

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)

Dr. Barry M. Foster

June 20, 2021 (Father's Day)

A Grandfather's Prayer

Psalm 71:1-24 (NIV)

*1 In you, Lord, I have taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame.*

*2 In your righteousness, rescue me and deliver me;
turn your ear to me and save me.*

*3 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.*

*4 Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of those who are evil and cruel.*

*5 For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord,
my confidence since my youth.*

*6 From birth I have relied on you;
you brought me forth from my mother's womb.
I will ever praise you.*

*7 I have become a sign to many;
you are my strong refuge.*

*8 My mouth is filled with your praise,
declaring your splendor all day long.*

*9 Do not cast me away when I am old;
do not forsake me when my strength is gone.*

*10 For my enemies speak against me;
those who wait to kill me conspire together.*

*11 They say, "God has forsaken him;
pursue him and seize him,
for no one will rescue him."*

*12 Do not be far from me, my God;
come quickly, God, to help me.*

*13 May my accusers perish in shame;
may those who want to harm me be covered with scorn and disgrace.*

*14 As for me, I will always have hope;
I will praise you more and more.*

*15 My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds,
of your saving acts all day long—
though I know not how to relate them all.*

*16 I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, Sovereign Lord;
I will proclaim your righteous deeds, yours alone.*

*17 Since my youth, God, you have taught me,
and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds.*

*18 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.*

*19 Your righteousness, God, reaches to the heavens,
you who have done great things.
Who is like you, God?*

*20 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.*

*21 You will increase my honor
and comfort me once more.*

*22 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.*

*23 My lips will shout for joy
when I sing praise to you—
I whom you have delivered.*

*24 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 31:1-5, NIV]

*1 In you, Lord, I have taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame;
deliver me in your righteousness.*

*2 Turn your ear to me,
come quickly to my rescue;
be my rock of refuge,
a strong fortress to save me.*

*3 Since you are my rock and my fortress,
for the sake of your name lead and guide me.*

*4 Keep me free from the trap that is set for me,
for you are my refuge.*

*5 Into your hands I commit my spirit;
deliver me, Lord, my faithful God.*

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! Fourteen years ago, at the tender age of fifty-two, I celebrated my first Father's Day as a grandfather, thanks to this guy. (That's Ian's birth picture. He's a lot taller now.) I told everyone that asked that I was far too young to be a grandpa, but as you know, you don't really have a say in the matter. Once you have children, the question of whether or not you will become a grandparent, or when, is completely out of your hands.

But despite my youthfulness, I've grown into the role over the years, and I do enjoy being a grandfather. It helps that our children are amazing parents who have raised (so far) a total of seven outstanding grandchildren, as any unbiased observer would be able to see. (I do have pictures of my grandchildren, but I don't know how to get them from where they are to something that will let me put them up for you to see them. And as soon as I say that, now the women are all thinking, "Awww, now we want to see the pictures of your grandchildren." And the men are thinking, "You remember what they look like, right? You could identify them in a lineup? Then what's the problem?")

All right—let's get back on track. So now, with some years under my belt, I can see some things in the Scriptures that I might not have seen or appreciated as much when I was younger. Our passage for today, Psalm 71, is a good example of a passage that holds a lot more meaning than I realized earlier in my life.

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Have you ever gone to your dad or your grandpa to see if he has a tool you need for a project you're doing at home? He'll say, "*Let me see if I've got something in the garage (or the basement or the tool shed). . . .*" He'll rummage around for a while and then hand you something you've never seen before and tell you, "*This ought to do the trick. Let me show you how to use it.*" Or maybe you've asked for help with a problem you're facing, or with a question about something you need to decide about? And he listens to you for a bit and says, "*You know, back when I was just getting started in my career, a friend of mine told me something that helped me from that day on.*" And then he'll share with you a bit of wisdom that he's used over the years.

The psalm we just heard read for us is a lot like that tool your dad pulled out for you, or the bit of remembered wisdom he shared with you. Let me explain.

