

Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel...for Young and Old

Psalm 71 (NIV)

¹ In you, LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame. ² In your righteousness, rescue me and deliver me; turn your ear to me and save me. ³ Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. ⁴ Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of those who are evil and cruel. ⁵ For you have been my hope, Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth. ⁶ From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you. ⁷ I have become a sign to many; you are my strong refuge. ⁸ My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor all day long. ⁹ Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone. ¹⁰ For my enemies speak against me; those who wait to kill me conspire together. ¹¹ They say, "God has forsaken him; pursue him and seize him, for no one will rescue him." 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. ²² I will praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, my God; I will sing praise to you with the lyre, Holy One of Israel. ²³ My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you—I whom you have delivered. ²⁴ My tongue will tell of your righteous acts all day long, for those who wanted to harm me have been put to shame and confusion.

How do you measure the value of human life? Is it based on what you can contribute to society, the work that you do, the care and nurture you can bring to relationship? Is it based on quality of life, how much suffering is acceptable and reasonable for a person to go through and endure? Is it based on cognitive ability, what decisions you can make, how you can articulate future plans to others?

Earlier this year when researching for my pastors' conference paper on transgender, I ended up reading about views of personhood as it relates to abortion. In the scientific community, it is universally accepted that human life begins at conception. How then can abortion still be considered ethical? The argument goes that although human life starts at conception, that life is not a person. Yet, there is no solid, universal definition of personhood. So, human life having value becomes undefined subjective qualifications such as when the human life can think about the future, make choices, etc. Is that, though, the best way to put value on human life?

Because infants are helpless. They can't create themselves, can't make themselves be born. They're entirely dependent on mom's body for all their nutrients and for pushing them out into the world. They can't get or prepare their own food; it has to be given to them. They can't change themselves; someone else has to do that. Yet, people gladly pay \$20,000 a year on raising kids, spending on average a quarter of a million dollars to raise a child from birth to age 18. That doesn't include costs past age 18, nor all the costs of time and energy, the sleepless nights, the expenditure of patience, the imparting of knowledge and discipline spent in raising this child. It's a high price for someone who starts out so helpless to one day, hopefully, become a contributing adult member of society.

Then you have the other side of life. You go from the helplessness of youth to the helplessness of old age when you start to lose your mental faculties, your decision-making ability, your strength and vigor for work, the normal functions of your body. Your spouse is facing the same physical degradation and can't give you all the help you need. Your kids are working full time or don't live around you. So, you go to an assisted living facility, costing somewhere around \$3,350 a month for people to care for you in the ways you no longer can. You're back relying on people to exist. Does that mean that your value ceases? Should you be cast aside because you are in pain, because you can't make your own decisions, can't care for your body and your home?

If we value human life based on their performance, their contributions to society, what they can do for themselves and others, we have to say that youths have no value outside of potential value in the future and the elderly have no value in their future because they have already given and performed what they could. Young people, old people, then are worthless. So, why not get rid of them? Why not abort? Why not euthanize? Do helpless people have no value and should be abandoned?

Two weeks ago, we confessed with Isaiah the reality that all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. Last week, we admitted that we can't straighten ourselves out. When it comes to being perfect, to being good people, we are helpless – whether we are young, old,

or in the prime of our lives. We can't change that. So, we pray along with the psalmist, "Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone." (verse 9)

Surely God wouldn't cast away the helpless, right? I mean, we have value as people. Do we not? We do. So the question is "Why?" Why do we have value? Why should God not abandon us, toss us aside if we are so helpless?

We know that we have value because we know what has been spent on us, what we are worth. We are worth the life of a god. Not just any ol' deity, some superhuman, powerful being. We are worth the infinite life of God, the one who has no beginning and no end, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. We know because this God came down to the very earth that he created for us to live as one of us, to do what we are helpless to do, to be Emmanuel, God with us. Emmanuel lived a perfect life for us in our place. Then he sacrificed his full, complete, and perfect life to pay for all our helplessness of our youth, our senior years, and all those years in the prime of our lives where we still couldn't straighten ourselves out and make ourselves perfect. Just as Isaiah said in our first reading today, God "has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness." (Isaiah 61:10)

This is what God paid for you. This is your value. We take refuge in it. Because of this value that God has paid for us, we know that he will not simply abandon us and cast us away.

But what about when life is full of suffering? Does that mean my life does not have value, that it should be over? No, because God acts in line with the value he has paid for us. "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." (verse 20) We can have a really hard time seeing our value in the midst of suffering, but God's value of us remains, because what Jesus paid with his life always remains. Our value is constant and enduring because what our God did is constant and enduring.

What, then, is the value when we are helpless in our youth, in infancy? The psalmist says, "For you have been my hope, Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth. From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you." (verses 4-5) Your helplessness as a youth taught you to rely on others. You needed Mom and Dad's DNA to exist. You needed Mom for every bit of needed nutrients and oxygen. You were taught to rely on others with your cries, that you if cried long enough, loud enough, someone would come in and do something for you. This is the faith of a child, a trust that someone will come and rescue me, deliver me, a faith that God commends and advocates for all, especially those in the prime of their life. God wants us to call out to him and trust him to come and deliver us no matter our age. He wants us to do this because he values us and will deliver us. It's proven by what he paid for us with the life of God the Son.

And when our strength is gone and we seem pretty helpless again in our old age, this lesson is reinforced. I stop trusting in myself to do everything and instead trust more and more in God to help me because I can't do these things. It also prepares us for how God will rescue and deliver us and restore us on the Last Day when he returns and raises all of our bodies back to life and reunites them with our souls. "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. You will increase my honor and comfort me once more." (verses 20-21)

Not only in our old age does God not abandon us as we learn to trust and rely on him in our helplessness, but we also share the value God has given to us with others. "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." (verse 18) I remember an elderly woman in assisted living who was blind. She wondered, "Why am I still here? What value do I still have?" I shared with her time and time again that her value is in what God has done for her. On top of that, she had people here at this complex, people with whom she ate, family who still called her. She could still declare God's value of her and them to the next generation, pointing people to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, just like John did. She could also pray as she looked to the God who still gave her value to ask him to do his powerful things and affect this world, to bring people to faith, to help the helpless no matter their age or how others valued them.

Our value is not based on what we can do, what we can contribute, or even our potential in these things. Our value is in what God has done for all us helpless human beings – from youths to the elderly. No matter our age, we view people with that same value, knowing the perfect life and precious blood that God paid for them. We know that our value remains even as helpless people because it is based on our Emmanuel who gave his total life for us to deliver us and so he will never abandon us. Amen.