

July 14 Lesson 7 (NIV)

Continual Proclamation

Devotional Reading: Ephesians 3:1–13

Background Scripture: Psalm 71:12–21

Psalm 71:12–21

- 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.**

Key Text

As for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more.—Psalm 71:14

Hope in the Lord

Unit II: Expressing Hope

Lessons 6–9

Lesson Outline

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- A. God the Teacher
- B. Prayer
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How to Say It

Jürgen Moltmann *Yahr-gehn Molt-mawn.*

psalmistsawlm-ist.

Introduction

A. Experiencing Hope

The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann once remarked, “Hell is hopelessness.” He was 16 when he was drafted into the German Air Force during World War II. Upon his surrender,

Moltmann spent time as a prisoner of war, during which he learned of the atrocities his country perpetrated in concentration camps. Into this hell of hopelessness—his country in shambles and guilty of unspeakable crimes, the unfathomable suffering inflicted on millions of families, the guilt and shame of having had any part to play in evil—stepped a chaplain. This man was the first to share the gospel with Moltmann. That Moltmann went on to write a book entitled *Theology of Hope* speaks to the fundamental change he experienced when Jesus found him.

Some of us also have experienced times when hope seemed out of reach. To believe oneself to have no possibility for redemption, forgiveness, or mercy is the worst state of life. Fortunately, Psalm 71 (and the rest of the Bible) affirms that a hopeless life is not inevitable for any human being. This psalm lays out the perspective of someone who has not yet reached a perfect world but believes in its possibility—because of God’s continued efforts.

B. Lesson Context

Psalm 71 is part of a long string of prayers (going back at least to Psalm 50) that express the hope that God will help those who trust in him. This section of Psalms addresses the suffering of either individuals or Israel as a people in lament after lament. These psalms call God’s attention to the human need for a continuing relationship of rescue. And the psalms remind the people of Israel of their constant need for self-examination, repentance, and hopeful action. Psalm 71 is the last in this series of laments; Psalm 72 brings Book II of the Psalms (Psalms 42–72) to a hopeful conclusion.

Because this psalm is not attributed to a specific person, we can refer to him (or her) as “the psalmist.” Psalm 71 is a psalm of individual lament, in which a single person addresses God while seeking help during a time of danger or catastrophe (compare Psalms 3; 22; 43; etc.). Even though the psalm does not explicitly name an audience, the psalmist likely had in view a public performance of the psalm (perhaps set to music) along with other texts like it. The audience would be the assembly of Israel gathered in the temple, especially during the great festivals noted in Exodus 23:14–19.

While this poem is a lament, we can also speak of it as a prayer. Psalm 71 interweaves requests for help with statements about the problems faced and expressions of trust in God. The psalmist expresses trust in God’s righteousness (v. 2) and reliability throughout life (vv. 5–6). Verses 10–11 (not in our printed text) describe the insults of the psalmist’s critics and enemies. They slandered not only the psalmist but also God, whom they accused of abandoning the faithful (compare Psalm 22:7–8). The psalmist’s real experiences are revealed in general terms, without naming names, so we are invited to consider our own experiences as we consider the psalmist’s troubles and how he responded in faith.

I. God of Help (Psalm 71:12–16)

A. Request for Presence (vv. 12–13)

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

On the heels of these insults, verse 12 responds to the enemies not by returning their insults but by asking for God's presence (compare Psalm 22:19). The psalmist asserted the enemies' accusations were baseless and false, and that God would prove their error and vindicate their victim.

The verse's two requests are closely related. First, God's nearness allows him to save the psalmist. Coming *quickly* emphasizes God's nearness and his desire to respond to the prayerful request for *help*. Requests like these also occur in other psalms of lament or petition (Psalms 38:22; 40:13; 70:1, 5; etc.).

This standard appeal for God's merciful presence depends on two prior ideas. First, God has shown himself to be a helper as defined by his being the one who provides needed aid unobtainable from anyone else (examples: Deuteronomy 33:7, 26, 29; Psalms 115:9–11; 121:1–2). Second, humans often experience the need for God's aid as urgent, not as a pleasant future desire but as a present need. God's relative speed in responding to such pleas is less about a timeline than about attentiveness and care. The psalmist assumed that God wants to help in ways that bring hope—not from afar and not with needless delay.

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

Verses 10–11 (not in our printed text) identify the psalmist's *accusers* as the source of mistreatment. Whether the psalmist had any power in the relationship with these enemies, the psalm itself suggests a lack of power. As such, God is the one who shifts the power from the evildoers to the psalmist who has been mistreated (compare Romans 12:19–21). This change of fortune is entirely in God's hands.

The verse at hand turns back to those people (or the attitudes they represent) and asks God to change *those who want to harm me* by exposing their sins to public scrutiny; the request that they *perish in shame* is repeated with the phrase *be covered with scorn and disgrace*. This request would lead to everyone else recognizing the injustice and cruelty of the enemies' words and deeds. The language of shame does not refer only to individuals' internal feelings but to their status in society. Part of the pursuit of justice in the Old Testament involved ensuring that society does not reward evil behavior (example: Isaiah 32:5–8).

