

We now turn to reading Psalm 71. Psalm 71 is a cry for help from someone in a personal crisis. The Psalmist or writer of this Psalm believes that they are under attack in some way by an outside force. The psalmist believes that the promises of God are under attack as well.

I want to invite us into what the Psalmist is experiencing by watching a clip from the movie "The Apostle" starring Robert Duvall. Duvall's character in this movie is a Pentecostal preacher. He has found out that his wife is having an affair and the people in the church want him to be fired as their pastor. Confused by seeing his family and career falling apart, he prays this prayer to God:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTVo9ymHBSc>

In Psalm 71 there will be three occasions where the Psalmist will ask for help from God because the Psalmist is going through a difficult time. What is the difficult time that the Psalmist is going through? We don't know the answer to that.

Based on the words in the psalm, some suggest that the person is ill or maybe that their body is showing signs of old age. Maybe the Psalmist is going through some other type of difficulty like Duvall's character. We don't know. But listen to these words and imagine Duvall's character praying them to God.

Read Psalm 71: 1-6

Earlier in worship we read from Luke 4:20-30. In that passage, Jesus enters the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth and is handed the scroll to read. This is not unusual. Jesus is described as a teacher and we are told that he had taught in other synagogues. Synagogues were Jewish churches that were located in most every town.

Jesus is handed the scroll and he reads from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. He reads about how the Spirit of the Lord is upon him “to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

But Jesus goes one step farther and says that “today this scripture has been fulfilled.” The text initially says that the people loved what Jesus said but then later the crowd becomes very angry with Jesus. So angry in fact they force him out of the synagogue and drive him out of town. They even get to the point of taking Jesus to the top of a cliff where they were prepared to throw him off.

And why was the crowd so angry with Jesus? Because Jesus had the audacity to say that God brought healing to the outsider Naaman from Syria. When the crowd hears Jesus say that God brings healing to the outsiders from Syria and from other places, then the people in the crowd become furious because they believe that God gave them preferential treatment. These were the people in Jesus’ own home town who were ready to kill him for the sermon he preached about God showing compassion to the outsiders.

Question for readers to ponder: Who are the outsiders today that Jesus welcomes and who are the insiders that Jesus challenges? Is it significant today that the person that Jesus named came from Syria?

I wonder at this point if the prayer that Jesus was offering to God was similar to the prayer that Robert Duvall’s character prayed in “The Apostle?” I wonder at this point if the prayer that Jesus prayed was similar to the words we read from Psalm 71.

Question for readers to ponder: Have you ever prayed a prayer like Duvall’s character? Have you been told that you can’t pray this type of prayer?

Do we remember some of the words from the Psalmist to God? Words like “I take refuge, let me never be put to shame.” Words like “deliver me and rescue me, O God.” Words like “be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress.” Words like “rescue me from the hand of the wicked and from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.” Words like “do not forsake me, God, when I am weak.”

How many times have we said or thought these same words to ourselves? How many times have we faced difficulty in our lives and prayed for God to deliver us and rescue us? How many times have we felt beaten down and wondered where God was during our time of trouble? How many times have we faced illness, death of a family member, aging bodies and wondered what the future held for us?

How many times have we stood up for what is right only to be shunned and have people say nasty things behind our backs? These are all experiences that the Psalmist and certainly Jesus encounter.

But in the midst of illness, or old age, or being shunned for a stance taken, the Psalmist affirms a trust in God. The Psalmist responds to his cries to God with the words, “for you, O Lord, are my hope. You are the one I have trusted since I was young.”

The psalmist says, “even though people have picked on me you have been my strong refuge.” The Psalmist says, “I will hope continually and will praise you more and more.” The Psalmist says “my lips will shout for joy.”

So even though this person is facing tragedy and difficulty and is picked on by people around him, he still places his trust in God and seeks for God to be his refuge.

Question for readers to ponder: What does this text teach us when we face difficulty? When we face difficult times what are we allowed to pray? Can we trust God when times are difficult? How is God our refuge in times of trouble? AMEN.

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