

“Help Me, Lord!”
Psalm 70
July 29, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

The theme of this psalm is made clear by a literary device known as “bracketing” or “inclusio.” As the word “bracketing” suggests, it means to bookend material through the repetition of a theme at the beginning and end. So the theme of Psalm 70, stated at its beginning and end, is the urgent call to God for help. **“Make haste, O God, to deliver me! O Lord, make haste to help me!”** The need is urgent, indicated by David’s plea to the Lord to be quick in his help. And David needs outside help, being unable to meet the need on his own.

The Orthodox priest, Patrick Henry Reardon, says the prayer of verse 1 “has been prayed, over the centuries, more than any other line of the Psalter.” The reason for this, he says, is the inclusion of this verse in the sixth century Rule of St. Benedict. That was a book listing the prayers to be used in monasteries. Benedict prescribed that this verse should be recited at the beginning of each of seven daytime hours of prayer. Centuries later, Archbishop Cranmer placed this verse at the beginning of the Anglican daily Evensong, the service at the end of the each day.

A century before Benedict, a Romanian monk by the name of John Cassian wrote a work on prayer and spoke of the usefulness of this verse in all the circumstances of life and that it should accompany us through every moment of every day, from the time we rise in the morning until we lay ourselves down at night. “Whether in temptation or calm, whether in fear or reassurance, whether in pain or pleasure, joy or sorrow, there are no circumstances in life when it is not supremely proper to pray: ‘O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me.’ This prayer should never be absent from our lips.”

This request for God’s help lies at the heart of prayer and is the key to praying without ceasing, a practice commanded by God in the New Testament. We are to call out to God for help throughout our day. Those who don’t do so are warned in this psalm of their great danger, and those who do are promised joy and gladness.

I. The Call for Help – v. 1, 5

Verses 1 and 5 state the theme of the psalm, the urgent call to God for help. The urgency is indicated by the fourfold repetition of the request that God

hurry. The word “haste” is used twice in verse 1, and the psalm concludes with another twofold mention of the idea of haste. We call for speedy help when the situation is dire. Why does God do things this way? Since he’s God and therefore able to anticipate our needs and satisfy them before they reach this level of urgency, why doesn’t he do so? I think it is because the thing God most wants, and the thing we most need, is to draw near to him in faith. He wants us to come to him with our needs, and if he anticipated our needs to satisfy them before we were even aware that we had a need, then we would not be coming to him. As someone has said, “God is rarely early, but never late.”

We can be sure, too, that God loves to come to the aid of his people. Remember that promise from Psalm 46, the one where God is referred to as **“a very present help in trouble”** (46:1). He responds with great passion and care for his people. Several years ago, our youngest daughter was riding her bicycle in our neighborhood with some friends when she crashed while traveling at a high speed down a steep hill. An off-duty police officer happened to be passing by at that very moment, and she stopped to assist. After checking on Kathryn, she called to inform us of our daughter’s accident and tell us where it had occurred, which was about four blocks from our house. As soon as Wendy hung up the phone, she shouted the news to me as she was running out of the house. She burst through the front door and began running as fast as she could to the place of the accident. She hadn’t thought it through carefully, forgetting that several hills had to be climbed on the way to that site. I went and got in the car, stopped about a block and a half from our house to pick her up, and then the two of us made our way to our injured daughter. Thankfully, she was wearing a helmet and only had some scrapes and bruises. The thing that stays with me about that incident is the passion of a mother’s heart for her child. It is the passion our God has for his children, the passion David was counting on in the request he makes here.

There is something else important to notice about this request for help. David was completely dependent on God’s favor, declaring himself to be **“poor and needy”** (v. 5). He wasn’t asking for God’s help based on any merit within himself, but based solely on God’s grace. That’s the way we must always come to God, not based at all on what we think we deserve from him. The truth is that we do not deserve God’s help. But we can count on it nonetheless, because of the one who does deserve God’s help, our Lord Jesus. By faith, we are joined into union with him, to the point that we get what Jesus deserves, even as he got what we deserve. To appeal to God for help based on what Jesus deserves is a much more solid and grounded appeal.

The application of this first point is to go to God for help all the time. It is one of the chief ways God appoints for us to draw near to him. In order to do this, we need to cultivate a greater appreciation for our neediness by learning to go to God for the little needs that arise throughout the day. We don’t need to wait until we have been diagnosed with life-threatening cancer to come to God

for help. If you find yourself feeling a little down, go to God for help. If you get stuck while trying to solve a math problem in your homework, ask God for help. If you are confronted with a child-rearing challenge and don't know what to do, ask God for help. I'm learning to work on my own bicycle, and there have been times when I get stuck and can't make headway in what I'm trying to do. It is usually after many frustrating attempts that it dawns on me that I can ask God for help. It is a joy to do so, and I have never found him to fail me in this. I don't think God cares that much about my bicycle. But he does care about me, and he delights when I come to him with any need, no matter how small.

II. Those Who Don't Call for Help – v. 2-3

The middle verses of this psalm list two groups of people, described by what they seek and love. The first group is the enemies of David who seek his life and who delight in his hurt. Then there are those who seek the Lord and love his salvation (v. 4). To be human is to be a seeking, loving creature. The thing that distinguishes people from one another is that some seek the Lord while others seek more self-centered goals. Let's look at the latter category first, as they are described in verses 2-3.