[Slide 3] *The author of Psalm 71*

Psalm 71 doesn't give us the name of the author of this prayer. It is included in a collection within the book of Psalms that is ascribed to David. But what is more telling is that the first three verses of the psalm are almost identical to Psalm 31:1-4, which *is* said to be from David. And as we read the rest of the two psalms, it becomes clear that Psalm 31 comes from a time when David was younger, and Psalm 71 comes from a time when the author is an older man.

So either an older man is composing his prayer in Psalm 71 and using David's words written earlier to guide him as he begins his prayer, or David himself is recalling his earlier psalm and applying the opening words to his new situation as an older man (which is what I think is more likely, though not certain).

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That's why I've entitled today's sermon, "*A Grandfather's Prayer.*"

The author of Psalm 71 is an older man. He's pulling out a well-used, well-trusted tool from his tool belt. This is a tool he has used often; he knows it well. When you're younger, you're learning new things all the time. You're developing skills, developing your facility in using the tools of your particular trade—whether that is welding or bookkeeping or web design. As you get older, you keep learning (or at least, you should!), but you also develop familiarity and confidence in certain tools that become your favorites. They are your go-to's when you need something done.

[Slide 5] *Verses 1-4: Recalling God's faithfulness in a time of new challenges*

That's what the psalmist is doing here. He's using a familiar, trusted tool: a prayer that helps him recall God's faithfulness that he has witnessed through the years. He reminds himself as he calls on the Lord that the God to whom he is

praying has answered him in the past; he has delivered him from danger in the past; he has rescued him from his enemies time and again.

Trust—in a tool or a person or God—is built over time. Developing trust requires frequent small steps in the same direction; repeated experiences over a long period of time that build confidence. Confidence is not the same thing as bravado. It isn't posturing or boasting. Confidence is having an expectation that is based upon proven dependability, strength that has been tested, established value that has been verified and found to be true.

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The psalmist is recalling the faithfulness of God throughout his life; the words that he has borrowed from the past are signals that remind him of specific times that God has helped him; of frequent encounters with God over the years that have built his confidence in God, that have strengthened him in his relationship with God as he has put his trust in the Lord and the Lord has proved himself trustworthy.

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Now, in his old age, he is again facing enemies; new enemies that threaten his life. Or perhaps he is still facing familiar enemies, who continue to harass and attack him. The wicked are all about him; he needs God's protection and God's deliverance.

One of the things that happens to us as we age is that we become more aware of the evil that is around us. I'm not talking about getting cranky because the things that we like are being pushed away in order to bring in things that young folks like that old folks think are ridiculous. I'm talking about real evil.

As we age, we have more experiences with which to measure the world around us. And we have more experiences of being cheated; of seeing criminality going unchecked; of seeing people break the law and get away with it, maybe even profit by it. We see more senseless wars, more corruption, more foolishness enshrined in institutions and laws.

When you're young, you see awful things happening in the world, and you want to change the world to make it better. So you set your sights on doing that. You're convinced that you will make a difference. As you age, it's easy to become cynical—because despite the good that has come from your efforts, it doesn't seem to have made a lasting impact. You see evil that is as entrenched as it ever was, and it doesn't look like it is possible to root it out.

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That's when the psalmist pulls out his trusty tool, his familiar prayer. He knows that what he needs is God; there is no other help that is adequate in the face of the enemies that are pitted against him—no other help that can defeat the wicked who surround him and the evil he sees both around him and within him. So he returns to his refuge—the fortress to which he retreats when the attack is overwhelming, the place where his defense is the strongest, where he can hold out.

[Slide 9] *Verses 5-8: Rehearsing God's faithfulness to strengthen his resolve*

The psalmist reminds himself of what God has done for him when he was younger. He reminds himself of the truths that God has taught him. He rehearses, both mentally and verbally, the faithfulness of God, how God has proven himself over and over in specific times and ways that he can recount. He recalls the times and events that have given him reasons to trust God, where God's strength and saving power have been evident.

