

Do Not Cast Me Away

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[0 : 00] Let's turn this morning to Psalm 71 and verse 3. Be my rock of refuge to which I can always go.

There is something beautifully poetic about these words. The person who wrote them first lived thousands of years ago in a country thousands of miles distant from our own.

And yet they represent for us the timeless and universal yearnings of the human heart. Which of us does not at one time or another at least silently pray words like this even if we do not always know to whom we pray them?

They may be beautifully poetic but they're also brutally realistic because they represent the longing of our hearts for certainty, for security, for belonging.

We need to know because we've been made to know that someone in this lonely universe is watching out for us. That a higher power is conscious of us and yes perhaps even cares for us.

[1 : 24] In Psalm 71 verse 3 that anonymous someone that unknown higher power to whom we call is given a name.

The name Lord. Though we may not know it, it's always been him we've been yearning for. It's him who's our rock of refuge to whom we can always go.

The Lord whose name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And this morning I want to introduce you for a short while to the rock of your refuge and invite you to find in him your home and your help and your love and your life.

This morning I want each of us to drop the act and to acknowledge that it's always been him we've been yearning for even if we've tried our hardest to deny it.

Yes, it's the Lord who is our rock of refuge. The Lord who according to the Bible created the world by the power of his voice and redeemed the world by sending his son to die on the cross.

[2 : 42] The Lord who governs the motions of the stars and the planets, the weather systems and the great tides. And yet he will be to you this morning your rock of refuge to whom you may go whenever you are lost and uncertain, whenever you are doubting and hurt.

He'll never get tired of you calling out to him in that as many times as you call upon him to help he will listen and answer.

Well it seems to me that when the writer speaks of the Lord as his rock of refuge he could be speaking first of all as the Lord as a home for the homeless or as a help for the helpless or as a love for the loveless or as life for the lifeless.

Yes, that's it. Let's all drop the act this morning. Let's all acknowledge our basic human yearning for home for help for love and for life and realize that we'll only ever be satisfied with the Lord.

First of all then when the psalmist is speaking of God as his rock of refuge he could be referring to God as a home for the homeless. A home for the homeless.

[4 : 15] According to Shelter Scotland Scotland's homeless charity one household in Scotland becomes homeless every 18 minutes. There are nearly 30,000 homeless households in Scotland today.

And it was really good to see that problem highlighted so prominently at Christmas time with various appeals. As one would think in 2020 with all our technological advances the problem of homelessness would have been eradicated.

Well not so for though we may map the human genome and send satellites beyond the borders of our solar system over 14,000 children are homeless in Scotland today.

The word refuge is often used to describe a place where homeless people can find temporary accommodation. And it's used that way today because it's always been used that way.

When the psalmist talks about the Lord as being his rock of refuge he's telling us that's where I find my home. It's in God that I feel safe.

[5 : 27] In Job 24 Job is describing the plight of the homeless in his time. The poor who are rather like the donkeys of the desert foraging for their food.

And in Job 24 7 he says of them lacking clothes they spend the night naked. They have nothing to cover themselves in the cold. And in verse 8 he continues the poor are drenched by mountain rains and they cling to the rock for lack of shelter.

So for Job a rock was a place where homeless people found shelter. When we talk of the Lord as our rock of refuge what we're saying is that it's in him we find our home.

That it's in God we feel safe. That he's dealing shelter from the storm for us. Tell me which one of us does not need that refuge that home that shelter?

Over 1500 years ago the great North African Christian St. Augustine wrote these words. Lord you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

[6 : 44] You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. And that's beautiful. But it's the precise sentiment of the psalmist when he speaks of the Lord as the rock of his refuge.

Because no matter how settled we may feel we know there's something about the world which means it's not home. It may be the nagging feeling that there's more to life than this.

The sense of the divine we have when we witness a glorious sunset or are present at the birth of our child. We try our hardest to make our houses our homes but try as might there's always something missing.

because the truth is we're never entirely at home anywhere because we were designed to be at home in God.

I want to find my refuge somewhere. I want to find it anywhere and the psalmist tells us you can find it in God that he's a home for the homeless, he's a rest for the restless.

