

Rock of Ages

Psalm 71

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“Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go.” Wouldn’t it be an incredible gift to always have a place to go, a place of refuge where you could know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the land on which you stand is solid like a rock? The bible tells of such a place. The bible tells of such a God.

One writer imagines, “The person who prays this psalm is one who is hiding in God, or perhaps trying to hide behind God. The image is striking: think, perhaps, of a child who runs to hide behind a parent’s leg...”¹ I have hidden behind my parent’s legs, and it was a place of refuge. My children hid behind my legs, and I trust it was a refuge. Could it be the psalmist wants to give witness to just that type of faith. “I ran to God, hid behind his legs, and he protected me.” There certainly is a childlike quality to faith in God.

Yet according to another commentator, “The psalmist testifies to a faith nurtured by time: ‘Upon you have I have leaned from my birth.’ Time has amazing power to nurture pebbles of faith into bedrock, to turn seedlings of faith into massive trees. The psalmist draws upon memory, memory that reaches back to birth. The psalmist affirms the power of memory and time to create trust in God.”²

I like to think both are true. To know God is our rock of refuge, one to who we can always go, calls forth a childlike faith. When we are afraid, when we are lonely, when we are attacked, when we are overwhelmed, when we are heartbroken, abandoned, distressed, depressed, oppressed, with knees that are skinned, toes that are stubbed, bodies that are bruised, and feelings that have been hurt, we run to God and we hide behind him.

But having a childlike faith does not mean faith in God is childish. So there is a depth and maturity to this faith in God, to this faith which says God is our rock of refuge to which we can always go. This particular psalm conveys in part what the psalms and the whole bible say in total. God has been there always.

- God is there when we rise. “In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.” (Psalm 5:3)
- God is there when we lie down. “I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.” (Psalm 4:8)
- God is there all through the day. “From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised.” (Psalm 113:3)

¹ Jon L. Berquist, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, p. 371.

² Art Ross, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, p. 372

- God was there before we were born. “You knit me together in my mother’s womb.” (Psalm 139:13)
- God will be there when this life ends. “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

God is always there. God is always there not just every hour of the day and every stage of our lives. God is always there, wherever there may be.

- “If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your right hand will guard me, your right hand will hold me fast.” (Psalm 139:8-10)
- He is there when we enter the gates of the temple with thanksgiving in our hearts.
- He is there when we sit down by the banks of the river in Babylon and pour out our sad songs of exile.
- He is there when we return from exile, when the Lord restores our fortunes and brings us back from captivity and our mouths are filled with laughter.
- He is there in green pastures and beside still waters.
- He is there when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.
- He is there when we are surrounded by all our friends in church and we are singing, “Behold how pleasant and how good it is when the people of God dwell in unity.”
- He is there when even our closest friends desert us and betray us.
- He is there when the orbits of the sun and moon and planets are so orderly and majestic that we know all is well in the heavens and on earth.
- And he is there when the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, and the waters roar and foam.

God is there always. Like little children we can grab hold of his leg and hide behind him, sure of his protection, his comfort, and his care.

Because this psalm clearly portrays God as our rock and our refuge, it also stands as a critique of every other person or place in which we seek refuge. What I mean is the image of a child grabbing hold of a parent’s knee and hiding in their shadow cuts both ways. There will always be a little boy named Wayne who was at a summer day camp that his dad was leading. There were hundreds of kids, and it was great fun to have my dad in charge. The camp was huge, a park that covered acres and acres of land. We had singing and games, arts and crafts, contests, piñatas, so much to do. One day I got caught up in the excitement and ran off on my own. I left my father’s side. I didn’t get lost, because I was with a group of kids and counselors. But at some point I realized I was separated from my dad. At that point no one else’s knee would do. I needed my dad, and with tears streaming down my face I cried and cried and ran this way and that. There were lots of knees to grab hold of, but it wasn’t until I saw those familiar ones belonging to my dad that I was comforted. I grabbed hold of his knees. He was my rock and my refuge.

But unlike God, my dad wasn't always there. There came a day when he was diagnosed with a progressive illness. There was a day he needed a cane. Then a wheelchair. Then he was confined to a bed. Then came the feeding tube. If he could have been there, he would. But even moms and dads with the best intentions are not able to be there always. And we are sad to say that even when they are able, some moms and dads are not available.

If we can't stand on our parents as a rock that will always be there, how much less can we stand on things that are earthly and fading? Some stand on wealth and prosperity and if their 401k and stock portfolio seem secure then they think they are on a solid rock. Some look in a mirror and if the face looking back at them is beautiful and attractive they think they can stand on that solid rock. Some have degrees and diplomas as their rock. Some have a badge that says I work here and that is the rock they stand on. Some run fast and jump high, some sing well, some dance, some paint, and all of these things give you something to stand on. But none of these are a rock that is there always. None of these is the rock that is there 24/7, 365 days a year, from birth to death, through thick and thin, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and health.

So we not only need the image of a little child grabbing hold of a knee and hiding in the protection of a parent, we also need to hear this psalm as the voice of one who has lived long on this earth, as one who maybe stepped on some of those other rocks and put his trust in things that are not there always, and through experience and through trials and testing has come to realize there is one rock, one rock alone.

