

Do not cast me off in the time of old age. Forsake me not when my strength is spent. For my enemies speak concerning me. Those who watch for my life consult together and say, God has forsaken him.

Pursue and seize him, for there is none to deliver him. O God, be not far from me. O my God, make haste to help me. May my accusers be put to shame and consumed with scorn and disgrace.

May they be covered who seek my hurt. But I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more. My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all the day.

For their number is past my knowledge. With the mighty deeds of the Lord God, I will come. I will remind them of your righteousness, yours alone.

[2 : 20] O God, from my youth you have taught me. And I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So, even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me.

Until I proclaim your might to another generation. Your power to all those to come. Your righteousness, O God, reaches the highest heavens.

You who have done great things, O God, who is like you? You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again.

From the depths of the earth, you will bring me up again. You will increase my greatness and comfort me again. I will also praise you with the heart for your faithfulness.

O my God, I will sing praises to you with a lyre, O holy one of Israel. My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you. My soul also, which you have redeemed.

[3 : 22] And my tongue will talk of your righteous help all the day long. For they have been put to shame and disappointed who sought to do me hurt.

Amen. And may God bless to us this great song of his salvation. Well, friends, let's open our Bibles up at Psalm 71.

Again, on page 484 in our hardback Bibles. Psalm 71. My title for tonight is An Old Man's Cry for Rescue.

Over these next few Sundays, I'm hoping to look at four psalms. And the reason for this, the reason for looking at the psalms, is first to help us to know the Lord better, because the psalms reveal him and his nature to us so much.

But especially to help us to learn to pray better, because the psalms, above all, teach us how to address God. Now, an interesting question arises when you start reading the psalms.

[4 : 37] You realize that many of the psalms, most of the psalms, are prayers addressed to God. So you have David or some other writer calling upon God.

You'll see this just in this part of the book of psalms. Look at the beginning of Psalm 70. It's a prayer. Make haste, O God, to deliver me. Psalm 71.

Again, a prayer. In you, O Lord, do I take refuge. 72. Give the king your justice, O God. These are prayers. So in most of the psalms, we see a man speaking to God.

So here's the interesting question. How can words addressed by man to God function as the word of God to man? After all, we believe that the whole Bible, every chapter and verse of the Bible, is the word of God addressed to the world.

So how can these prayers, which are obviously the words of men to God, act as God's words to men and women? Well, the answer is not difficult. It was God who gave these words to David and the other psalm writers.

[5 : 46] It was God who inspired the psalmists to record their prayers. These prayers are God given. They're God inspired. In fact, Jesus makes exactly this point about the psalms in his own teaching, that they are God inspired.

There's a point in Mark's gospel, chapter 12, where Jesus is teaching in the temple. And he says, How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, speaking in the Holy Spirit, declared, The Lord said to my Lord.

David himself, speaking in the Holy Spirit, declared. So Jesus himself is telling us that David's pen is guided and taught by the Holy Spirit.

The psalms are the words of God. They teach us about God. They teach us how to live as believers. And they teach us to pray and how to pray. So these words of men addressed to God are really God's words put into the minds of men as they speak to him.

So as we turn to this psalm, 71, this evening, let's allow it to teach us how to live and how to pray and also how to grow old gracefully. Because it is clearly written, look at verse 18, Even to old age and gray hairs, oh God, do not forsake me.

[7 : 09] It's clearly written by somebody who is no spring chicken, somebody who dropped his rugby boots into the dustbin at least 35 years ago. Now, friends, if you are young and many of you are young, please don't switch off.

Please don't take a siesta. Because this is for you as well as for the more senior citizens amongst us. And it's for the younger ones for two very good reasons. First of all, so that you can understand some of the things that your elderly Christian friends are facing.

But secondly, because you will discover that life passes very much more quickly than you think it will. Life is a very quick thing. If you're 20, the age of 40 seems ultra mature.

Isn't that right? 60 seems decrepit and 80 seems like Methuselah. But I can assure you the years pass as quickly as lemmings over a cliff.

You just somehow never get used to the speed of it. You get to 30 and you say, can I be 30? It seems so old. A member of our church said to me not so long ago, I've just had my 70th birthday.

[8 : 18] I cannot believe it. I feel just the same person inside myself as I did when I was 25. But then I look in the mirror and the truth comes home to me.

So it is good for us to have a psalm like this one, which gives us a godly perspective, a God-given perspective on the aging process, how to grow old gracefully.