In our family, all of our kids have gone through some tough times in the past couple of years. What has been so wonderful to see is that as each of them has gone through the various challenges and trials, all of them have reminded one another of all the ways that God has helped our family, beginning before any of them were born, and continuing through the times they can point to when they were children, to the times they were in college, and then in their lives as adults. Mary and I have listened as they have rehearsed the stories of God's faithfulness, his provision, his deliverance, his help. We've watched them retreat to God's fortress, to the rock that is Jesus Christ, and find their strength in him.

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Rehearsing those experiences and the truths God taught you enables you to become what the psalmist said he had become—a sign that signals God's ability to others, so that they can know that there is help available for them as well. When we rehearsed God's faithfulness for our kids, we became a sign for them, an indicator of God's ability. We became a signal, an indicator light—something that they could point to, something they could recall when they faced the challenges and enemies that were harassing them. Our testimony strengthened their resolve to trust in the Lord and allowed them to build their own confidence in God. When they rehearsed God's faithfulness for each other, they were strengthened even further, and helped each other deepen their confidence in the Lord's faithfulness.

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You know, there's not much that is more useless than a broken indicator light. But one that works is absolutely crucial, no matter how small it is. If you and I are supposed to be signs for those around us, we need to be "on." When we

rehearse God's faithfulness, what he has done for us; when we tell others and remind ourselves of the goodness of God, his salvation, his rescue, his provision for us in our times of need, we can have a big impact. We can serve as that crucial indicator light that points the way to the solution that others need.

[Slide 12] *Verses 9-14: Turning to God when I am old*

Now we come to the heart of the psalmist's prayer. He is in genuine need, approaching desperation. He is also painfully aware of two critical realities in his situation: (1) He is weaker than he used to be. He has lost a step. (2) Meanwhile, his enemies continue to mount their attacks.

It is a hard thing—particularly for a man—to recognize and come to grips with the fact that you reach an age where you can no longer do at all what you used to do with ease. Where you once had great strength and ability, you now are left with the unreliable memory of what you once were capable of doing. I've often quoted the saying on the T-shirt I saw once: "*The older I get, the better I was.*"

Meanwhile, the world rumbles on. History marches forward, bringing new challenges that quickly overwhelm your diminishing strengths. And your enemies are relentless. You might defeat some of them, but new and more powerful ones arise to replace the ones you've beaten.

It doesn't really matter who or what those enemies are. They can be your competitors in business or opponents of your worldview, religion, or political position. They can be new challenges that exceed your capabilities or your own ongoing personal frailties. They can be physical ailments that come with old age or spiritual powers that are as old as the heavens themselves. What matters is not the specific kind of enemy you are facing, what matters is that they are threatening your peace, your home, your livelihood, your nation, you.

And it matters how you will respond.

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The psalmist's enemies consider his faith in God misplaced; either his God is impotent and unable to deliver him, or else has abandoned him, leaving him on his own in his weakened state. So they plan their attack.

But the psalmist turns to God: "*Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone.*" His cry for help is combined with a determination to trust. He reminds himself that his hope is not in the inevitable victory of progress, but in God, who alone can save him from his enemies. He doesn't listen to their mocking voices, but to the voice of his own experience with the God who has saved him time and time again over the years. He recalls God's

faithfulness and chooses once again to trust once again, to put his hope in the one who has saved him before and will save him this time as well.

[Slide 14] *Verses 15-18: Looking to the future generations*

Verses 15-18 are, I think, the key to the entire prayer. For it is in this portion of his prayer that we see not only the psalmist's choice to turn to God and his determination to trust in God, but his comprehension of the need to tell of what God has done to others. He cries out, "*Do not forsake me, my God; do not fail to help me until I can tell the next generation what you have done.*"

The psalmist recognizes that he stands in a special place. He is an older man who has experienced God's help throughout his life. He can testify to God's saving power, to God's faithful love that has been demonstrated in specific times and ways over decades. And he has an audience who needs to hear what he has to declare, who need to know what God has done for him.

