



Psalm 71 - Prayer for Lifelong Protection and Help

Introduction

This is another individual lament, suited to a faithful person in danger from enemies who would cause hurt by taking advantage of any weakness or distress. These enemies could be foreign, and they could be Israelite; the wording is general enough to apply to either. It would appear that the author of Psalm 71 composed it using material from earlier psalms, albeit with variations. The exposition here discerns the stanza structure of the psalm by following the vocatives, 'O God' or 'O Lord.'

Many commentators believe this is a psalm of David, and is his prayer and trust in God in his latter years under the crisis of Absalom's rebellion. Since the title or text of the psalm does not say this, there should be no speculation and Psalm 71 should be treated as if it were so, and instead regard it as an anonymous composition.

Of interest in this psalm are the many references and allusions to other psalms:

- Verses 1-3 are quoted almost exactly from Psalm 31:1-3.
- The thoughts of Psalm 71:5 seem to be suggested by Psalm 22:9-11.
- Verse 12a echoes Psalm 22:11.
- Verse 12b takes the thought of Psalm 70:1.
- Verse 13 is similar to Psalm 35:26.
- Verse 18 carries the thoughts of Psalms 22:22 and 22:30-31.
- Verse 19 uses the phrasing of Exodus 15:11.

It is reasonable to think the author of Psalm 71 made study and meditation upon God's Word a priority throughout his life, and the result is that he naturally uses the phrases and vocabulary of the Scriptures to pray and praise.

Psalm 71:1-3 - Be My Refuge Always

The song opens with a sturdy profession of faith, taking assurance from God's covenant promises. God's righteousness is his faithfulness to keep his promises, and this is the ground of hope.

- 1 In you, O Lord, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
- 2 In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.
- 3 Be to me a rock of refuge,
a strong fortress, to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.

Psalm 71:1-3

In you, O Lord, I take refuge. Many psalms begin with the description of the poet's need. The first line of Psalm 71 looks to God and declares its trust in *Yahweh*, the Lord, the covenant God of Israel. The psalmist was confident that such trust in the Lord would lead to vindication, that he would never be put to shame: <<*To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame*>> (Psalm 22:5).

In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me. Because the psalmist trusted in God, he boldly asked God to act righteously on his behalf, and to deliver and rescue him. He asked that the righteousness of God work on his behalf.

Incline your ear and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge. In the previous line the psalmist established the basis of God's rescue: in your righteousness deliver me. He then called on God to act righteously on behalf of his needy servant, to rescue and protect him.

Psalm 71:4-11 - Rescue Me from the Wicked Who Want to Hurt Me

The next section identifies the specific occasion for the prayer: the wicked, namely, unjust and cruel men who look for any opening to do harm to the faithful (v.4 and vv.10-11). As usual in the psalms, the term 'wicked' refers to those who oppose true faith in God. The singer professes not to be in this category, but among the faithful from his youth, and prays that God will not cast him off in the time of his old age. This is to remind Israel that the benefits of the covenant are not automatic but are for those who are faithful to its provisions. Hence the congregation will come to love piety, and each will yearn to have his mouth filled with God's praise.

4 Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

5 For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O Lord, from my youth.

6 Upon you I have leaned from my birth;
it was you who took me from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of you.

Psalm 71:4-6

Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked. The source of the psalmist's misery is revealed. There was a wicked man, unrighteous and cruel who seemed to hold the psalmist in his grip. From this he needed God to deliver him: <<*Guard me, O Lord, from the hands of the wicked; protect me from the violent who have planned my downfall*>> (Psalm 140:4).

For you, O Lord, are my hope. The psalmist proclaimed his hope and trust in *Adonai Yahweh*, the master and covenant God of Israel. It was not just that his hope was in *Yahweh*; he was his hope: <<*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help*>> (Psalm 42:5), and: <<*I have a hope in God – a hope that they themselves also accept – that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous*>> (Acts 24:15).

From my youth, from my birth, from my mother's womb. The Israelites singing this came into the world as members of Abraham's family, the recipients of God's promises. These believers learn here to trace God's work in their lives back to the very beginning of their personal existence, before they were even born. Indeed, they even consider the faith that they articulate now to have begun then, before they could speak it. This is confirmed in Psalms 22:9-10 and 139:13-16, and in Luke 1:41-44.

