Advent Psalms: Psalm 70. Come Quickly, Lord.

Let's Pray: Heavenly Father, as we come to the time of year when we remember you sending your Son to us to save us, let us feel our need for him to come yet again in glory. Let our lives be lived out of that hope and expectation. Let our hearts see their need. Let us feel this need in the way we are attentive to your eternal Word. We are all like grass, and the grass withers, and the flowers fade, but the Word of the Lord stands forever. Amen.

The time of Advent is a time to anticipate our Lord's coming. As God's people once looked forward in hope of the coming Messiah, we now look forward to his return. One of the best places to make this connection of Christ's first coming and his second is in the Psalms. David, who is given the promise of the Messiah, helps us to feel our need for him to come. David writes the Messiah's words in prophetic poetry that cuts to our deepest desires, or at least what should be our deepest desires.

With this in mind, let us read and pray Psalm 70:

To the Director of Music. A psalm of David. For Remembrance.

Hasten, O God, to save me;
come quickly, Lord, to help me.

[2] May those who want to take my life
be put to shame and confusion;
may all who desire my ruin
be turned back in disgrace.
[3] May those who say to me, "Aha! Aha!"
turn back because of their shame.
[4] But may all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you;
may those who long for your saving help always say,
"The Lord is great!"

[5] But as for me, I am poor and needy;
come quickly to me, O God.
You are my help and my deliverer;
Lord, do not delay.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Slide 5

Psalm 70 has a couple interesting things about it. First, it is the second shortest psalm in the psalter. The superscription (the little introductory part) most literally says, “of David, for remembering.” Being the second shortest psalm, it makes sense that it would be one to commit to memory. I don’t know how many of you have a practice of memorizing Scripture, I am terrible at it, but I tried my best to memorize this one.

Slide 6

Aside from being the second smallest psalm, Psalm 70 has a peculiar, in that it is almost entirely a quotation from Psalm 40; basically, taking the last five verses of the Psalm with a couple edits.

Psalm 40 is from the perspective of David as the king, a representative for his people. First, thanking God for saving him in what appears to be an intermediate military victory, to then bring him to the place where he must call up on God yet again. The battle is over, but the war is still going, hence David’s call for God to come quickly to his aid as we see in psalm 70.

We can’t be sure exactly what war David is dealing with here, but considering the events of David’s life, from battling the Philistines, to being hunted by king Saul, to the civil war with his son Absalom, we can take our pick! The thanksgiving from the beginning of Psalm 40 turns to an urgent prayer, and that prayer is what is taken out of Psalm 40 and given to us as Psalm 70, to be memorized by God’s people so they too can call on God with a sense of urgency, which, whether we recognize it or not, we always have.

Slide 7

As the superscription says, Psalm 70 seems to be taken out of this so that everyone can recite it, and can memorize it. In fact, in the Christian tradition, that is exactly how this Psalm has been used. The first lines, “Hasten, O God, to save me; come quickly, Lord, to help me,” are the most recited lines from the Psalms in the history of the Western Church, as they introduced the “Liturgy of the Hours,” a set form of prayers that have been recited in the church for millennia. In the Liturgy of the Hours, these lines are recited seven times a day, introducing each prayer in this form.

Slides 8-10

The 4th C. Church Father, John Cassian defends this prominent place that this verse has saying, “It embraces all the feelings which can be implanted in human nature, and it can be fitly and satisfactorily adapted to every condition and all assaults. Since it contains an invocation of God against every danger, it contains humble and devout confession, it contains the watchfulness of anxiety and continual fear, it contains the thought of one’s

own weakness, confidence in the answer, and the assurance of a present and ever ready help. For anyone who is constantly calling on his protector is certain that God is always at hand. It contains the glow of love and charity, it contains a view of the plots and a dread of enemies from which one, who sees himself day and night hemmed in by them, confesses that he cannot be set free without the aid of his defender."[1]

Cassian powerfully shows the importance of keeping God constantly on our mind. As a prayerful Psalm selected to be memorized, it is like the Lord's Prayer in the way it teaches us to pray, as John Cassian says, in "every condition." It teaches us about how we are to interact with our God. As his creation, we are utterly dependent on him.

Slide 11

We all have a running internal dialogue with ourselves, deciding this and that, and wondering about things. If you're like me you will even rehearse conversations that have either taken place already, trying to think of better comebacks. Or maybe you rehearse conversations that have a potential to take place. This way, when the conversation finally happens, you have a snappy response. I hope you're all not as insane as I am, but if you are, know that you're not alone!