And as we shall see from the psalm, not only gracefully, but trustingly and joyfully and purposefully as well. Now, it's quite a long psalm, as you can see.

So we shan't look at all the details or all the verses. But I want to take it under two main headings. First, the heart that keeps on trusting right the way through to the end of life.

And second, the mouth that keeps on speaking right the way through to the end of life. So first of all, the heart that keeps on trusting.

[9 : 16] Now, we don't know who the author of Psalm 71 is. We don't know for certain. It could well be David, King David, because so many of the phrases and ideas in this psalm are exactly like ideas that we get in the psalms that are explicitly ascribed to David.

So it may simply be that our author postdates David and has read and drunk in David's style so fully that he speaks rather like him. But we don't know who he is, so I'll just call him the psalmist, though I do strongly suspect that it is King David.

Now, this psalmist keeps on trusting the Lord long term. He gives us a great sense of the length of his life. And all the way through his long life, he has been profoundly aware of his total dependence upon the Lord.

Look, for example, at verses 5 and 6. For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from before my birth.

You are he who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you. Now, isn't that vivid? He is speaking of himself there in utero, antenatally.

[10:29] In the first phrase of verse 6, he says he's been leaning upon the Lord from before his birth, when he was just a blob the size of a tadpole in his mother's womb.

Now, he doesn't mean, of course, that he was consciously trusting the Lord in the womb. What he means is that as he looks back over the years, he realizes that from the moment the sperm and the egg were fused, it was the Lord's doing.

And the wonderful process of gestation, that too was the Lord's work. And the moment of his birth, that was the Lord's work. In fact, the Lord is pictured here as a midwife.

Look at the way he puts it in verse 6. You are he who took me from my mother's womb, as though the Lord is lovingly standing over the mother in her labor pains and helping to bring her baby into the world.

Now, modern secular man, unbelieving man, can't see or accept any of this. He will put all these things down to the power and resourcefulness of the human brain and the human body.

[11:34] He will say, we create, we gestate, we bring forth. But the believer knows that it's all of God. So God does not begin to deal with us at our conversion.

He has been at work in us since our conception. It's his power that creates our first birth, our natural birth, as well as our second birth, our supernatural birth.

We are born by his power and we are born again by his power. And the reason why our psalmist writes about his birth and his youth and even his gestation in the womb is that he knows that the God who has been with him right from the start of his life can be trusted to see him through right to the end of his life.

See how he expresses it in verses 17 and 18. Oh God, from my youth you have taught me and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

So even to old age and gray hairs, oh God, do not forsake me. In other words, you've started the job, oh God, teaching me to know you from my youth and I'm sure that you're not going to drop me in the slurry now that I'm turning gray.

[12:46] When he says there, don't forsake me in old age, he's not expressing doubt or fear that the Lord might drop him. He's expressing his conviction that the God who has been his refuge and his rock for all these years will continue to be his rock until his dying day.

And he's teaching us that the Lord can be trusted in the same way, trusted lifelong. I remember when I was in my early 20s and a young Christian, I used to wonder and worry if it was possible to continue as a Christian all the way through life.

But what I hadn't realized then, but I do understand now, is that remaining a Christian is possible not so much because I am clinging on to the Lord, but because the Lord is clinging on to me.

And this is what this psalm is teaching. In verse 1, it's the Lord who will not allow the psalmist to be put to shame. In verse 2, it's the Lord who delivers and rescues and saves the psalmist.

He doesn't save himself. He can't do that. In verse 3, it's the Lord who commands his salvation. Don't you like that phrase there? You've given the command to save me.

[14:02] In verse 20, it's the Lord who revives the psalmist after times of trouble and calamity. And in verse 21, it's the Lord who brings him comfort after he's been reduced and diminished by difficulty.

This psalm is tracing a great ark all the way from cradle to grave, and it teaches us that the Lord is the one who saves and comforts and sustains us all the way through life.

And this means that at the most important level, at the most profound level of life, the believer need not fear the process of aging. Now, of course, there will be irksome irritations on the surface of life in old age.

Regular visits to the cardiologist, the oncologist, the hematologist, even the psychiatrist. Of course, there will be physical aches and pains and frustrations and many adjustments that have to be made.

Adjusting to things is all part of the aging process. But at the most important level, at the level of life's foundations, all is well because at the foundation of the Christian's life, whether we're 20 or 90, there is the Lord, described in verse 3 as a rock of refuge, my rock and my fortress.

