

July 12/13, 2008

## Afflicted and Needy

### Psalm 70

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I'd like to begin with a question: Would you rather be in a wasteland, needy and afflicted, or somewhere else safe and comfortable? It seems like a bit of a no-brainer, doesn't it?

Let me ask you another question that's different but related: Would you rather have an intimate, deeply satisfying relationship with God, or a relationship with God that is lifeless and boring?

Now let's go back to the first question: Would you rather be in a wasteland, needy and afflicted, or would you rather be somewhere else safe and comfortable? When I read the Bible from cover to cover and I study the stories of great men and women of faith—unimaginable faith, words I would not use to describe their stories would be *safe* and *comfortable*. As a matter of fact, it's just the opposite; there seems to be a consistent pattern of *needy* and *afflicted*. They are out there on the edge.

When we look at the great heroes of faith, whether it's Abraham and Sarah, whether it's David, whether it's Moses, we have a little bit of a bad habit of often going immediately to their points of failure. Somehow that makes us feel better about our failures. *Oh, they're just like us*. I'd like to suggest to you they are not like us. They were absolutely remarkable people of faith. And you do have to take those moments of failure within a greater context.

These people were so far out on a limb of faith that I'm guessing there isn't a single one of us here that can even begin to imagine what it was like to live the life of faith they lived, remarkable highs, experiences with God that are hard to really imagine when you read the text and low lows.

It shows up in the psalms quite a bit, both the high points of celebration (Mark talked about two weeks ago the *raise the roof* kind of moments) but also balanced with those gut-wrenching lows where it seems like God is nowhere to be found. It's hard for us to process in a culture where one of the highest values is safety and comfort. When you really listen to the advertisements on television and radio, you listen to our music, you watch our movies, that's at the top of the list of what we value. You have arrived when you are safe and comfortable! What else is there?

The problem is that value system has penetrated into the Christian world. We buy the same value system. Ultimately God is there for us to be safe and comfortable. If we have that, then that's all we need from Him. I would suggest to you this evening that that value system could perhaps be the greatest barrier that you will face for experiencing a deeply satisfying, intimate relationship with God.

Let's be honest this evening, how's it going? Would you say your Christian life is alive, is it dynamic, is it deeply satisfying? Or would you say, by and large, if you were to be honest, it's kind of another boring week spiritually? We tend to think that there's a continuum, and at the one end of the continuum would be needy and afflicted. At the other end of the continuum would be raise the roof celebration and praise.

I'd like to suggest to you a different continuum. I want to take raise the roof celebration and praise; I want to move it down to the same end as needy and afflicted, because I think they both belong at that end, which is the faith end. The other end of the continuum is safe and comfortable, i.e. lifeless.

I think that's the case David is trying to make in our psalm. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 70. Psalm 70 is a short psalm, five verses written by David. In Psalm 40, verses 13 through 17, you have almost exactly verbatim the same text as Psalm 70. There's debate among scholars as to whether or not Psalm 40 was just lifted out of that psalm and placed here as Psalm 70, or whether it's the other way around, Psalm 70 existed first and then Psalm 40 just incorporated it into the text. It's good to know that just because the sequence of psalms is from 1 to 150 doesn't mean they're in any chronological order. I think the case is stronger that Psalm 70 existed by itself and the psalmist in Psalm 40 incorporated it in.

It tells us it's a psalm of David and it says "for a memorial"—quite a unique Hebrew word. It's only used one other time and that's in the little writing, the superscription for Psalm 38. It means basically what you think it means. It's an idea of remembrance, a memorial. There's a lot of discussion about what exactly does that mean? Was it used in some of the Hebrew celebrations and feasts, or what exactly was done to make this a memorial? That's really hard to determine, but at the end of the day I think the point is clear: David intended this to be a reminder—a reminder that we are needy and afflicted, and it's when we are needy and afflicted that we experience God most intensely. It is what fuels raise the roof worship.

I think we all would understand that our times of being careless, being reckless spiritually, those aren't going to be the times when we're in despair. Typically those are the moments we're pretty dialed in to God. When we get careless is when we're in times of prosperity—when everything's going well. And I think that's the point David makes, is this is a reminder that you really don't experience God until deep in your soul you understand you're needy and afflicted.

