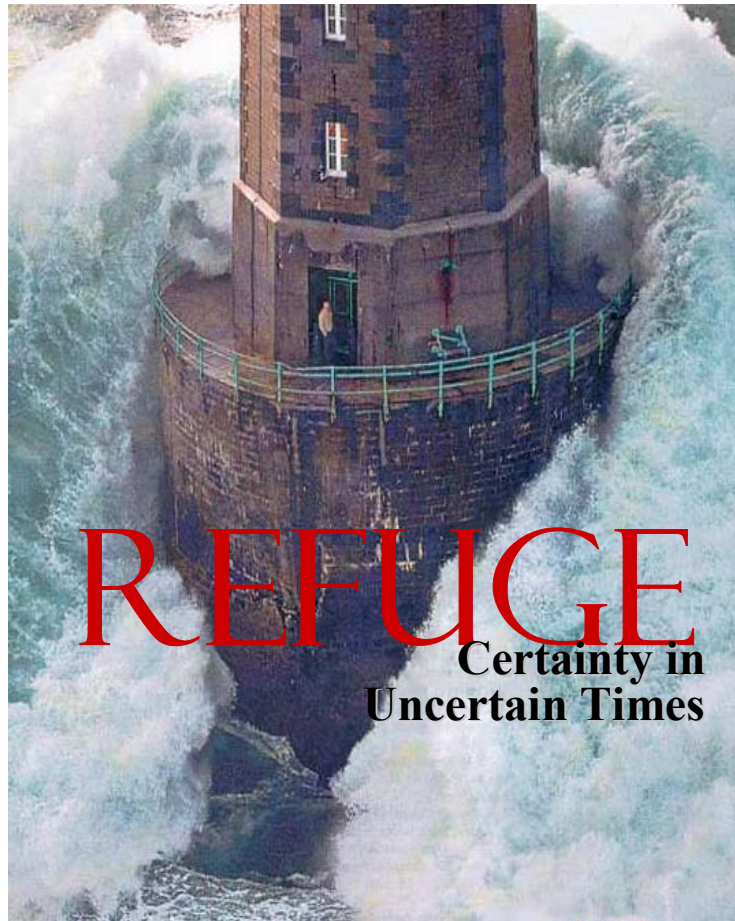


The Covenant Pulpit



A Child's Certainty
Psalm 71

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Isaac was an old man when he said in Genesis 27:2, "I do not know the day of my death." Nothing is certain, especially our future. The wisest man who ever lived wrote in Ecclesiastes 9:11&12, "...time and chance happen to us all. No one knows when his hour will come."

French lawyer, Anche-Francois Raffray, thought he could secure his future.

According to a newspaper article, he desperately wanted to buy the beautiful apartment of Madam Jeanne Louise Celant with its gorgeous view of the French countryside. Lots of people tried to get their hands on her prime real estate. But she wanted to live there until she died. So she wouldn't sell— not to Raffray, or to anyone else.

But the attorney conceived a deal she couldn't refuse. He would pay her \$500 a month as long as she lived in exchange for the first option to purchase her apartment from her heirs after her death.

Raffray figured that he couldn't lose. He was only 47 years old. She was 90 and in ailing health. Surely she would soon die and he would get her apartment. But Madam Celant fooled everyone. She lived to be 122, the oldest person in France. And the attorney, after paying \$500 a month for 30 years, died at age seventy-seven. His family continued to pay the monthly fee for two more years until Madam Celant finally expired. Raffray never got to spend a night in the apartment, but he and his heirs did pay a staggering \$202,000 just for the option of being able to buy her apartment.

Before she died, Madame Celant said about Raffray's real estate scheme, "Nothing works out the way we plan. The future plays tricks on us all."

Our future *is* uncertain. Look at the world our children are inheriting: Islamic terrorism, the rising costs of energy, economic turmoil, ecological meltdown, seismic shifts in cultural values, and geo-political upheavals that will rearrange our planetary landscape.