7 I have been like a portent to many,
but you are my strong refuge.

8 My mouth is filled with your praise,
and with your glory all day long.

9 Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
do not forsake me when my strength is spent.

- 10 For my enemies speak concerning me,
and those who watch for my life consult together.
- 11 They say, ‘Pursue and seize that person
whom God has forsaken,
for there is no one to deliver.’

Psalm 71:7-11

I have been like a portent to many, but you are my strong refuge. Because of the many adversities and attacks, many people were amazed at the psalmist. They were in wonder that a man, especially one so committed to God, could be so afflicted: <<*For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals*>> (1 Corinthians 4:9). Despite it all, he found a strong refuge in God himself.

My mouth is filled with your praise. Because God had been as faithful in providing such a strong refuge, the psalmist was determined to speak praise unto God and speak of his glory.

Do not forsake me when my strength is spent. He knew the faithfulness of God through his younger years and now asked that God continue that faithfulness in his old age and as his strength fails: <<*even to your old age I am he, even when you turn grey I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save*>> (Isaiah 46:4). He knew that man’s strength diminishes with old age, but God’s strength does not.

The psalmist did not only speak of the loss of physical and mental strength, but also the potential loss of spiritual strength. Not every believer grows stronger in the Lord as they grow older. The Bible is filled with examples of those who sinned or fell away in the older years:

- David sinned against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah in his mature years (2 Samuel Chapter 11).
- Solomon was drawn away to idolatry in his later years, mainly because he had taken so many foreign wives (1 Kings Chapter 11).
- King Asa’s trust in God greatly declined in his later years (2 Chronicles 16:7-12).

For my enemies speak concerning me. The psalmist knew what his adversaries said against him. He knew they claimed that God has forsaken him and there is no one to deliver him. His adversity made them think God was no longer with him, so it was a good time to attack, i.e. pursue and seize that person.

Psalm 71:12-16 - Do Not Be Far from Me

The next appeals to God are: <<**do not be far from me**>> and <<**make haste to help me**>>. Under threat from such people as are described as accusers and those who seek to hurt him, the pious singer looks to God for help. He promises to hope continually, leaving to God the timing of the answer to these prayers. He also looks forward to sharing his story of God's righteous acts with his fellow worshippers: praise, tell, and remind them, i.e. 'remind my fellow believers', describe activities among the congregation.

- 12 O God, do not be far from me;
O my God, make haste to help me!
- 13 Let my accusers be put to shame and consumed;
let those who seek to hurt me
be covered with scorn and disgrace.

Psalm 71:12-13

O my God, make haste to help me! With determined enemies, as described in the previous lines, the psalmist needed God's help soon. He felt as if delayed help was no help at all. The psalmist had to deal with the fact that as his years advanced his troubles did not go away. The problems remained. This is a significant test to some believers, but the psalmist understood it as compelling his constant and more personal trust in God.

Let my accusers be put to shame and consumed; be covered with scorn and disgrace. This was the help the psalmist asked for: <<**Those who hate you will be clothed with shame, and the tent of the wicked will be no more**>> (Job 8:22). He wanted God to strike his adversaries with confusion and consumption; with disapproval and dishonour. He not only wanted them defeated, but also discredited.

- 14 But I will hope continually,
and will praise you yet more and more.
- 15 My mouth will tell of your righteous acts,
of your deeds of salvation all day long,
though their number is past my knowledge.
- 16 I will come praising the mighty deeds of the Lord God,
I will praise your righteousness, yours alone.

Psalm 71:14-16

But I will hope continually, and will praise you yet more and more. The psalmist was in serious crisis and depended upon God for help. Yet in this psalm he does not slip into despair or seem to lose the sense of God's favour: *<<O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem>>* (Psalm 130:7). Psalm 71 is a wonderful combination of both problems and praise.

My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all day long. He was happy to testify of both God's righteousness and his salvation, and to do so all day long. He felt the entire day was needed because he did not know the limits of God's righteousness and salvation. They are limitless.

I will come praising the mighty deeds of the Lord God. Looking forward, the psalmist was confident in God's strength, despite his sense of diminished personal strength with advancing years (v.9).