Verse 1:

**O God, *hasten* to deliver me; O LORD, hasten to my help!** (\*NASB, Psalm 70:1)

It opens with the name *Elohim*, the creator God, the all-powerful God, a God who's big enough to come to the rescue, followed by the name *Yahweh*, capital L-O-R-D, also the God who is intimate, the God who is personal, the God that cares enough to know what's going on—big enough to come to my rescue but intimate enough to know that I'm crying out to Him.

Hopefully in your translation the word "hasten" is in italics—in some way it looks different—because the word "hasten" there in the opening line was not in the Hebrew text. It's just simply inserted in there by the translators. They're saying, *It's an incomplete sentence; I think that's what David meant.* But it actually was a Hebrew technique in order to communicate the urgency of David's cry. This would be referred to as a personal lament. David is crying out to God and it literally reads: "O God, deliver me; O LORD, to my help hasten!"

You really don't get to that word "hasten" or "quickly" in the Hebrew until the end of the statement. It's like David doesn't even want to take the time to say "hurry!" until he gets the plea out of his mouth. He's not even talking in full sentences. He doesn't have the time or the energy. All he can say is, "*Help, help!*" And the last thing in the phrase is "and hurry!"

Verses 2 and 3:

**Let those be ashamed and humiliated who seek my life; let those be turned back and dishonored who delight in my hurt. Let those be turned back because of their shame who say, "Aha, aha!"**

We find out in verse 2 the source of David's pain: it's people. There are people that want him destroyed. There are people who take delight in his pain, people who are hiding in the bushes waiting for him to mess up or something bad to happen so they can say, "Aha, aha!"

We know that trials and suffering and struggles, they come in lots of different ways, lots of different forms. But you could probably break them all down into two categories. There are those that we would put under the category of circumstances. There are things that happen that can be traumatic; they can be very painful—disease, a tornado, a flood, a car wreck, the economy—these are circumstances that can create very difficult circumstances to get through. But there's a second category, and that category is people: people that hurt you, people that wound you, people that attack you, people that abuse you. People.

Over the years I've found those two categories both can be very painful but they're very different. If a tornado hits my house, that's a tragedy and it's going to be a bit of a struggle, but it's not personal. That tornado didn't have it out for me; that tornado doesn't hate me. That's different. People attacks go deep.

One way to think about it would be there's a difference between a spouse that dies and a divorce. I've helped people through both of those for 25 years, and I'll tell you they're both really painful, but they are both really different. The one who loses a spouse to death still has the wonderful memories, and in their hours of pain and sorrow they cling to those and there's something deep inside that says: *This was wonderful and I'm lonely and I miss my partner, but this was great.* There's something deep that's healing about that. Divorce is a different story. It's personal. It's filled with second-guessing. It's filled with "what if's...?" It's filled with anger and hatred and betrayal—all the emotions that go with that. It's very personal.

David is dealing with people pain. David was a remarkable king for Israel—the most remarkable they ever had. After the disastrous reign of Saul, David comes on the scene and David draws his people back. He draws the nation back together as one. He draws them back to God. He calls them again to a higher standard that they would walk with God. Any time you do that there's people that don't like that. They like their sin. They're happy in their evil. They don't like being exposed and they don't like being called out.

These people that hated David could have been in his own kingdom; they could have been from surrounding nations. We talked about it a couple weeks ago—sometimes maybe I seem like a broken record on this—but we have to understand if you are a people pleaser, you will never walk the walk of faith. You have to trade in your need to be a people pleaser for the call to be a God pleaser. And you have to understand if God in the flesh, perfect in every way, was so rejected and hated, it's not possible that you can be a Christ-follower and not experience the same. You just have to settle that within your own spirit.

Jesus told us that over and over again. "If you're going to follow Me, there's a cost." We might as well settle, that's part of the deal. Nobody likes that. I don't like having people hate me. I don't like the fact that there's people that if I were to totally mess up tomorrow, if I were to cheat on my wife, I'll guarantee you there'd be parties around the city with people taking absolute delight in that. There's people that would say to you, "You're a bunch of hypocrites. You people over there on 70th and Highway 2, you think you're so holier than thou. You got it all together but your preacher's a hypocrite, just like everybody else."