Maybe Yogi Berra put it best: "The future isn't what it used to be." Here's a question: can we hope for a good future in an uncertain world? I believe we can view the future three ways: **an optimistic view**—"Don't worry, be happy; everything's going to be okay." Or we can take **a pessimistic view**—"Batten down the hatches and wait for the Second Coming. The world's on the fast track to Armageddon." Or we can take a **realistic view**, which understands that there will always be uncertain and tough times ahead, but we will overcome through God's grace and build bridges to a better future.

Optimism is not biblical because it doesn't embrace reality. Pessimism is not biblical because it refuses to embrace hope. But biblical realism faces the brutal realities of life without losing the hope of a better future. This kind of realism is at the core of overcoming faith. A Dutch survivor of the Nazi holocaust, Corrie Ten Boom, best defined Christian realism with these words, "Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God."

This is the realism of Psalm 71. The unknown writer of this Psalm is in a life-or-death-struggle. He describes his panic and desperation in the most graphic terms. Real life is real tough! But he is not without hope. He cries out in verse one: "In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge..." In perilous times he has a certain refuge. More than that, he wants to survive his crisis so that he can create a better future for those who follow him. He says in verse 18,

"Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come."

You could reduce Psalm 71 to a single line:

**The Bridge to the Refuge is anchored in a faithful past
and connected to a hopeful future.**

By definition a bridge takes us from where we have been to where we are going. It is anchored on either side—from where we have crossed over *from* to where we are crossing over *to*. On our vacation last week, we went to the top of Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina, the highest elevation east of the Rockies at some 6,000 feet. At the summit is a narrow suspension bridge that hangs between two giant rocks over a breathtakingly-deep ravine. Crossing that suspension bridge as it swings in the wind is a heart-in-your-throat adventure, especially if you are deathly afraid of heights. As Joyce and I took fearful baby steps across that swaying suspension bridge, looking over the railings to the dizzying depths below, we desperately hoped that it was anchored securely to where we had come from to where we were going.

We need to build a bridge to the God of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, by connecting the faith of our fathers to the future challenges that will be faced by our children. How do we do that?

1. By Building a Bridge to the Fortress

The Psalmist is locked in a life-and-death struggle that he may not win. Listen to his desperation. Verse one: "Never let me be put to shame!" Verse

two: "Rescue me and deliver me...turn your ear to me and save me!" Verse three: "Give the command to save me!" Verse four: "Deliver me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked and the grasp of evil and cruel men!"

I wonder how many times Vice-Presidential candidate, Sarah Palin, cried out prayers like this as her family was crucified in a media feeding frenzy this past week? Whether you are a Democrat, Republican, or Independent, you have to feel for the agony they went through. There is nothing more shameful than the media meat-grinder that shreds the families of candidates (whatever their political stripe). All of us have experienced excruciatingly-painful times when the brutal realities of this sinful world have chewed us up and spit us out. Like this Psalmist, every one of us has cried out in desperation to God when we had nowhere else to turn.

The viciousness inflicted on Sarah Palin's family is not new. In a recent television interview, one of Ronald Reagan's sons talked about how his family was savaged by the media during the election of 1980. The candidate's children weren't off limits in that election either. He said that he still bears emotional scars almost 30 years later. But if you want to see really savage media coverage, go back to Abraham Lincoln's presidential campaign 150 years ago. The brutal media even went after his personal appearance in the most vicious personal attacks imaginable, comparing his looks to a gorilla in a zoo. Newspapers headlines declared his wife to be insane, hinted at marital infidelities, and poked fun at their children.

Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 1:9: "There is nothing new under the sun." The good old days weren't really all that good. And the future isn't going to escape the problems of the past. This isn't the first time that this Psalmist has been up against it. He says in verse 17, "Since my youth, O God, you have taught me..." Since he was a boy he has had to run repeatedly to this Refuge in the same storms faced by his parents. And the storms that have buffeted him up will surely come roaring in like hurricanes upon his children.

But there's another reality in Psalm 71. In times of uncertainty there is a certain Refuge. Verse one: "In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge." Verse three: "He is my rock of refuge...for you are my rock and my fortress." Refuge, rock, and fortress: these are words that speak of stability, safety, and security. As the bridge on Grandfather Mountain was buffeted by wind over a yawning ravine, we were glad that it was anchored deeply into the rock.