The prayers of the faithful do not personalize attacks on evil people, but they do ask for God's help in real-life interpersonal struggles. This verse asks God to somehow turn the enemies' wishes for the psalmist back on them. It does not ask for their physical harm but seeks their exposure as evildoers.

B. Worshipper's Commitment (vv. 14–16)

14a. As for me, I will always have hope;

As for me marks a shift from the request for God's vindication to what the psalmist promises to God. Verses 14–16 work together as a vow of praise, in direct contrast to the enemies' insults. The faithful person commits to a life of celebrating God's gracious deeds. That commitment implies a willingness to look for evidence of grace and reasons for *hope* in all aspects of life. This

expresses the poet's desire for steady confidence in God's promises. The statement is also a commitment to God and a bid for favor. The faithful person's desire is always to live in hopefulness, even when events and feelings challenge that attitude.

14b. I will praise you more and more.

This second clause of verse 14 is difficult to translate. A more literal translation (and more difficult reading) would be, "I will continue your praise in all." But all of what? "All situations" "before all people" would be reasonable completions of the translation. Regardless, the psalmist commits to learning the art of praising God with *more and more* skill.

Humans do not praise God for his sake, since God neither requires flattery (Psalm 50:12–15) nor needs to be informed about our lives (139:1–6). We *praise* God as an act of truth-telling and orientation to reality. This praise happens primarily in a community of like-minded people who encourage each other to see the joyful world God seeks to create for humanity. The commitment is to a lifetime of praise, whether in the midst of trouble or peace (compare Acts 16:22–25).

15a. My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds, of your saving acts all day long—

Verse 15 builds on the ideas of verse 14 by clarifying the content of praise. God's *righteous deeds* to save all become the subject of these praises. The psalmist could enumerate evidence of God's justice and compassion in specific terms. But we can imagine that the psalmist needed a manageable psalm at the end of the day and so did not go into every detail of God's saving work. Therefore it becomes necessary to speak *all day long* (compare 1 Thessalonians 5:16–17).

15b. though I know not how to relate them all.

The Hebrew word translated *relate* occurs only here in the Old Testament, though words from the same Hebrew root are common. God's deeds are so numerous that humans should spend time enumerating them while also realizing our inability to finish the list (compare Job 5:9; Psalm 40:5).

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

Come here means to go to the temple for worship, as it also does in verse 3. The psalmist joins the community of the faithful at prayer in the place where Israel could gather for prayer (compare Psalms 5:7; 42:2; 66:13; 95:6). The one praying does not enter timidly, fearful of God's rejection or indifference, but confidently drawing on God's strength (compare Hebrews 4:16).

While in the presence of God in the worshipping community, the psalmist will carry out the commitment made in the previous two verses to mention God's fundamental commitment to fair and loyal treatment for all. Since God's righteousness will be the subject of each individual's prayer, the whole community of faith will praise God's pursuit of justice (a concept closely linked with righteousness; compare Psalms 7:11; 9:4; etc.) and join in it themselves.

Yours only qualifies the statement in a meaningful way. Prayer is not an occasion for human boasting. Admittedly it often becomes that when we thank God for carrying out the plans we had already agreed upon. Proper prayer, however, focuses on the unexpected signs of God's mercy and questions our tendency to baptize our actions as though they were God's.

II. Lifelong Learning (Psalm 71:17–21)

A. From Youth to Old Age (vv. 17–18)

17a. Since my youth, God, you have taught me,

A shift begins with a new address to *God*, paralleling the one that began in the previous section in verse 12 (above). Furthermore, this verse begins a new section in the psalm, shifting the imagery from prayer to learning. Verses 17–19 explore the extent and content of the process of spiritual education that the psalmist experiences.

Once again, the prayer turns to God, this time as the teacher. The learning process begins early (see Ecclesiastes 12:1–11) and operates through the many dimensions of life. Some learning may occur in school, but that environment is only part of the whole. Learning occurs everywhere, just as long as the person pays attention to life's experiences and receives proper guidance from wise teachers. Thus, the elderly psalmist reflects on a life of learning from the days of his youth.

17b. and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds.

Here the psalmist states the core curriculum in God's school: the *marvelous deeds* of creation and salvation. The (one) Hebrew word translated *marvelous deeds* can refer to the liberating plagues in Egypt (Exodus 3:20; Micah 7:15; etc.), relief in an invasion (Jeremiah 21:2; etc.), or repeated acts of deliverance (Psalms 9:1–6; 75; etc.). The marvels also include the sustenance of the creation itself (Job 5:9–10; 37:6–13; etc.).

The psalmist did not advocate mouthing empty phrases but instead expressed a deep respect for the many ways in which God works in the world. The wonders in question are diverse and deep, and we must think carefully about what each of them implies about humanity's place in God's creation. That process of thinking is precisely what the psalmist celebrates. God has gradually taught the lessons of life to an attentive pupil, but those lessons never end.

