

“40”

Psalm 40

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“I waited patiently for the Lord.” The opening words of the 40th psalm. “I waited *patiently* for the Lord.” Not the easiest thing to do, is it? To wait *patiently* for the Lord? Especially when you’ve been going through a rough spot in your life. Like this psalmist. “He inclined to me and *heard my cry*; he drew me up from the *desolate pit*, out of the *miry bog*.” Why was the psalmist crying out to God? What was going on – going *wrong*? What kind of a pit was he in? Or was it a well, or a cistern, or a dungeon – for the Hebrew word can mean all those things? What kind of a bog – or mud, or swamp? Was the writer of this psalm *really* in such a place? Sometimes biblical figures were; remember when Joseph was thrown into a pit by his brothers, who were jealous of that colorful coat his father had given him.

But more than likely, these words are just a metaphor – a metaphor for some unspecified trouble or difficulty that this psalmist was going through. That’s one of the beauties of the psalms; the words can be applied to *so* many different situations. It might have been an illness, or some kind of terrible disease. Maybe it was a relational problem – some trouble in this person’s marriage, perhaps; or a worry about their child, or their aging parents. Maybe they were suffering from some kind of financial trouble; maybe they found themselves in debt. Who knows. It doesn’t really matter what it was. The point is, *we can relate*. We can all relate to what this psalmist was going through. For there are times in all our lives, aren’t they, when we are *crying out to the Lord* for help, when we feel like we’re in some kind of *desolate pit*, some kind of *miry bog*. We’re in deep, and no matter how hard we try, we can’t seem to get out of it on our own. We need help, we need *serious* help. We need ... *God*.

And so we cry out. We lift up our prayers. We pray, and we hope. We hope that God will answer. We hope that God will *hear* our prayer. We hope that God will *respond*.

That’s the hard part, isn’t it ... *waiting* for an answer. Those of you on the prayer chain know, there are times when we just keep praying, and praying, for somebody important, somebody special, some dear friend, some beloved child of God ... praying for a miracle. Praying for God to intervene.

Sometimes that works, doesn’t it? Sometimes, things happen, *miraculous* things, things that leave the doctors mystified. Symptoms dissipate, cysts disappear, organs rebuild themselves ... *for no logical reason*. Some of *you* have experienced that in your own lives, or in the lives of people you love. Sometimes miraculous healings really *do* happen. We have no way of controlling the outcome of our

prayers. We have no way of knowing what *else* might be going on in the spiritual realm, what kind of battles might be being fought between angels and demons. Sometimes we underestimate the power of our own prayers, what difference they truly *can* make, some of the time. We pray ... and we wait ... not knowing what is going to happen ... and we need to *keep on praying*, as long as needed. That's the hard part – the *patient waiting*. We never know if the prayers are going to lead to the desired outcome. Sometimes they don't ... which is why some people give up. But sometimes they *do* ... which is why we should *never* give up.

Whoever wrote this psalm had experienced one of those miraculous interventions of God. “He inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.” He says all this so matter-of-factly, but surely there was nothing “matter-of-fact” about this. There were heartfelt prayers, tears, anguish, heartache ... and then, when the day of deliverance came, when God's healing hand came through, you and I both know, there was a great deal of elation. Excitement, revelry, relief, release. *Joy*. Great joy and happiness.

The psalmist responds. He pours out his heart, in a joyful prayer of thanksgiving. These words probably just flowed right out of him. This whole psalm *wouldn't exist*, except for the fact that this man had *experienced* God's saving hand. “He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God!” When you have experienced God's saving hand, God's healing power, what else is there to do, but *sing*?