[7 : 54] We don't want to keep feeling unsettled. We want to settle down into someone and that someone is God because ultimately home for us isn't a place, home for us is a person.

We can be in any place but if we're not at home in God, we're not at home period, but if we are at home in God, then we're at home wherever we are.

And it seems crazy doesn't it not to speak of finding our home in someone, in a refuge in a person. but when that person is God, what seems delusional becomes inspirational because there really is no end to the wonder of his love.

There is no limit to the depth of his compassion. There is no boundary to the security of his grace. At home, we're safe, we're secure, we belong in God.

because he's our rock and refuge, we're safe and we belong. Shut up in him. The dogs outside me bark, but we are safe from their bites.

[9 : 03] I want to find my refuge somewhere. I want to find it anywhere. And I, for one, along with millions of other Christians, have found a home in God.

You can too. Secondly, when the psalmist speaks of God as his refuge, he could be speaking about God as the help for the helpless.

God as the help for the helpless. You know, this is a fascinating psalm and it's fascinating because of its emphasis upon the human experience. This is a world without doubt for the young.

The pace, the technology, the culture, leaves most of us behind. Most everything is for the young. But not so much Psalm 71.

Well, it is if young people will heed its wisdom, but this is most obviously a psalm for the seniors. We don't know how old the psalmist was when he wrote it, but it focuses our attention on what happens when we are old and grey, as the psalmist says in verse 18.

[10 : 16] Some of us are fortunate to be old and not grey. Others of us are unfortunate in that we're young and grey. But I think we know to what particular age group the psalmist is referring.

Sometimes the psalmist will commend the virtues of wisdom in old age. But at other times, the psalmist will use the physical limitations of old age to illustrate human weakness.

So for example, in verse 9, the psalmist prays, do not cast me away when I am old. Do not forsake me when my strength is gone. So here's a person really who feels old.

We don't know his precise age, but he feels like an old man. His strength is waning, his abilities are rapidly diminishing. He is faced on every side by enemies, and he does not have the physical wherewithal to fight against them.

When he was young, perhaps he could have taken up his sword, he could have fought for his freedom, but now he can't scale a molehill, far less a mountain. But it's when the psalmist is at a total end of himself, when he's got nothing left to give, that he recognises that the Lord is his refuge, that it's the Lord who in his helplessness will help him, who in his weakness will strengthen him, who in his captivity will liberate him, who in his disgrace vindicate him, who in his shame deliver him, and who in his trouble rescue him.

[12 : 01] You see, for the psalmist, old age and physical weakness, according to this psalm, anyway, seem to go hand in hand. One belongs to the other, and the other belongs to the one. Do you ever feel at a total end of yourself, and of your own inner resources of strength?

It doesn't have to be an old age experience per se, but whatever it is, the young person in you has suddenly got very old. Perhaps you feel rather like a boxer, who for the whole three minute round has been up against the ropes, being hit again, and again, and again, but then you hear the bell, and you crawl back to your corner, to your refuge, where that merciless opponent can't get to you.

You can recover your strength. I wrote this sermon on Christmas Eve, and on Christmas Eve, I took the train into the office here in the church, just through that door, and opposite me on the train, there was a young man reading the atheist Christopher Hitchens book, God is not great.

I didn't wish to think harshly of a young man, but apart from the obviously poor timing of its reading, it had been Christmas Eve, I thought to myself, I wonder where this young man finds strength when things are tough for him, where his refuge is.

He looked like a very intelligent young man, and so I thought to myself, well perhaps he finds it in his intelligence, personal tragedy is no respecter of your intelligence.

[13 : 43] He was a very handsome and fit looking man, and perhaps he thought to himself, I can find all the strength I need in here.

Sooner or later, our strength wanes and weakens every one of us. He looked like a very well-educated young man, perhaps he thought, I can find strength and dignity in my personal achievements.

Son, when your gravestone cracks with the decay of years, who will care what you ever achieved in this life?