In the early days of the church, not long after the disciples who walked with Jesus had passed on, a new generation of disciples emerged. A man named Polycarp is said to have been discipled by the apostle John and later appointed as bishop of Smyrna. He joined in the battle against the heresy known as Gnosticism. Polycarp lived to be 86 years old, but at the end of his life the Roman authorities found him threatening enough that they came to arrest him and put him to death. When his friends urged him to run, he simply said, "God's will be done." Then he let the soldiers in. After being interrogated and threatened he was martyred, put to death for his faith in God, for his faith in Jesus Christ. Before he was sentenced to death he was given the opportunity to deny Jesus Christ and to save his life. With the proconsul urging him, and saying, "Swear, and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ;" Polycarp declared, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"³ Polycarp knew who his rock was, and he stood on him, confident and trusting even to the end. Polycarp knew God was with him always. Faith like that is childlike, completely trusting in God. ". But there is absolutely nothing childish about it. That type of faith is rock solid. "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any injury." Polycarp knew God was there...always.

³ Christian History website

I did a funeral several years ago for a good friend who belonged to our church. His name was Franklin Rhodes, but everyone knew him by his nickname, “Dusty” Rhodes. What a great name for a great guy. In preparation for his service the family showed me some photos of Dusty when he was a WWII pilot. He flew a plane with the nickname Double Trouble. Surrounded by his crew, Dusty is standing tall and proud. He flew 33 missions. When it was all said and done he flew home and every member of his crew made it back alive. There are pictures of Dusty standing next to that old plane and you still see the pride in his face. If all Dusty did was fly 33 missions it would be reason to stop and give thanks for his life. But listening to his family talk about him, it was obvious he flew many other missions. He returned from the war and received a Bachelor’s degree in Mechanical Engineering. Mission accomplished. He met and married his wife Venice. Mission accomplished. He earned a master’s degree and then traveled all over the world working. Mission accomplished. He raised two kids. Mission accomplished. He developed hobbies like woodworking and model trains.

Through it all, Dusty’s most important mission was to be faithful to his God. Saturday nights he would say, “Going to church tomorrow.” It was not a question he was asking. It was a statement he was making. He served as a deacon and an elder. Long after he had grown old and his body became feeble, Dusty Rhodes would slowly make his way into church and sit in his assigned seat. How do you bring a life of faith to a fitting close. Dusty chose to study the Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5-7 in the gospel of Matthew. That sermon of Jesus begins with the beatitudes, the pronouncement of blessing, and it is followed by many other powerful words from Jesus himself. The Sermon on the Mount ends with a parable. It is a parable about a rock. Jesus said,

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” Polycarp said I lived eighty six years and God never failed me. Dusty flew 33 missions in WWII and filled his life with countless other missions, and when he got to the end of his life he let the bible fall open to Jesus saying that if you build your life on him you are building on the solid rock. When you trust in the rock you are saying you have a faith that is childlike, that runs to God and grabs hold of his leg and seeks protection. But having a childlike faith is not having a faith that is childish. This psalm was written by one who knew God was always there. Always there.

I told you there came a time when I couldn’t run to my dad and grab hold of his knee. I guess my dad saw that day coming, because from an early age he took me to church. And it wasn’t always willingly. But he took me to church, where I could hear the stories and sing the songs and say the prayers and learn about the wise man who built his house upon the rock, and the old hymn that says, “Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in

thee.” My dad was teaching me that there is someone who is always there. He was young and strong and able to protect me at that time, but he knew the day was coming. And he wanted me to build my life on the rock that is always there.

I spent a lot of time as a young person putting my faith in other places, standing on other rocks. I loved sports and I stood on that rock as long as I could, playing basketball and running races, until I wasn’t tall enough or fast enough to excel. I did well in school and I stepped hard on that rock and got a lot of satisfaction out of succeeding in classes and getting some scholarships and winning some awards. But that rock couldn’t support the weight I put on it, it couldn’t meet the deep desire to know if my life had meaning, if my life had purpose, if my life could be filled with joy. So I stepped on a bunch of rocks as a young adult until one day they all seemed to give way at the same time, and I started to sink.

At that time I was riding a bus about an hour each way to a community college in the next town over. I didn’t have any friends riding that bus, and so it was a long and lonely bus ride, which took place every day during a long and lonely period of time in my life. At one point, I was so low I called out to Jesus for help. I didn’t know what help looked like, but I knew I needed it. I was sinking and I needed a rock to stand on, a rock that would always be there.

I can’t tell you how it happened. I can’t give you a formula. I can’t write out certain steps to follow. I don’t even know when it happened. All I know is that it did happen. I was reaching out for a leg to grab hold of, for a rock who would always be there, and one day it simply became clear to me, I had a leg to grab onto, I had a rock on which I could stand. I had a God who would be there for me always. I had a God named Jesus who promised he would never leave me nor forsake me.

Maybe you need a leg you can grab hold of today. Maybe you are sinking and you need a solid rock to stand on. Maybe you have put your foot down on some other rocks that gave way, that let you down, that disappointed you, that couldn’t bear the weight or stand the test of time. Maybe you are looking for someone who will always be there, always, as in all the time and every single moment and every situation and every season and stage of life. Maybe you need a place to set your foot down and know there is safety and security and power and strength and love, a deep and abiding love that will surround you and fill you and sustain you and support you. Maybe you are ready to pray with the psalmist, “Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go.” Maybe you are ready to say, “Rock of ages, cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee.”