I will praise your righteousness, yours alone. The psalmist was only interested in telling of God's righteousness and not of his own, or the supposed righteousness of pagan gods. The psalmist knew there was only one God and he alone was worthy of praise: *<<Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might>>* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

Psalm 71:17-21 - Care for Me from Youth through Old Age

This stanza returns to the topic of the second stanza: since 'from my youth you have taught me,' i.e. to trust in God (vv.5-6), so even *<<to old age and grey hairs, O God, do not forsake me>>*, as confirmed by v.9. The song goes on to foster an ideal for a pious person's life, asking God to make it long enough so that the singer might proclaim his might to another generation, his power to all those to come; the life of faith is meant to be passed on to one's descendants: *<<We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done>>* (Psalm 78:4), and: *<<Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation>>* (Joel 1:3).

The Book of Psalms readily confesses that the believer's life is full of many troubles and calamities and acknowledges that these are under God's control; and since God governs these troubles, he can also relieve them.

¹⁷ O God, from my youth you have taught me,
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

^{18a} So even to old age and grey hairs,

O God, do not forsake me,
until I proclaim your might
to all the generations to come.

Psalm 71:17-18a

O God, from my youth you have taught me. The psalmist had the blessed fortune to have followed God and learned of him from his young years. It was something that benefitted him to his older years, still declaring God's wonderful works: <<**He does great things and unsearchable, marvellous things without number**>> (Job 5:9). To be taught from one's youth by the older generation displays stability and consistency: <<**For inquire now of bygone generations, and consider what their ancestors have found; for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing, for our days on earth are but a shadow**>> (Job 8:8-9). There is no fluttering about from one fad to another, from one controversy to another.

So even to old age and grey hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come. He prayed for the continued presence of God so that he could declare God's strength to a new generation.

^{18b} Your power ¹⁹ and your righteousness, O God,
reach the high heavens.

You who have done great things,
O God, who is like you?

²⁰ 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.

²¹ You will increase my honour,
and comfort me once again.

Psalm 71:18b-21

Your power and your righteousness, O God, reach the high heavens. The psalmist considered the greatness of God, first in that his righteousness was of a different order than that of men, very high above that of men. Then, that God is the one who has done great things: <<**Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them'**>> (Psalm 126:2), and: <<**for the Mighty**

One has done great things for me, and holy is his name>> (Luke 1:49), beyond what men can do. The surpassing righteousness and power of God made him ask, O God, who is like you?

You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again. He understood that all things were in God's hands and that if he had experienced many troubles and calamities, that too was shown to him by God. That same God could also revive him, bringing him up again from the depths of the earth, unlike those who oppose him and God: <<*But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth*>> (Psalm 63:9).

You will increase my honour, and comfort me once again. More than a prayer, this was a confident proclamation. Although he was older in years, he was still expected that God would increase his greatness and continue his comfort: <<*You will say on that day: I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me*>> (Isaiah 12:1).

Psalm 71:22-24 - I Will Praise You for Your Deliverance

The psalm closes by bringing to conclusion the previous parts of the psalm, especially the confidence (vv.20-21), and the anticipation of giving testimony in worship (vv.14-16). Not only does the singer look forward to joyful songs in worship, he expects to talk of God's righteous help all day long, i.e. even outside of the gathered congregation.

22 I will also praise you with the harp
for your faithfulness, O my God;
I will sing praises to you with the lyre,
O Holy One of Israel.

23 My lips will shout for joy
when I sing praises to you;
my soul also, which you have rescued.

24 All day long my tongue will talk of your righteous help,
for those who tried to do me harm
have been put to shame, and disgraced.

Psalm 71:22-24

I will also praise you with the harp, I will sing praises to you with the lyre. The psalmist promised to praise God not only with his voice, but also with his musical

instruments. It would be a song celebrating God for what he has done (your faithfulness) and for who he is (O Holy One of Israel).

Holy One of Israel is the common name for God in Isaiah, where it is used twenty five times, and is rare outside of that book, appearing only in 2 Kings 19:22, which is the same as Isaiah 37:23, Psalms 71:22, 78:41 and 89:18; and Jeremiah 50:29 and 51:5.

All day long my tongue will talk of your righteous help. His lips and soul were already given to praise God in song. Now he added the talk of his tongue to speak of God's righteousness, especially as it was seen in triumph over his enemies, i.e. for those who tried to do me harm have been put to shame, and disgraced. This is vindication, not vindictiveness. It will be part of the joy of heaven: <<***And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: 'Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!'***>> (Revelation 15:3), and: <<***Rejoice over her, O heaven, you saints and apostles and prophets! For God has given judgement for you against her***>> (Revelation 18:20).