I told somebody the other day, when I graduated from seminary and was headed into the ministry 26 years ago, I never could have guessed at this point in my life so many people would hate me—never would have imagined. I don't like it. It's not fun. But it's just not me, it's you—any of us that choose to take our stand. You expose people. The light of God's holiness shines through you into the world, and there are people that don't like it.

That's what David is talking about here. These are people that want to see him destroyed. These are people that take delight in his pain. *Where is your God now?* These are people that are hiding in the bushes and they can't wait to see you fail so they can say, "Aha, aha! I knew it." David wants these people put to shame; he wants them humiliated. He wants them dishonored. He wants them turned back. "Turned back"—the Hebrew word means "turned on your heels." It's kind of a technical military term for retreat. He wants it clear that God has won. He wants it clear that they have lost.

We talked about this a little bit last week. David is not taking matters into his own hands. He's crying out to God but he wants God to deal with them—for the name and reputation of God but also out of his own emotions. From Genesis to Revelation there's a really clear message that there are the righteous and there are the wicked. The psalms are full of that distinction. It starts in Psalm 1 and goes right through the psalms: the righteous/the wicked, two paths—light and darkness. Jesus said, "If they are not for Me, they're against Me." David understood that. He understood that there are those for and those against. And he's wanting God to deal with those who are standing against him.

These lines have gotten really fuzzy in our culture. We don't really understand where that line is anymore. It's gotten real mushy. There's kind of the really bad people, and there's kind of the fanatics at the other end. But then there's this mushy middle. We live in a culture that in many ways celebrates the very behavior that offends God. We kind of make evil popular, and it all kind of mushes in the middle. We really don't have a sense of the righteous and the wicked, and as Christians we often kind of settle down in there and it's kind of the Rodney King thing—can't we just all get along here? And then we read what David says and we don't know what to do with that. I mean, wow, come on, you know, take a deep breath and settle down here a little bit.

David understood there are the righteous and there are the wicked. He understood the battle. And it's often reflected in his psalms. It's really easy if you're safe and you're comfortable, sitting on your couch drinking lemonade, to cast judgment on somebody that's on the front lines ducking bullets.

Think of it this way. You're free to have your opinion just as I am about the Iraqi war. You can agree or disagree with the President. This isn't political. But we would all agree that it's one thing to sit in a leather chair in an air-conditioned building, sipping a lemonade and throwing out opinions about the war—that's one thing, but it's a very different thing to be embedded in a hundred and

some degree heat, day after day, with somebody shooting real bullets at you. For those people there is a clear sense of mission. There is a clear sense that there is an enemy. *There are two sides here, and they're trying to kill me so I must kill them.*

When somebody goes into a crowd of innocent men, women and children and blows them to pieces and your assignment is to pick up the carnage, don't you think they could identify with David saying, "*God, I want these people stopped. God, I want them shamed; I want them humiliated. I want it stopped!*"—because there's a clear sense this is a battle; this is a war. Well, just take that analogy into the spiritual world and that's David: David with the emotion of a soldier engaged in the battle. He says, "*God, I want these people stopped for the name and reputation of God. I want them shamed; I want them humiliated. I want them stopped!*"

The challenge that we have in our culture is with this mushy middle. A lot of the countries even today in the world, they don't have this mushy middle. Either you declare for Christ or not, and if you declare for Christ you may very well die. They don't have this mushy middle, but we do. Oftentimes our testimony is lost in all of that.

Now I can't do much about the side of evil. That's up to God. But we actually can do quite a bit about our side as we represent God to this world, and that's what David talks about in verse 4:

**Let all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; and let those who love Your salvation say continually, "Let God be magnified."**

Not only does David want the wicked to be dealt with by God but he wants the righteous to erupt in praise. He wants them to celebrate. He wants them to experience this joy, those who love His salvation to stand on the rooftop and say, "God is great!" That's what it means to magnify Him: to stand on the roof and say, "Our God is great!"—that there would be a sense that God dwells here, that God is among us.