[15 : 21] Now, there's another consequence of seeing the Lord's care for us from cradle to grave. And that is that we don't need to be over-anxious about our health.

If a person has no conception of God, no conception of eternal life, they're bound to think that this life is the only life there is. And so they get anxious about preserving their life and their health at all costs.

I must go to the gym five times a week. I must go jogging. I must avoid salt and sugar. I must eat blueberries and oily fish. And every new superfood that comes on the market, I shall take out shares in Holland and Barrett.

So health and fitness becomes a kind of idol. You begin to gear your whole life around your personal fitness program. And in a sense, therefore, you start to worship your own body.

Now, of course, the Lord expects us to look after our bodies. The body of the Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit, to use Paul the Apostle's language as he warns Christians against sexual immorality.

[16 : 31] So of course it's daft to smoke or to take drugs or to drink heavily or to eat too much. The Lord has given us our bodies. And the human body has been immensely dignified by the fact that Jesus came as a human being in human flesh.

So of course we're to look after our bodies. Paul writes to the Ephesians, no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it. But it's all too easy in this anxious and fearful society that we live in these days to make our health an idol.

We're to worship the Lord, not our bodies. If you do worship your body, you're going to get terribly upset when it begins to fall to pieces, even perhaps when the first gray hair appears.

Look at verse 18. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come.

You see what the psalmist is saying there? He's not praying, Lord, don't let old age come. Don't let my hair turn gray. He accepts that old age and gray hairs will come. His concern in verse 18 is not to stop the aging process, but to let the next generation know about the Lord.

[17 : 51] He's not saying, don't let me get old. He's saying, let me tell the rising generation about you. So the psalmist teaching us about the heart that keeps on trusting right the way through to old age and gray hairs.

But it also shows us the heart that keeps on trusting in the presence of enemies. Now, I said earlier that this psalm is not explicitly attributed to King David, but it's very David-like.

And the most David-like feature in the psalm is the way that this writer is conscious of his enemies who are fierce and very hostile. You can sense them even in the very first verse.

Let me never be put to shame, which really means let me never be put in a position where my enemies can crow over me. When he says in verse 2, deliver me and rescue me, what he means is deliver me from their power.

The theme comes right out into the open in verse 4. Rescue me, oh my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel man. Now, it's all very much related to the theme of growing older.

[19 : 04] Look at verses 9, 10, and 11. Don't cast me off in the time of old age. Don't forsake me then because my enemies are conspiring and consulting together.

They're watching for my life. They're wanting to destroy me. They're wanting to unseat me. When Winston Churchill was prime minister in his late 70s, you may know he was prime minister more than once, but in his late 70s, in the early 1950s, he was just at this late stage in life and this tactic was used by his political enemies.

They said, he's an old man now. He's not fit to be running the country. Let's take advantage of him. Let's get rid of him. If this is David writing, that's the pressure that he was feeling.

He was well aware that people who wouldn't have dared to attack him when he was 40 might well try to topple him at the age of 70. So he prays in verse 1, let me not be put to shame.

But look at verse 13. May my accusers be put to shame. And in the final verse of the psalm, verse 24, he looks forward to the moment when they have been put to shame and disappointed who sought to do me hurt.

[20 : 21] So the burden of the prayer of the whole psalm is let me not be put down, but let them be put down and finally disgraced. Now you've probably noticed, and you may have felt a bit uncomfortable about it, but you've probably noticed that the psalms are full of these enemies.

I think 90 or 93 of the psalms are explicitly ascribed to David. And of those 90 plus psalms, not more than three or four of them have no mention of David's enemies.

So we're bound to ask why all these enemies? Who were they? Why do they feature so powerfully in the psalms? Well, the answer is straightforward. David was the king of Israel, the king of God's covenant people.

And David is the forerunner and pattern of Jesus, who is the everlasting king of God's covenant people. And it's in the nature of our sinful and rebellious world to attack King Jesus and to try to unseat him and disgrace him.

Now in the end, of course, his preeminence over all his enemies is assured. As David says in Psalm 110, the Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. [21 : 37] The fact that all Christ's enemies will be put under his feet in the end is assured. In the world to come, there will be no more opposition to the world's true king.

But the world to come is still to come. And in this world, the opposition is fierce and relentless. And in God's goodness, the Psalms constantly remind us of these enemies so as to keep us on our guard and to keep us from falling asleep on our watch.

