

In You, Lord, I Take Refuge

Psalm 71:1-9, 18-21 (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. 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.

Dear family and friends of Marilyn, especially to JD and all her kids,

I guess the lead up to today started last fall when Marilyn was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. How do you take in that kind of news? It was overwhelming. What treatments would she have to do? What would her body go through? Is this even treatable or is it too far gone?

But you all know Marilyn. You know that she is a fighter. She's strong. She wasn't going to just sit there and do nothing about this news. She did what she did best. She fought. She started the treatments. Went the rounds of radiation. I remember her final radiation treatment. She got to ring the bell at the Bitner Building because that part of her treatment was done. The cancer had shrunk significantly. She was fighting, and she was winning.

And that just made sense. I don't think there is a person who has met Marilyn who didn't comment on how strong she was. We took refuge in her strength. As strong as she was, she was going to kick cancer's butt. So, bring on the chemo.

Where did that strength come from? Was it just natural to her, that some people are just built that way, that they're built tough? Maybe. But there was a strength in her that was not just her own. Her source of strength came from the same place as King David's, the man who wrote Psalm 71: "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. I have become a sign to many; you are my strong refuge." (verses 5-7) Marilyn had that same confidence in the Lord as King David. This is how she was as strong as we admired her to be. The Lord was her strength and hope.

Then this last Tuesday, I got the phone call from JD. Marilyn was at the hospital in the ICU. But this is just a hiccup, right? She will bounce back. She's a fighter. Clear up the pneumonia, and she'll be back on the chemo treatments, back to kicking cancer's butt. We prayed for healing for her. We prayed that the pneumonia would clear up, that her health would be restored. And the pneumonia did clear up. She should have been getting better, but she got worse.

What gives, God? Aren't you hearing our prayers for her? You've given her the strength thus far. Give her more. Heal her. Bring her back. Make her lungs stronger. You aren't casting her aside, are you, God? You can't. You can't do that. We are praying, "Heal her!" You have to do it!

There's a part of us that maybe feels like God was casting our prayers for Marilyn aside, that he was even casting her aside. Our prayers seemed to be ignored. It seemed like God was purposefully making our lives harder, more troublesome. Why won't you deliver her, God? We all wanted to know.

Last Thursday, there was a family meeting. We had to meet because Marilyn's health was drastically changing and for the worse. Now we were talking about her that she might not come home. We had been bold to ask for her healing and we still were asking boldly. God has done much more miraculous things in the past. Certainly, he can do them again today. And so we kept praying for her to be healed.

After this past week, we have come to understand King David's words in the psalm a little better: "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) God heard our prayers, and he answered them. He had not cast Marilyn aside. No, he delivered her, just in a different way than we maybe thought or hoped. He delivered Marilyn by letting her stop fighting. She wouldn't have to do these chemo treatments any more. She wouldn't have to struggle to have enough oxygen. She wouldn't get dizzy or faint ever again. God answered our prayers by lifting Marilyn up from the depths of her health struggles and carried her to heaven.

Marilyn loved the poem about the footsteps in the sand. It's a reflection of a person who died and went to heaven and looked back on their life. Often there were two sets of footprints. The person knew that this was God walking with them. But then they saw times with only one set of footprints, times of struggling, times of fighting. These were the toughest times. The person asked God where he went during those times. God answered, "That's when I picked you up and carried you." God has picked up and carried Marilyn for the final time. He kicked the cancer and death to the curb and brought her life everlasting. She's happy now. She is done fighting. Her struggle is over. God has wiped every tear from her eye.

God promises to do the same for us. He promises to deliver us. He promises to rescue us. He promises to be our rock and our fortress, the one in whom we can always take refuge because he is solid. Our words, our promises may fail, but not his. He keeps all his promises. He answered our prayers, just like he said he would. He delivered Marilyn like he said he would. He gave her life even in death. He is with us always to the very end of the age just like he said he would. He is here for us right now to pick us up and carry us through this bitter and tough time. He will wipe every tear from our eyes because that's the God we have, the God who paid for our sins, the God who rose from the dead, the God who conquered death for us.

Today is a day when we need to take refuge in the Lord like Marilyn did. We are not strong enough to face this on our own. We need God. We need our rock of refuge and our fortress. We need our deliverer. And that's what I've seen happening. I saw it as JD called me to make sure that I could be up there at the hospital for him and for Marilyn. I saw it as I gave JD the Lord's Supper, that he was reassured that his Marilyn was forgiven like him, that God kept her strong until he took her peacefully to him. Annette with her rosary, with that symbol of the cross, was showing her faith firmly planted in the Lord as her refuge through all of this. Mike sang to Mom that great hymn that we already sang today, "How Great Thou Art," a song that proclaims that Jesus was taking Mom home. At every visit this past week, every gathering at home, I think there always was a prayer.

God is our rock of refuge, our fortress, our strength throughout all of this, and he will continue to be that for you and me in the days and weeks and months and years ahead. He did not cast Marilyn aside when she was old and grey (even though you know she kept trying to hide the grey). God will not cast you aside when you are old and grey either. He will always deliver because he loves us. He loves us enough to give up his one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to live for us, to die for us, and to rise again for us. He has taken away our sin. He rose from the dead conquering death for us.

So, take refuge in the Lord, Marilyn's rock of refuge, your rock of refuge, your fortress, your strength. He will never cast you away. He will deliver you, just as he delivered Marilyn. Amen.