Slide 12

When Adam walked in the garden the Lord was ever present with him. What we experience as an internal dialogue was always meant to be a God dialogue. In this way, Paul commands us, "pray without ceasing" (1Thes. 5:17). Had we not been separated from God with our sin, a constant dialogue with God would be our natural state; never-ceasing prayer, internal dialogue with our creator rather than ourselves.

It might not be obvious at first, but that is what this psalm is teaching us. When we pray, "Hasten, O Lord, to help me; Come quickly, God, to save me," we wake up our ever-present need for God. Memorizing this psalm ensures we are aware of our need, that we understand ourselves. This psalm is all about forming us into good prayers, those who pray well.

Slide 13

The psalm wants us to see our need for God like a child *needing* Christmas to *finally* come.

---

[1] Quentin F. Wesselschmidt, ed., *Psalms 51–150*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 8 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 88.

Like a child who is counting down the days to Christmas. In our house, Heather will make up a chain of paper rings, and the kids get to rip off one every day. This is intended to keep them from asking every 10 minutes how many more days to Christmas, as they can count for themselves.

Hasten, come quickly, come quickly to me; over and over the psalmist calls for God. The person who is praying this psalm recognizes that they need God, and they need him now!

Slide 14

We need to constantly reiterate that to ourselves, because our sense of our need for God has been dulled. In our modern world, we are more likely to be like the person in Rev.3:17, who says, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." Jesus responds to this person, "But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." Like Jesus to the rich man, this psalm reminds us of our need. All our riches are good distractions from our real needs.

How many of us really feel like we need God constantly? How many of us feel the immediacy of our need? It is often only when we are met with a crisis; a death, an illness, a tragedy, that we truly feel that need. This is why committing to memory a psalm like this becomes so necessary in our lives, especially our modern lives, which are so cushioned from the reality of our frailty. Who needs to dialogue with God constantly when I can dull all my needs with a constant stream of Netflix and Facebook? Distracting my soul to death.

But of course, we do need God. David pulls this Psalm for memory to remind us to not forget our need for God when it becomes less obvious to our dulled souls.

Slide 15

In recognizing our need for God, the psalm then directs our attention to our enemies. It mentions three characteristics, those who "want to take my life," second, "all who desire my ruin," and third, "those who say, Aha aha!" So, who are these people?

They are not, and this is very important to recognize, anyone we don't like.

Slide 16

Now, I need to tell this to myself as much as I need to tell it to you. As I have been preparing for this sermon, I have been repeating this psalm in my own prayers. If you know anything about what's been going in in my life the last couple weeks, you might know the enemies I'm thinking of… But, Paul reminds us, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood…" (Eph.6:12a) Jesus tells us to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you…"

(Mt.5:44). Those who appear to be our enemies may be doing us the favour of reminding us of our need for God, the purpose of this whole psalm.

Slide 17

The three things in this psalm describe the enemies of God, not simply those who annoy us. They are those who hate God's purposes in the world, and how he is trying to save it. All "those who wish to take his life" are all who with their sin put our Lord on the cross. "Those who desire his ruin" are those who despise his gift of salvation. And "those who say, Aha aha," are who mock him for his grace. Surely, there are people like this who hate God, his people, and his purposes for the world.

Slide 18

One such enemy I remember from my youth is the famous atheist, Richard Dawkins. Some of you might have read his infamous book, "The God Delusion," which came out 20 years ago. In that book Dawkins argues that belief in God is like a delusion. A delusion to Dawkins is a "persistent belief in the face of strong counter evidence." The strong counter evidence to Dawkins is that we cannot see God or prove his existence by scientific means, and since science has provided us with means to explain the universe, so we are being persistent in our belief despite this, and hence believing in God is being deluded.

When I was entering college, this was the great threat to the church and to belief in God in general. I remember having discussions with friends who were once fervent in their faith, to take these arguments and walk away. Twenty years later, it is a mostly forgotten trend, remembered only in memes with guys in fedoras and reddit subgroups. It is widely recognized by believers and unbelievers alike that Dawkins simply did not understand Christian theology, or what it means for God to be God in any major religion.

Funnily enough, Dawkins now refers to himself as a "cultural Christian"[2] after seeing some of the alternatives. While he maintains that he does not believe in the tenets of Christian faith in any way, such as the articles of the Nicene Creed, he now recognizes that cultures that are built upon Christian principles simply work better than those that don't.