And then I saw a picture in my mind of a child in a stable in Bethlehem, hardly a picture of the intelligent, hardly a picture of human achievement or strength, more really of humility, dependence and potential, and I realised that he, Jesus Christ, is the greatest refuge for all who are in him, have hope for the hopeless and help for the helpless.

And then furthermore, I realised at that point on Christmas receive, that God has never been interested in us for what we may do for him.

[15 : 10] God's only ever been interested in us for what he can do for us. So it matters not then whether we are strong or weak, whether we are young or old.

The important thing is that we find in him, the refuge who is our rock, our refuge. Some people mistakenly believe that if they become Christians all their problems will disappear and their life will become a bed of roses.

The reality is somewhat different. God never promised any of us an easy life, but he did promise us himself. And the grace and strength he provides to overcome the problems we may face.

the ultimate human experience the psalmist testifies, consists in God, God's strength for the helpless. That's the kind I want.

That's the kind of help I've always needed. The grace of Christ which is sufficient for me. And the more I've experienced it personally in my helplessness, the more I've learned to rely upon it in my strength also.

[16 : 22] It's true for me. What's true for the psalmist, what's true for millions and millions of other Christians can be true for you also. The third sense in which the psalmist may speak of God as the rock of refuge is that God is love for the loveless.

God is love for the loveless. You know as we read through Psalm 71 and we try to put ourselves in this man's shoes, a terrifying feeling of isolation sweeps over us.

Here's a man who's very much alone. He feels as though he's swimming in a sea of sharks. Everyone around him is trying to get a bite. And so he turns to one and he appeals for help but the one to whom he has turned bites him.

And then he turns to another and appeals to him for help but that one bites him too. It may not be true. It may just be the way he feels but he feels as though he is the most hated man in the whole world and he is all alone.

Listen to what he says in verse 10. My enemies speak against me. Those who wait to kill me conspire together. And what he's done to deserve such isolation is neither here nor there.

[17 : 44] What's true is the way he feels misunderstood, rejected, unloved, alone. But he also knows that however mercilessly he is rejected by this world, the Lord will always be his refuge.

that he may be misunderstood by this world but God knows everything about him. He may be unloved by this world but God loves him. He may feel isolated from the world around him but God will always be with him.

After all, no matter how isolated, misunderstood and unloved we may feel, it pales into insignificance when compared to the experience of God's own son Jesus on the cross.

who even in the hour of his deepest misery and death heard only the scoffing jeers of the crowds. You know, for fair or for foul, you may feel unloved today.

I'm not saying there aren't people in your life who love you, but for as much as you love them, they can't burrow down.

[18 : 59] Perhaps you don't want them to bury down into the very essence of who you are on the inside because you're scared that if they see who you really are, they wouldn't love you anymore and you'd be alone again.

I know that singleness is often associated with loneliness, but for some of the loneliest people I know are married. And for one reason or another, there's this lovelessness in the marriage.

Well, it's been said that there's an epidemic of loneliness in Great Britain today, but may I add to that there's also an epidemic of lovelessness. Because for all they say and do, no one really cares about you.

No one. And even if they do, it's only up to a point. And beyond that, there's only self-protection.

And maybe you're saying to yourself, you're just thinking too deeply. Whether I'm thinking too deeply or not, it doesn't change the fact that sometimes you feel loveless, that no one ever could, that no one ever should love you.

[20 : 14] You know, there's a refuge for all who feel the way you do today. And that refuge is the Lord, our rock, whose love is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable.

It's so difficult to believe, is it not? But before the creation of the sun and the moon, God knew you. He knew everything about you.

God loved you. Before the first man placed his feet on the earth, God knew you and he loved you. Before your parents, whatever born, God knew you and loved you.

There is nothing about you God does not know, nothing at all, and yet he loves you infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably. No one could ever love you like he does.

We're all alone in this world without him, but with him we're safe in the rock who is our refuge. And it might sound cheesy to say it, I no longer care as long as you hear it.

[21 : 15] God loves you. love. He knows all about you. And he loves you deeply. Love ain't his weakness.