To draw out the implications of all this, we need to see the parallel between David and Jesus. It's the king who is constantly under attack. And he's constantly under attack because he is the rightful ruler and the rebellious heart of man does not want to submit to his rightful rule.

Now, in David's case, his enemies were actual human beings. For example, you may remember from the story of his life. When he was young, Saul, the king, tried to kill him.

Later on, in middle age, his own son, Absalom, tried to depose him and organized a very powerful attempted coup against his father. And there were lots of other individuals who hated David and would gladly have seen him dead.

[22 : 55] And it's no coincidence that the most determined opposition to David arose from within the people of Israel, not from Gentile enemies. And it was the same for Jesus.

The opposition to him began to organize itself very early in his public ministry. In fact, in Mark's gospel, it's at chapter 3, verse 6, very early in the gospel, that the Pharisees, along with Herod's people, begin to discuss with each other how they could find a way of killing Jesus, destroying him. The unregenerate human heart does not want Jesus to rule over it. Now, in our day, the opposition to Christianity is always fundamentally an opposition to Jesus.

It's the claim of Jesus to be the rightful king of every human heart. That's the thing that is so unacceptable in the modern world. People are much happier, people who are not Christians, are much happier with a vague idea of the existence of God than they are with the idea that Jesus is God.

People are much happier to think of Jesus as being just one amongst a series of equals, equal with Muhammad and the Buddha and Moses, much happier to see him as just one amongst a group of spiritual leaders, rather than as the one and only true revelation of God.

[24 : 18] The world can cope with a relativized Jesus because to relativize him is to strip him of his authority. But to see him as the Bible sees him, as the one and only son of the Father who demands our absolute allegiance, when the human heart sees that that's who he is, the human heart then begins to hound him to death.

And when the king is surrounded by enemies, inevitably, the king's followers, the king's friends, are going to be under attack as well.

Do you remember how Jesus says to his apostles in John's Gospel, chapter 15, if the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. Remember the word that I said to you, a servant is not greater than his master.

If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. This is why the Psalms so often speak of the enemies of King David. It's in order to prepare us for the hostility which is bound to come our way if we stand for Jesus.

This theme of old age is really the secondary theme in Psalm 71. It frames the psalm and enables the psalmist to take a long view of his life. But the central theme of the psalm is this prayer that the psalmist should be vindicated and that his enemies should be finally put down.

[25 : 41] Verse 1, let me never be put to shame. Verse 13, may my accusers be put to shame and consumed. With scorn and disgrace may they be covered who seek my hurt.

Now as we look down the long road of history, how has this prayer been answered by God the Father? It has been answered doubly.

First of all, at the cross and resurrection of Jesus because the cross is the place where all the spiritual opposition to Jesus has been decisively defeated. And the resurrection is the event that vindicated Jesus.

But secondly, that prayer will be fully and finally answered at the return of Jesus for the day of judgment when all the opposition, including Satan himself, will be sent away to eternal condemnation, to a place from which there is no return.

This is why the Psalms so often speak of the king's enemies, to forewarn us, to prepare us, so that when we get caught in the crossfire, as we certainly will, we don't become too surprised or too alarmed.

[26 : 54] Battle. Battle is the nature of the Christian life. Battle not with swords and spears and bombs, but with the weapons of prayer and the gospel. But it's always battle with the assurance that ultimately our king Jesus will be vindicated and will be shown to be true.

Now this psalm also helps us in another way, and that is that the heart that keeps on trusting from cradle to grave is a happy heart. It's a heart that is full of praise and joy even in the midst of these battles.

Let's see how this comes out in the psalm. Verse 6. Upon you I have leaned from before my birth. You are he who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you.

Verse 8. My mouth is filled with your praise and with your glory all the day. Just look at the way he expresses it. Continually in verse 6. Filled in verse 8.

All the day. Verse 8. This is not part-time praise is it? Verse 14. I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more.

[28 : 07] Verse 22. I will also praise you with the harp for your faithfulness oh my God. I will sing praises to you with the lyre oh holy one of Israel.

Harp and lyre. That sounds a bit like David doesn't it? Verse 23. My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you my soul also which you have redeemed.

Now here's the thing. Here's an important thing to learn. The believer's life simultaneously experiences joy and trouble.

Simultaneously experiences battle and enemies and praise. Now the world can't really cope with that kind of idea. In the world you're either up up up or you're struggling struggling struggling you can't be both at the same time.