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.

The psalmist's education began in youth and continues in *old* age. The psalmist seeking wisdom asks God never to *forsake* the role of teacher, not because the writer believes God might do so, but because it is valuable to express the human desire for God's presence during all phases of life.

The psalmist aims to learn and become wise in part so that he can teach *the next generation* as well. The psalmist takes responsibility for the learning he has acquired, seeing it as a sacred trust rather than just a chance for self-promotion or even self-satisfaction.

How will the psalmist declare God's *mighty acts*? Surely the very words that the psalmist utters perform that task. So, the last part of this verse refers to itself, or rather to the poem as a whole. By speaking as it does, this psalm carries out the task of teaching about God's work by celebrating its depth, breadth, and impact on each individual who learns of it.

B. Of God's Incomparability (vv. 19–21)

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

Some people could be said to have done *great things*, but by questionable means. God's *righteousness* permeates all his actions; every incredible act of creation or recreation, of love or mercy or justice, is done perfectly by the Lord. Unlike human beings, *God* does not waste time

on trivialities but works for the good in all things. God's righteousness becomes tangible in ways that humans can identify and understand. For this reason, the poem speaks of God's incomparability (compare Exodus 15:11; 1 Kings 8:23; Micah 7:18). No one else in Heaven or on earth can bring about the good outcomes righteous people experience every day.

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.

This verse amplifies the role of God as the teacher. God has allowed the faithful person to experience *troubles*, since much learning can occur under difficult circumstances (see 1 Peter 1:7). But God can also bring a person back to life, in this case figuratively (Deuteronomy 32:39; 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18). The psalmist acknowledges such an experience. A person's trials may seem to resemble death itself, but God can revive even the dead (compare 1 Kings 17:17–22). For a similar idea, see the song Jonah sang while in the belly of the great fish (Jonah 2:3–10).

The depths of the earth can refer to a space that God has created (Genesis 1:2) or overcome through creation (Psalms 33:7; 77:16; Isaiah 51:10). It can also be a metaphor for extreme suffering and death (Jonah 2:6; see lesson 9) as well as for the magnitude of God's mercy (Psalm 36:6). Suffering cannot have the last word because God has the power to *restore* a person's *life again* and *bring* that person out of whatever depth he or she experiences.

21a. You will increase my honor

The psalmist expects God to increase the praying person's *honor* rather than allowing him or her to suffer social isolation and disgrace. This is not the request of a boastful or already successful person for even more power. Rather, this is the hope of an oppressed, downtrodden person to receive the honor due to all human beings who trust in God. This hope is rooted in God's character. The prayer asks God to reverse the painful situation that the psalmist experienced because of the slanders of the enemies (see Psalm 71:9–11, not in our printed text).

21b. and comfort me once more.

The psalmist will find peace of mind at last. This request provides a fitting ending for the reading. Verse 21 is the beginning of the psalm's final turn (see Psalm 71:22–24). As in most other psalms of individual lament, Psalm 71 concludes by praising God. The terrible present, with its rivalries among human beings and its moral struggles, gives way at the end to a world of healthy, ordered social relationships and deep spiritual engagement. Fittingly, this prayer and others like it conclude by either praising God or promising to praise God (71:22–24, not in our printed text; compare 22:19–31).

Conclusion

A. God the Teacher

This psalm, like others, portrays God as the head teacher in the school of life. The attentive student enters enthusiastically into the lessons even when they are difficult, even when they involve real suffering. When other people seem bent on our destruction, when everything we attempt fails, or when our most cherished plans crumble into the dust, even then, there is hope. Hope is possible because this life does not fully belong to human beings, and whatever evil we

may dream of, carry out, or merely tolerate will not prevail in the end. God reigns in life. He works steadily for the good, building a world in which love prevails over hate.

Hardships can teach us hope because we trust the teacher to provide valuable learning that will transform our lives and lead to a better situation (Romans 8:28). As the good teacher, God cares deeply about the welfare of his students and leads us at a pace at which we can successfully proceed toward the ultimate goal, a life of goodness and peace before him (compare 5:3–5).

A more righteous world begins by improving our use of language as people of faith. We refuse to join in the fearful, hateful barrage of words that does so much damage. Instead, we fill the air with praise for God's justice and mercy, as this psalm does. Better words lead to better actions and better relationships. Hope spreads from life to life to create a new world. The social alienation and pain caused by human greed, pride, and envy will give way to social harmony wrought by mutual love and full of praiseworthy actions. May God grant us this comfort and bring his kingdom to earth as it is in Heaven (Matthew 5:10).

Visual for Lesson 7. Ask the class to consider how a tree's growth can be an analogy for our growth in wisdom and praise.

B. Prayer

O God, our teacher, help us to learn to read the signs of your grace everywhere, to add up the evidence of your mercy and subtract the fears that overwhelm us so easily. Write on our hearts the words of joyful expectation you have opened to us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Cry out to God and be comforted.¹