But notice that our God is a fortress with a heart. A fortress can be high above us on sheer cliffs that are impossible to scale. Its stones are cold and

imposing, walling people out; and its doors might be bolted shut, keeping people out. A lot of folks think that God is far away and cold, unapproachable and unassailable. But the Psalmist has a certain hope that this Mighty Fortress possesses a compassionate heart. Drink in his descriptions of this Refuge. Verse two: "...deliver me in your *righteousness*." This God will do what is right. "...turn your ear to me and save me." This God listens, and cares. He is a personal God. The Psalmist says, "you are *my God*" and "*my rock of refuge*" and "*my fortress*".

The Lofty God, who sits serenely secure and unshakable above the storms in life, also comes down to meet us in our storms. Psalm 24:3 says that only those with "clean hands and a pure heart" can ascend to the holy hill of the Lord. None of us can claim to be that good. The Fortress is unattainable. But, when we couldn't go up the hill, God came down it in the Person of Jesus Christ. The rock came to us. He walked on the stormy waters of our life when our boat was about to sink. He walked up an unholy hill outside of Jerusalem, and died on a cross in our place, so that we could walk up his holy hill in his righteousness. In Christ we have a solid rock with a compassionate heart. He is also the bridge that takes us over troubled waters to the Waiting Father who longs to be our Refuge.

In his tough times the Psalmist has found a Refuge. And he can hardly wait to share his testimony of God's power with the next generation. We can never give up on the future. During a particularly dark time, when the Civil Rights Movement looked like it was going nowhere, someone asked Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. why he continued to plug ahead. He replied, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree." St. Simeon lived during the 4th Century when Rome was collapsing and the barbarians were at the gate. But that didn't keep him from writing, "The Golden Age is not behind you, but before you." Biblical realism invests in the future with hope.

2. By Building a Family

A bridge takes us from the past to the future. But we need to stick together as a family on the journey to the Fortress. Young people need old people to give them lessons from the past. And old people need young people to give them a reason to hope for a future. Too many churches today try to separate into age groups that seldom touch each other. Increasingly, children are put in one part of the building where they have the kid's programs; teens have their own worship services; and adults meet in another place. There's a contemporary service for the hip and young. At another time there's the

traditional service for the old and staid. Churches specialize in reaching certain demographic groups. There are *Emergent* Churches for the young, and the *Traditional* churches that specialize in the old. But everyone loses out when we aren't all together in one family: babies, children, teens, young adults, middle-aged folks, and grandparents. It's the only way that the past and future connect in a bridge that can stand anchored in the storms of life. Psalm 71 shows us why:

1) The living legacy of a testimony

When you read verses 5-17, you see an older person who has faced a lifetime of struggles. Through it all he has learned to trust in God. He can testify in verse six, "From birth I have relied on you..." I think of words from that old gospel song by Andre Crouch: "If I never had problems, I wouldn't know that God could solve them." There were times when people mocked him. Look at verse 11: "They say, 'God has forsaken him'..." Sometimes he was filled with shame when it seemed that his life was falling apart. But he lived long enough to see God come to his rescue, and his attackers go down. So now, as he faces new attacks, he can say, "May my accusers perish in shame..." (vs. 15) As an old person, he can say in verse 17, "Since my youth, O God you have taught me..." He has built up a resume of experiences. Again and again he has seen the power of God rescue him in the bad times. That's why he can say in verse 17, "...and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds."

Young people who are facing an uncertain future need to be connected to old folks who have already faced the same issues and come through battered-but-triumphant. It's critical for them to hear people who, in the words of verse 18, are "old and gray," testify that God has not forsaken them. Grandparents should cuddle babies in the nursery. And old folks should be involved with the youth group. And older men should mentor young dads. Mature women should open their lives to young mothers. Young kids need to sing along with grandparents the great hymns of the Faith, and grandparents need to loosen up and sing some new songs. The bridge needs to be anchored to the past and future *at the same time*.