But the believer is able to be filled with joy even while hard pressed in battle even when being wounded in battle perhaps even when being grievously wounded. The battle will be hard at times.

[29 : 13] We will get roughed up shot at. The wounds may be very painful. If you're a young person and you want to live a quiet and peaceful life don't be a Christian. If we go on not only holding the truth in our own hearts but holding out the truth to our society we will be on the receiving end of cuts and slashes.

If for example we insist that Jesus is unique that he is the only way to the Lord God. If we insist that Bible ethics are the only ethics that will prevent our society from pressing the self destruct button.

if we insist on these things we shall be massively unpopular. But the Christian life has always been a combination of battling and rejoicing. And don't forget friends we're in this together.

None of us is a solo operator. That's encouraging. So there's the first thing the heart that keeps on trusting. Now secondly much more briefly let's notice the mouth that keeps on speaking right the way through to the end of life.

Our psalmist as we can see is very conscious of getting older. But the last thing he's thinking of doing is shutting his mouth. Look at verse 17. Oh God from my youth you've taught me and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

[30 : 39] Why then has the Lord taught him in youth? The answer is so that he's got something to say in old age. Now many Christians in youth and young adulthood feel fairly tongue-tied.

I could hardly say boo to a goose when I was in my 20s. I really couldn't. But if the Lord teaches us in our youth gradually what happens is that we learn to speak.

An activity like release the word helps to loosen the young tongue. You sit around the table there discussing the teaching of the Bible and you gradually find your tongue.

We help each other to articulate the Christian faith. We learn how to put the gospel into words. It can take years but it happens. Students come to the Cornhill training course.

Some of them have well-oiled tongues when they start but many of them haven't. And yet as the Bible is discussed in class week after week the stiffer tongues are gradually loosened and the learner begins to be a teacher.

[31 : 43] It's a wonderful process to see that happening. But our psalmist develops his thought in verse 18. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come.

So he has a focused purpose. He's not just launching words onto thin air. He wants to teach the next generation. And what is he teaching the next generation?

Look at those two words there in verse 18. I want to proclaim your might and your power to another generation. Now isn't that an interesting way to describe the work of a Sunday school teacher or a youth leader, a Christian youth leader?

Boys and girls, welcome to our Sunday school. At this Sunday school we teach you the might and the power of God. God. Now that's precisely it, isn't it? The purpose of a Sunday school is to prepare the children for judgment.

We teach our children and our young people the might of God and the power of God, his power to save from death, hell, and judgment displayed in the intervention of Jesus Christ.

[33 : 01] That is the power of God, displayed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. As Paul puts it to the Ephesians, we want you to know what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand.

The gospel is about the power and might of God and that is what we teach our children. Now, friends, unless the Lord returns in the meantime or we're run down by a McGill's bus, all of you who are young today will be old quickly in a few decades time.

Isn't this a wonderful portrait of the aging believer? Do determine to be like this. Don't say, as some older Christians have been heard to say, oh, it's time now for me to sit back and let the younger ones take over and do the work.

No, there's so much work to be done, we need the older ones and the younger ones all working together for the gospel. This psalmist is not hanging up his boots because he's getting old.

Look at the words still and will in this psalm. Verse 17, from my youth you've taught me and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

[34 : 22] I'm still at it. I'm 105, but I'm still talking about God's wonderful deeds. The gospel is still in my mouth although I'm ancient. Isn't it good to be like that?

Then look at the word will. Verse 22, I will also praise you with the harp. I will sing praises to you.

My lips will shout for joy and my tongue will talk of your righteous help all the day long.

I will do this. It's my determined choice. I've set my compass. I will live like this. I will what? Look at the verbs there in 22, 3, and 4.

I will praise and sing and shout and talk. My head may be gray, says our psalmist, but this is what I will do.

Friends, let's be like that so that the next generation will know the might and the power of God as displayed in Jesus Christ our Lord.

[35 : 25] Let's pray together. God, our Father, we pray that we too will never be put to shame.

We pray that we should never have to be ashamed before you, but rather that you would help us to declare the truth about you with joy and enthusiasm all the days of our life.

And even when strength and energy begins to run thin, we pray that you'll support us and sustain us and help the older ones to continue to tell the rising generation about these wonderful things, the truth that saves, the only gospel in this fearful and failing world.

So we thank you, dear Father, and we trust you, and we pray that you'll give us grace and strength to do it. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.