There were times when the nation of Israel, several million strong, would ascend the holy hill for various feasts and festivals, and they would begin singing and chanting one psalm after another. Imagine the sound of that as they are filled with the sense of God's presence. There are millions of voices chanting these psalms and these hymns in praise of God.

Have you ever been outside of Memorial Stadium when there's a game going on and you hear the crowd? It kind of starts low and it erupts. You don't know what happened; you just know something happened. Okay, that's what, 80,000 some voices? Take that to several million and imagine it echoing through the hills to the neighboring countries, and they're hearing this unimaginable praise and worship when the Hebrew people believed that their God was real and that He was alive and they loved His salvation. That's what David is talking about in verse 4, "Those who seek you rejoice; and those who love Your salvation say continually, 'Let God be magnified.'"

Regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the stuff of life, to know that our God reigns, as Mark talked about two weeks ago *to raise the roof*, is a witness that we believe. This is beautifully illustrated in the classic *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. There's a scene at the end when all the Whos down in Whoville come out of their houses and everything's gone. The Grinch sits up on the hill and he knows what he's going to hear. But he doesn't hear what he thought he'd hear. He hears joy; he hears rejoicing; he hears celebration. It causes him to think, *Maybe this thing isn't quite what I thought it was. Maybe there's more to it than all the stuff.*

It's a great scene, it's a great picture of what God expects from His people—that no matter what the gas prices are, no matter what the world events are, no matter what the circumstances in life are, that the people of God erupt with praise and worship. We stand on the housetop and we say, "Our God is great!" We're filled with joy and rejoicing. There's a sense of God's presence that causes people around us to say, "Whoa!"

We're not going to get very far if we just build a fortress. We're not going to get very far if we just try to convince the world we have more rules than they do. We're not going to get very far if we're pointing fingers at them because they're doing it wrong. But I'll tell you, we can get a long way to reaching the people around us with this unexplainable sense of God's presence, God's joy, that we stand on the rooftop regardless of life and say, "Our God is great! We love His salvation. We're filled with His joy."

Well, how does that happen? It doesn't happen without verse 1 and verse 5:

**But I am afflicted and needy; hasten to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O LORD, do not delay.**

David ends this psalm again, "I'm needy and afflicted." It's verses 1 and 5 that are the motivation for verse 4. You see, when we settle into that which is safe and comfortable, we're not really going to get to verse 4. There's no need. *I'm safe...comfortable. God, I want it all.* We can sing the songs and we can like the music, but deep in our hearts it's not where we're at.

Let me ask you a question. Be honest with yourself. Would you say this past week you were seeking hard after God? Did you find yourself this week motivated to open up the Scriptures and search the Scripture because you were seeking hard after Him? Did you find yourself on your face before Him this week, needy and afflicted: *Oh God, I need You! I need You to show up. I need You to speak to me in Your Word?* Maybe not?

Let's be honest with ourselves, if you weren't in the Book this week, it's because you don't think you need to be. *I've got it wired; I'm safe, comfortable; it's there if I need it.* You weren't on your face before God this week because you don't need to be—you've got it wired; you've got it figured out...safe...comfortable. That's where we'd like to be...stagnant and lifeless.

See, it's easy to just kind of settle in where it's safe, comfortable, no real risk. We just float along. But you're never going to get to verse 4 if that's your story. God has called us to a walk of faith. Faith always has risk. Faith is living out on the edge. God calls us to live in this understanding that we're needy and afflicted. Oftentimes we feel like we're in a wasteland: *God, I've got nowhere to go. I've got no one to call. God, if You sleep in tomorrow morning, I'm toast.*

When was the last time you woke up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat because of what God was calling you to? Is it possible you've just become safe, comfortable? And then you wonder: *How come my Christian life doesn't have more going? How come I don't really feel the presence of God? How come I'm kind of bored with this whole Christian thing?* Because it's pretty boring on the couch.

God has called every single one of us to a walk of faith—to take the risk of faith. Many of you this evening, if you were to be honest with yourself, you know deep down God's calling you to something and you've been saying no for a long time—*because I prefer it where it's safe and comfortable*. But maybe it's time to hear the call. Maybe it's time to step out by faith. Maybe it's time to have some courage, to trust God, to remember again that you're needy and afflicted. If God doesn't show up, you're in trouble.