Slide 19

One might ask Dawkins, why is it better to be an atheist in a Christian country than an atheist in an atheist country? Could it be that these principles work in making a better society because they are true? Or to turn Jesus' statement on its head, if the fruit of something is good, what does that say about its root? Dawkins, on this front seems rather

[2] https://www.breakpoint.org/richard-dawkins-a-cultural-christian/

confused. As the psalm says, “may all those who wish to take my life by put to shame and confusion.”

Slide 20

This then makes sense of what we pray will result for these enemies in the prayer. These things are for their good. We pray them to love our enemies, as Jesus says. We pray that they “be put to shame and confusion,” and “turned back in disgrace,” and “turned back because of their shame.” That is, we pray for shame for sin, confused plotting against God’s goodness, and turning back from all those who try and twist God’s plan for the world.

What is another way to say turning back, but to repent? That is our prayer for the enemies of God, not that we get our own selfish desires, but that they repent out of shame for their sin. “Let them turn back because of their shame.” We pray that the Spirit will convict them of their sin, and that they will repent.

Slide 21

Before we scoff too much at Dawkins, and other enemies, we should remind ourselves that we too were once enemies of God (and sometimes still are…)! As Paul says, “while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son” (Ro.5:10). Praying this psalm should not lead us to think that God is our errand boy going out to deal with our problems (and make it snappy!), but should again help us to see our need for him. If we are arrogant in this prayer, we are totally missing the point.

Slide 22

The psalm makes this abundantly obvious as it moves from God’s enemies, to how we are supposed to relate to him, how to be a good pray-er. The psalm shows us what the heart of person the Lord blesses looks like. First, they “seek” him. Second, they “long for his saving help.”

When we recognize our immediate need for God, the result is seeking him. The psalm says that the blessing that comes from seeking God is, “rejoicing and being glad in him.” Seeking God is both a recognition that he is not here fully, and also the acknowledgement that he is able to be found.

Slide 23

Seeking God’s presence comes in two senses. First, God is omnipresent. He is everywhere, and so seeking him means simply recognizing that he is already there, but one must have spiritual eyes to see him. Because we are blinded by our sin, we quickly forget God’s constant presence, and so we live as though our lives are not before God at all times. This

is a vicious cycle, as our sin causes us to not be aware of God even more, and so on. Memorizing and praying this psalm reminds us of God's presence, and our need for him when we are otherwise blinded.

Slide 24

God's presence to us is also one of absence. Advent reminds us, that though God is everywhere, our Lord has not yet come again in glory to put all things under his feet. In this way, we are called to long for him, as we have been seeing in this psalm. When we rejoice and are glad in him, this is when we are seeking him. When we truly long for God, we recognize his greatness.

Slide 25

But longing for God, truly feeling your need for him means returning to that original place of request for him to come quickly, and that is where the second shortest psalm finishes. David says, "as for me, I am poor and needy." This is the place we need to be to put ourselves right before God, to tell him and ourselves, that we need him constantly and urgently.

This is the gospel, that we are "poor and needy," but he is "our help and our deliverer." Though we desire to put him to death with our sin, he prays that we repent. God shows us our need by sending his Son to become man for us. Not despising humility, but demonstrating it. He became poor and needy, so we would recognize that is who we are. Humanity mocked him by putting him on the cross, but our plans were confused and disgraced when he rose from the dead.

When we rely on ourselves, we are self-satisfied. This is arrogance and pride and makes us enemies of God. It is to this arrogance that God calls us "dust" and reminds us that without him "to dust we will return" (Gen.3:19). Because in our pride we turn from the place we were created to be, to be before God receptive of what he give us. When we see that we will crumble into nothingness without God, our desire for him grows.

Slide 26

Augustine says, "The sum total of all human knowledge is this: A person must know that by himself he is nothing." This is a hard thing to learn about yourself, because you feel like you really are the centre of the universe. This is what your internal dialogue teaches you continually, that things revolve around you. And this is why we need to be continually reminded of our need, and that our longing must be for the one who created us.

But when we feel this, then we are open to the gospel's power in our lives. That we are saved by God alone. We say with David, "You are my help and my deliverer; Lord, do not

delay.” Let’s not be like the ones who say, on my deathbed I’ll turn and serve the Lord with my whole heart. Let’s see that our only good in in him alone, and that we were designed to live with a constant dialogue with him and not ourselves.