Some of you are familiar with the rock band U2. Back in 1983 they wrote a song based on the first few verses of this psalm. It's called “40,” and the refrain goes like this: “I will sing, sing a new song ... I will sing, sing a new song. How long to sing this song ... How long to sing this song.” Most of the lines in the song are direct quotes from Psalm 40. It became one of their most popular hits; even if you're not a U2 fan, you've probably heard it playing at places like Meijer. What happened was this: they were putting together an album, they were at the recording studio, they had been working all night, it was 6:00am, and they were one song short. Another band was coming in to start recording at 8:00. They quickly came up with a tune, and then Bono, the lead singer, opened his Bible and found these words. He said later: “We wrote this song in about ten minutes, we recorded it in about ten minutes, we mixed it in about ten minutes and we played it, then, for another ten minutes – and that's nothing to do with why it's called “40.” It's called “40” because of where the inspiration came from.

Back to the psalm. A whole bunch of thoughts and feelings burst forth from the psalmist's mouth. “Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.” Indeed, when you truly experience something *miraculous*, when your family and friends know the suffering you were experiencing, suffering that is now *gone*; when they have *seen* God's power at work, when they have *marveled* at God's healing mercies, it can help them to place their trust in the Lord; it can increase their faith in God.

“Happy are those who make the Lord their trust.” Or, in more traditional translations, *blessed* are those who make the Lord their trust. Those who put their hope and confidence in God. He's saying that if you do that, *really* do that, you will experience more *happiness* in your life. More ... *blessings*. There are other places people sometimes turn, other places where people sometimes put their trust. The psalmist mentions “the proud” and “false gods.” Those can't save you. Only *God* can save you.

“You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and thoughts toward us; none can compare with you.” The psalmist already knew that God was good, that God cared about him, and about the whole people of God. But there’s a difference between knowing something with your *head* and knowing something with your *heart*. When you’ve experienced God’s saving power in your own personal life, you now know of God’s love *in your heart*, in a way maybe you never have before.

“I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” It’s a faithful response to God’s mighty love. God has done such great things for *him*, that he wants to do great things for *God*. Likewise, when God does great things for *us*, we naturally want to do great things for God, in return.

“I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips.” Ah, yes, here is where we Presbyterians sometimes have trouble. When God has done something great for us, when we have experienced God’s *grace*, God’s *deliverance*, do we tell other people about it? Or do we just keep it to ourselves? Do we say quiet “thank you”s to God in our prayers – which we certainly should do – or do we also boldly and jubilantly share the good news of God’s great love with other people? The best response is to do *both*. Thank God, *and* tell other people. How is the world going to know how truly awesome and great God is, unless we *share* what we *know* to be true about God? That God truly *does* love us? That God truly *does* care about us? That God truly *can* deliver us from the things that ail us – and that God indeed *does do that*, at least some of the time? There’s a reason we started offering those “God Moments” in our worship services a few years back; every now and then, we give someone an opportunity to get up here and tell all of you how *they* have experienced God’s love and grace at work, in *their* lives. (I am, by the way, currently looking for someone who would be willing to do that in March – so let me know if you have a story about God’s grace to share!)

“I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.” Those of you who think that God *wants* us to keep our faith private should read these words carefully. Faith should be *personal*, of course – but it should *never* be private. God *wants* us to *share* it!

Then the psalmist says this: “Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.” It’s a final prayer, a final *plea*. This psalmist knows that he has experienced a generous outpouring of God’s grace. He is thankful, profoundly thankful. *But he also knows that a situation may develop in the future in which he will need God’s mercy and love and grace yet again.* Nothing is certain in life. Just because we have gotten through *one* struggle does not mean there will not be *others*. The psalmist is wise enough to know: *he could find himself crying out to God again*, from yet another desolate pit or miry bog. So this is a prayer-in-advance, if you will; it’s a prayer that he is offering to God *now*, on behalf of the *future self* he will yet become. “Stay with me, God.” “Whatever happens, whatever troubles or ailments or maladies may afflict me in the future, *stay by my side*. Keep me *safe*.” The psalmist knows, he is well aware, there are all kinds of trouble in this world, all sorts of suffering. He’s wise enough to know: *he can’t handle it all on his own*. None of us can.

He needs God. We *all* need God. Always and forever. We *need* our saving Lord.

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