Love is his strength. And though no one in the world may fully understand you, he does. And his love means that he calls and invites us to put our faith and trust in him.

Not just perceiving Psalm 71 verse 3 as poetically captivating, but as practical counsel. Put your faith in Christ, because in him and in him only there is love for the loveless.

Finally, when the psalmist is speaking of the Lord as his rock of refuge, he could be referring to God as life for the lifeless. Life for the lifeless.

I don't think it takes a rocket scientist to figure out that the person who wrote this psalm was rather afraid. Powerful people are after him. And what he says about his life is that it's bitter and it's full of troubles.

[22 : 27] When I was doing my honours year in Aberdeen University, one of my professors was a highly eccentric man who while he was lecturing spoke very quickly, smoked a cigarette and used technical language.

And confused sometimes by a classroom of blank faces staring at him, he'd get annoyed with us and say, well listen ladies and gentlemen, this isn't rocket science. Of course the problem was he really was trying to teach us group theory quantum mechanics which is the basis of rocket science and we just weren't taking it in.

In verse 20 the psalmist writes, you will restore my life again from the depths of the earth you will bring me up. perhaps the psalmist didn't realise the extent to what he said there was true.

Because the consistent teaching of the Bible is that this life is not all there is. That YOLO, you only live once, is a total lie. You don't only live once.

As James Bond famously says, you only live twice. It may be difficult for some of us to swallow but not hard to understand that this life is not all there is. There is more, there is far more.

[23 : 41] There's a life to come and it's bigger and it's better and it's more important than this one. It's the life of eternity and it's either enjoyed in heaven or endured in hell.

There is in Ecclesiastes the words of the writer who solemnly tells us there's a time to live and a time to die. Later on in the Bible someone says it is appointed once for men to die then face the judgment.

So with what attitude shall we approach these fearful events? Our own mortality faced with the terrifying judgment of God. A judgment we know shall be according to the full knowledge of our hearts.

In the Hollywood blockbuster Titanic there's a scene where the American billionaire Guggenheim he chooses to sit on a comfy chair and have a brandy and watch the sea as it crashes into the boat.

That's what he chose to do but when his eyes see the water and his ears hear it crashing he drops his glass in shock and horror. Ah we can talk about death and judgment with courage just as long as it's not face to face in the here and now.

[25 : 01] And it's not rocket science to ask the question really it's not. When our lives are so short and so fragile and when beyond death lies the judgment where shall we go to find strength to deal with the one and forgiveness to deal with the other.

And the psalmist says to us well I don't know where you go but it's the Lord who's my rock and refuge. Call a Christian a simpleton.

Call her naive but I'd rather stand with the psalmist staring with confident hope into my mortality and eternity than with the fool who thinks of neither.

I know it was this very thing that led at least one or two people in this congregation to put their faith and trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. That he'll be with us in the valley of the shadow of death.

That he'll raise us on the last day. And he has promised that all who put their faith and trust in him. That he'll be the rock and refuge to the grave and beyond the grave.

[26 : 09] And before we start thinking to ourselves well that's all pie in the sky when you die stuff. It's fiction. Ask yourself to measure the Christian hope up against what happened on the third day after Jesus was crucified when with great power and glory he rose from the dead to everlasting life.

Such resurrection is not fiction. Such resurrection is fact. He's our rock and our refuge and to him we both continually go for strength to deal with our mortality and forgiveness to deal with our judgment.

Ah but to whom do you go for life in your lifelessness? For love in your lovelessness? For help in your helplessness and for home in your homelessness?

Perhaps no one. Perhaps you're a tough guy. You just tough these things out yourself right? You know you aren't.

You don't need to be. You can't always be that way. Why do this life alone? when God himself offers to be your rock and refuge to whom you may always go.

[27 : 29] He invites you today to find refuge under his mighty wings. Today come. Today learn the truth about God.

Let us pray. Lord you are our rock and you are our refuge and to you we may always go.

You are the home for the homeless. You're the help for the helpless. You're the love for the loveless and the life for the lifeless. Be to us all these things and more oh Lord as we place our faith and trust in Jesus.

Amen. Amen.