David's urgent need for which he called to the Lord for help was occasioned by these enemies who were seeking his life and delighting in his hurt. Though we don't know the specifics of their opposition to David, there are some things we can know about them in the quote David attributes to them. They were saying, **"Aha, Aha!"** What does that mean? This is not the "Aha!" moment of discovery. Rather, it is the "Aha!" that delights in harm being brought to another. As one translation puts it, "Let them be horrified by their shame, for they said, 'Aha! We've got him now!'"

So David is facing these enemies who want nothing more than his downfall, and for whom his downfall will bring a big smile to their faces? How does he respond to them? He doesn't engage in personal retaliation, but leaves it with God. He prays that God will take care of it in accordance with his perfect justice. He asks for God's common form of justice in the Bible, which is to visit upon people what they would do to others. The gallows Haman built for Mordecai end up being the gallows upon which Haman is executed. The shame that David's enemies seek to bring upon him now returns to them.

I need to make a couple of points about David's prayer against his enemies. Verses 2-3 are part of a class of psalms known as imprecatory psalms. They are psalms of prayers of judgment against one's enemies. This is actually a milder form of such imprecations. How should we apply this class of psalms to our lives today? Jesus' command to bless our enemies gives us help with this. We are to pray against our enemies, asking that their evil purposes might be defeated. But on this side of Judgment Day, that prayer is to take the form of

praying that Jesus' enemies might be defeated by being turned into his friends through conversion. In that way we both pray against evil and bless our enemies.

A second point I want to make is to relate this back to our main point about calling on God for help. What leads a person to delight in the downfall of another, as these enemies of David were doing with him? As in the case of all sin, this one was rooted in their self-trust rather than trust in God. They assumed that the only good that would come to them was what they could provide for themselves, and they were unwilling to trust God to bring good to them. And for some reason that the psalm doesn't explain, they had concluded that David stood in the way of such good coming to them. So they sought to get rid of David. When you trust in self, you don't ask God for help and the door is opened for evil that even has the potential for turning you against the Lord's anointed.

Are there ways in your life that you don't ask God for help because you are trusting in yourself? One form this can take is that of avoiding situations where you will need to trust God and seek his help. You always play it safe, not out of prudence but out of fear and unbelief. Jack Miller used to say that we either risk or we rust. Playing it safe, making sure we avoid situations where we will have to ask God for help, will lead to spiritual decay.

Several years ago, Steve Whitner and I were interviewing a candidate for part-time youth director at our church. After we asked several questions, it began to dawn on this young man that this job was perhaps something different than he thought it might be. He asked us, "Now, one of you is going to be with me the whole time, won't you?" Many of us want service opportunities just like that, where someone else is going to do all the hard work and we just show up and get our good feeling from doing some service for others. Instead, we are called to venture out into the unknown, wild areas of life where we are going to be faced many times with a sense of our need. We are going to need to call on God for help. I want to encourage those of you who have done so, whether it be in taking in foster children, teaching Sunday School, taking a risk by leading a ministry, or maybe simply by reaching out to a stranger and risking rejection. It is a good thing when we put ourselves in the kinds of situations that will require us to look to God for help as David did here.

III. Those Who Do Call for Help – v. 4

Verse 4 is David's prayer that all who seek God for help will be filled with joy and gladness. It is a joy and gladness *in God*, meaning that they will find delight in God. When you go to God for help as a poor and needy person, as David did, and God delivers you, it leads to joy and gladness in God. A couple I know belong to a church that had just launched a building campaign. This

couple felt led to make a sacrificial commitment that they didn't quite know how they were going to meet. Not long after that, the wife was called into the office of her supervisor and told that it had been determined that she was being significantly underpaid. She was then told that her salary was being increased by 33%. They had called to God for his help and provision, God provided and their hearts were filled with joy.

The next phrase amplifies on this. **“May those who love your salvation say evermore, ‘God is great!’”** When we call out to God for help and he delivers us, we love his salvation. Ultimately, this is speaking of the salvation we have in Jesus. The biggest area where we need God's help is with our own sin, and that is where Jesus delivers us. We may not know the exact situation David is referring to in his own life that prompted verses 2-3, but we know exactly how those verses describe what happened to Jesus. There were many who delighted in his hurt. They came for him, led by Judas Iscariot. They took him before his enemies, who falsely accused him and thought they had him for good when the sentence of death was pronounced and then ratified by Pilate. But God came to him speedily. Upon his death, he was joined by the thief on the cross in Paradise. Then his body was raised from the dead, and now he sits on his throne in heaven, where he reigns in order to help us.

CONCLUSION:

If Patrick Henry Reardon is correct, verse 1 of our psalm is the most frequently prayed verse in the entire book of Psalms. Has your voice been added to the millions of others who have prayed this? What is the situation in your life right now where you need God's help? We all need it as we battle the sin of our own hearts. Call out to God for his help in that. Where does the brokenness of life have you down right now? Call to God for help. All who do so are filled with joy and gladness as they say, “God is great!”