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As older men, as fathers and grandfathers—and even if you don't have any children, you can still fulfill the role of a spiritual father or grandfather—we have a holy responsibility and a sacred opportunity to share what God has done for us to our children, and our grandchildren; to the next generation. Nothing that God gives us is just for us. Whatever God does for you or teaches you or gives to you is never for you alone. It is always given to us so that we may share it with others. We are stewards, not owners. We are always and only temporary managers of the gifts and resources God puts in our hands.

I know that there is an easy excuse for not trying to pass on what we've learned from God or what we've experienced with God. "*The young people don't want to listen to me. They just spend all their time staring at their phone.*" Older people have been complaining about younger generations for at least 2500 years (if we believe Socrates). But there actually is a way to bridge the gap.

It starts with befriending them. When you befriend your children and grandchildren, you listen to them. You engage with them in the things that they like to do. And as you build your relationship with them, you give them a reason to listen to you. And the things that you share about what God has done for you have weight, because they don't sound like moralizing lectures or angry complaints. They sound like help from someone who loves them.

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So tell them your stories. Let them know what God taught you, what Jesus did for you, what the Holy Spirit empowered you to do when you were afraid. Tell them about what God delivered you from, how he rescued you, how he provided

for you. Let them know what he shaped you to be—and how unlikely that was, given what you used to be!

Tell your kids your story, the story of your faith, your spiritual battles and the things you learned. Tell your grandchildren about your walk with Jesus, why you go to church, why that matters to you. Tell those within your sphere of influence about what God is doing in and for you.

Don't assume that anyone knows the lessons God has taught you: unless you tell them they won't really know what God has done or given *you*. You know that God transformed you from what you were to what you are. People around you just think that you're a nice guy. And they never put two and two together just because you go to church. Because if they don't know Jesus, they also likely think that church is a club for nice guys where we remind each other to be nice. So don't assume. Tell them what Jesus has done for you.

[Slide 17] *Verses 19-24: Looking to the resurrection*

The closing verses of the psalm focus mostly on the psalmist's declaration of his intention to proclaim the praises of God, to tell others who God is and what he has done. (That's what true worship and true praise is—not simply singing great music in church, but proclaiming to your world who Jesus is and what he has done for you and for the whole world.) If you'll take these verses to heart, pray them out as your own prayer, asking God to help you carry them out, you'll start seeing a change in your own outlook and in your day-to-day interactions with those around you.

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But there's a neat little nugget hidden away in this closing section, in verses 20-21: "*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.*"

When we read the Old Testament, we find very little written about what happens after death. Even today, Judaism is primarily a religion focused on matters of this life—ethics, behavior, community, and so on. But in this prayer, probably from David, we have a hint of a belief in resurrection. I say, "probably from David," because even though we don't have a specific inscription attributing this to David, we see in several other psalms of his similar hints about resurrection (such as Psalm 16). That, plus the use of Psalm 31 tip the scale in favor of David as the author for me.

David, or whoever wrote this, clearly anticipated God's intervention on his behalf after his death. Verse 19 extols God's righteousness. The psalmist is aware

of his own failings, and trusts in God to bestow his own righteousness upon him and to “*bring him up*” from his grave, to crown him with honor and bring him everlasting comfort. So even though it’s fairly undeveloped, still not more than a seed, we see a hope, an expectation that God’s salvation will not only involve deliverance from his enemies so that he doesn’t die, but deliverance from death itself, transformation and deliverance from the grave in order to live eternally in the presence of God.

Because he has that hope, the psalmist makes his final declarations: he will trust in the Lord. He will continue to proclaim what God has done for him all of his days—and throughout eternity. He will pass on to the next generation the good news of God’s salvation with specific testimonies about what God did for him.

That, my fellow dads and grandpas, is a gift that only you can give this Father’s Day. We who have the clearer promise of resurrection because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have the greater responsibility and opportunity to share that hope with others, beginning with our own family. I hope you’ll take hold of the opportunity. Maybe start later on today, while you’re around the grill with your kids or grandkids. But make sure that they hear *from you* what God has done *for you* and what he can do *for them*. That’s your one job today (besides manning the grill and the remote).

[Slide 19]

Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

Please be careful to maintain our safe distancing practice as you leave.

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]