This past week my daughter Bobbi and I went to the movie *WALL-E*. It's really quite a classic. It's a Pixar animated movie about two robots that fall in love with one another, based on a true story, I believe (laughing). It's a cute little movie with quite a few cultural agendas and commentaries mixed in. But at one point the two robots end up on this floating space thing that's mammoth. It started with a trip, and it ends up as kind of like Gilligan's Island. They've been up there for generations because the earth is no longer suitable for habitat.

So in this highly technological, advanced culture they meet your every need. Whatever you need, you kind of float around on this energized couch, so you never have to walk. You float wherever you want to go—if you want food, if you want a beverage, if you want a change of clothes, if you want anything. That's what is the selling point: absolutely every need you have is immediately met. So life becomes perfect...and lifeless and boring.

As I was watching that movie, I couldn't help thinking: *Boy, that looks like a picture of far too many of us as Christians*. These people that were riding on these couches had become so fat from inactivity. They were just like a jellyfish, with little tiny legs and little tiny arms poked out, but they never had to do anything. Every need was met. They couldn't even function anymore.

I got an e-mail this week from someone who has been in the church for some time: years and years and years. They were disgruntled and leaving the church, and it went on to say, "I need this...I need this...I need this...I need this...I need this...I need this." I found myself saying, *Wow, what a commentary. How could you be in the church that long and still need, need, need, need, need? Why isn't the question, "What does God want? Who does God want me to serve? Who does God want me to help? Where can I serve?"*

What would you think of me if I was 30 years old, still living with my mother, asking her to wait on me hand and foot: *I need you to wash my clothes; I need you to pay my bills; I need you to cook me my meals; I need you to shop for me; I need you to do absolutely everything. I need...I need...I need?* What would you think of me? You'd think: *You know, isn't it time you grow up?*

Is it possible far too many of us are stuck in spiritual adolescence. We're saying, "Do this...do this...do this.... I need...I need...I need...I need." At what point do we step out by faith and go from that to boldly hearing God call...and I serve and I do? I don't need the church to do everything for me. I'm a big boy. Can't I begin to ask God to use me in significant ways—to begin to step out and walk by faith?

There isn't a single person here who has trusted Jesus as Savior that's an exception to the fact that God is calling you to a walk of faith. I will absolutely guarantee you God is not calling you to be safe and comfortable. God is calling you to step out courageously by faith, to trust Him—trust Him in ways you have never trusted Him before, to get so far out on that faith limb that you have this awareness every day: *If God sleeps in, I'm toast*. You have this overwhelming sense: *I'm needy*

*and afflicted. I need God more than I could even put into words. Therefore, I love His salvation. Therefore, I rejoice in His presence.*

What if every weekend we had a group of people that were gathering together to worship that had been out in the trenches all week, engaged in this walk of faith, desperately needy for the presence of God? Imagine what that would look like as we celebrate the presence of God, we celebrate our love for His salvation, we recognize in overwhelming fashion how much we need Him. What a remarkable witness that would be as people sense the reality of the presence of God here.

My encouragement for you this week is to consider where would God have you to step out. It's enough time on the couch. It's enough time being safe and comfortable. What is it that God would call you to do that when you think about it today, it fills your heart with terror? You think, *Absolutely not!* At that moment, you're desperate and needy, and you've got only one place to turn. That's exactly what God wants. You're never going to get to verse 4 unless you understand verse 1 and verse 5.

*Our Father, we're thankful that You are so patient with us. Lord, many people throughout the last 2000 years have really not even had the opportunity to be safe and comfortable as we are. Lord, that's a nice thing, but it also may be the greatest barrier to our trusting You. Lord, for every single person here tonight who has trusted Jesus as Savior, You've put a call on his or her life—a call that requires Your power, a call that requires Your presence. Lord, I pray that we would be obedient to the call, we would remember again what it's like to experience life in the trenches, that we would have a daily sense that we're afflicted and needy, and Lord, out of that would come this passionate love for Your salvation, this passionate love for You. We've got nowhere else to turn, Lord, that we would stand on the rooftops and we shout that our God is great because we experienced Him this week in a way that's hard to even put into words. Lord, may that be true of us, in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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