2) A reason to go on living usefully

The Psalmist says in verse eighteen, "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come." The Psalmist understands that God has a passion for the next generation. He's the one who told the Old Testament

people to spend every waking moment building their children in the Faith. He's the Jesus who said to his disciples, "Don't keep the little children from coming to me, for of such is the kingdom of God." (Mt. 19:14) Do you want God to keep you healthy? Do you want him to keep you alive longer? This Psalmist understood how: declare his power to the next generation. If all you use your old age for is to enjoy your retirement, or spend days playing golf and nights dozing in front of the television set, you are taking up space and wasting time. But if you will give your life to the next generation, you will be useful to the great purposes of God. We must all take to heart the words of the British philosopher, Bertrand Russell: "One must care about a world one will not see." I like that old Chinese proverb: "If you want happiness for a lifetime, help the next generation."

3) The certain past for a future made more certain

What does the past generation need to give to the next generation? In verse 18 the Psalmist says that he will declare God's *power* and *might*. It's not that the youth of America don't believe in God. Polls show that more than 90 percent of the millennial generation in America believes that God exists. But only four percent identify themselves as Christians. For the most part, this generation could be described as deists. Deists believe in a God who is distant and passive. He's out there, but not relevant. But don't blame our youth for seeing God as irrelevant. For the most part, they haven't seen the relevance of God in their parents' and grandparents' lives. They see the older generation talk the talk but not walk the walk. If God is powerful, why aren't their Christian parents' lives more transformed and radically different than secular neighbors? Ravi Zacharius says of the millennial generation, "This is the first generation to hear with their eyes." In short they hear what they see, not what they're told. That's why verse eighteen is so relevant to us. What we must declare to the ears, and live out before the eyes, of the next generation is the transforming *power* and *might* of God. Nothing is more compelling than personal testimony, especially if we can share a lifetime of experiences where we have seen God's faithfulness in tough times. In that way, the certainties of your past can prepare a future made more certain for the next generation.

Building refuges for generations yet to come

What is it that our kids need? They need to connect to a living, dynamic relationship with God. It is our Refuge that is the only certainty. It is not our religion, but our Rock! Not our hymns, but Him! Not our liturgy, but our Lord! Not our traditions, but the only One we can trust. I love the great

words of that old gospel hymn: "I know not what the future holds, but I know who holds the future." In a world where millions of kids go to bed without a father, our kids need a Refuge. In a world where values are like shifting sand, they need a Rock. In a world where children face dangers that their grandparents never could have imagined, our kids need a Fortress. Let's be a church that invests in the next generation by using the rich experiences of those who have seen the faithfulness of God in the past.

3. By Building a Future

The focus of this Psalmist is on the next generation and their desperate need to know the power of God. The great British philosopher Samuel Johnson wrote, "The future is purchased by the present." We stand at a moment much like August 24, 410 A.D. On that day Rome fell. For 500 years this city had stood at the epicenter of the world. But on that day, the barbarian Visigoths sacked the world's greatest city. It was the beginning of the end for the greatest empire in history. With Rome's fall, Europe began its torturous descent into the Dark Ages.

The news of Rome's fall shook the ancient world. Economic markets collapsed overnight. When the news reached the shores of North Africa, panicked citizens rushed to see their great spiritual leader, St. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo. In response, St. Augustine wrote one of history's greatest classics: *The City of God*. His riveting analysis of why Rome fell is as relevant for America 1600 years later, if only we will heed his words.

Augustine gives three reasons for Rome's fall on August 24, 410: 1) the unraveling of moral values; 2) a huge influx of immigrants. More than 70 percent of Rome's people were aliens who did not share the old values of the Republic; 3) by the time the barbarians were at the gates, the people of Rome no longer had the moral strength or patriotic zeal to withstand the terror from outside.

Rome fell in a single day, but her fall began years before. Like ancient Rome, the barbarians are at the gate. Values are collapsing from within. But there is still time. The ancient Roman, Seneca said, "A generation which ignores history has no past and no future." Let's pray that God will keep us alive and healthy long enough to invest in the future, by sharing the power of God with the next generation so that our children will inherit a world that will not fall as Rome did on August 24, 410.

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