

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

Dr. George O. Wood

For those of you who are with us for the first time, we've been going through the Psalms. One psalm a week. On a couple occasions, we've taken more than one. In a couple of weeks, we'll actually take two together, since they fit together: Psalm 42 and Psalm 43. But tonight, just the one psalm: Psalm 40.

“I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD. Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods. Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders you have done. The things you planned for us no one can recount to you; were I to speak and tell of them, they would be too many to declare. Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’ I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, as you know, O LORD. I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and salvation. I do not conceal your love and your truth from the great assembly. Do not withhold your mercy from me, O LORD; may your love and your truth always protect me. For troubles without number surround me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me. Be pleased, O LORD, to save me; O LORD, come quickly to help me. May all who seek to take my life be put to shame and confusion; may all who desire my ruin be

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

turned back in disgrace. May those who say to me, ‘Aha! Aha!’ be appalled at their own shame.

But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation always say, ‘The LORD be exalted!’ Yet I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, do not delay” (Psalm 40:1–17, NIV).

I don’t know if you picked it up in that quick reading, but this psalm really falls into two sharply different parts with a tremendous mood change that occurs. I therefore call this psalm tonight, “A Psalm of Triumph and Trouble.” Because those are the real two aspects of prayer that David focuses upon here. In fact, the division of thought and expression within the psalm is so pronounced, there are some who have even suggested that originally this psalm was actually two psalms and didn’t belong together as a unit. However, I think, as we read it and look a little bit at life, we discover that there can be sharp mood swings within real short spaces of time. And that the psalm is presenting to us, on the one hand, a picture of great triumph (verses 1–10). There has been an obvious deliverance in David’s life. Then suddenly in verse 11, through the end of the psalm, he finds himself in continuing difficulty. How much like real life it really is, that within a short span of time, we have trouble follow a testimony.

I. Let’s look for a moment, first of all, at the testimony.

It’s time for a new song because David has been in a slimy pit. That evokes a lot of imagery, but I sort of think of a grave. As hard as he’s tried to scramble to get out, he’s found himself unable to get out of the pit. This is descriptive of every situation in life where we find ourselves in a grand mess that, no matter how hard we try, we don’t seem to be able to extricate ourselves from. Fortunately, David doesn’t tell us what the slimy pit is. I say “fortunately” because it’s so good that some things can be left open to interpretation, like Paul’s thorn in the flesh. It allows us

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

all to identify with it. Because when we have a prickly situation, then we can also say, “Paul had a thorn in the flesh and so do we.” Or “David had a miry pit and so do we.”

This part of his testimony, which spans from verses 1 through 10, is divided into four subparts. There is an emphasis, first of all, upon his rescue, verses 1–3. Then in verses 4–5, a time to reflect upon what God has done for him. And then in verses 6–8, a dedication that David makes in light of his rescue. And in verses 9–10, a proclamation, what he declares to others as a result of the rescue.

A. First, the rescue. The psalm begins with this: “I waited patiently for the LORD” (verse 1).

Those who know Hebrew, the commentators—and I’ve studied Hebrew but I don’t know it well; I have to depend upon the commentators—say that the word “patiently” here is a little bit too passive. It doesn’t reflect the strength of expression that is in David at this particular moment.

The literal Hebrew says this: “Waiting, I did wait for the LORD.” Or a modern translator says that the best way to translate this is to say, “I waited, I waited, I waited for the LORD,” the emphasis being on the “wait” part. David’s being in the slimy pit was a long process—in the mud and the mire—and it required a great deal of patience.

I think that’s one of the hardest things to do when you’re in trouble. Whether it’s financial trouble or relational trouble or soul trouble or illness or whatever kind of trouble it is—to wait until God helps us. Because what we try to do, first of all, and rightly so, I think, is scramble to do our best of it. If we can get out of it—great! I’m very practical in my spiritual life. If it’s something I can solve, I use good common sense.

David probably had tried to get out of his pit on his own. He found out he couldn’t do it. Then there was that moment which comes when, having done your best and not being able to solve the problem, you’re in a kind of suspension, a hiatus. Now you’re calling upon God. “I’ve done

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

whatever I could; now it's Your turn. I turn it all over to You. I know You're going to do it."

And nothing happens.

That's where this psalm has such a kick when it begins. "I waited, I waited and I waited for the LORD." But when he was done waiting, the Lord did help him.

David is simply telling us that there are some times in life in which we can't do anything about the pit we're in. Only God can put us on a firm place to stand. And when He puts us there, He'll give us a new song. David tells us that in rescuing him the Lord did some critical things, some critical intervention.

The first thing the Lord did in rescuing him was, "He turned to me and heard my cry" (verse 1). I really think there's a gap in time between the moment the Lord turned and heard his cry and the moment the Lord brought him out. I think anytime we're in need of help and come to the Lord and ask Him for help, He immediately turns to us and hears our cry. "He turned and heard my cry."

Then "He lifted me out of the slimy pit. Out of the mud and the mire" (verse 2). A slimy pit suggests horror and floundering helplessness. The Lord lifted him out. And He did more than lift him out; He put his feet on a rock. He gave him a firm place to stand. David is celebrating that now he's secure—because of whatever his miry bog situation had been, it had been a very insecure feeling and he was in a lot of trouble. Now he's singing, "Lord, it's wonderful. You brought me to a place where I'm secure."

Isn't it great when you've seen the Lord work you out of a problem or situation, and bring you out to a place where you have some breathing room and some space? You're no longer worn out and you can get a decent night's sleep. You can feel calm and relaxed in your spirit and say, "The Lord has set me on a rock." That's a great thing. And there are wonderful moments in the

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

Christian experience where the Lord brings us into a wide place. It may have been moments or days we've been over our heads in problems so big we couldn't see the answers. Suddenly, we have a clear sky again.

To be on solid ground gives us a wonderful feeling of security. And David has had that in a spiritual and emotional way. He's come through on solid ground. That's given him a new song, a hymn of praise to God. There are moments of growth and breakthrough in our life where, because we've been through an experience, we can praise God in a way we've never praised Him before. That's the kind of positive outlook we need to take toward our reverses in life. If we can just get through this time of trouble, if we can get through this reversal or loss and stay with it long enough—until God brings us through—then we're going to have some new way to celebrate God's goodness and mercy in our personal life.

I thought of some Scripture where people had great stretching moments and come to know God in a deeper way because they had been stretched like crazy.

Daniel would have never known God as the tamer of wild beasts if he hadn't had the experience of being in the den of lions. But it was in the den of lions that he came to understand something very significant about God. He would've never had that new song unless he'd been through the experience.

The three Hebrew young men would have never known God as the one who keeps people in the fire unless they themselves had been in the furnace.

The twelve disciples would have never known Jesus as the Lord of the storm had they perished in either of two different episodes where their boat was swamped.

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

We come to know the Lord in special ways in our down moments. Our perilous moments either make us or break us. David has had this glorious rescue and found that he can sing a new song to God. He learned something new about God in this experience that he never knew before.

When we have seen the Lord bring us through, it's time for a testimony. That testimony will encourage and help other people. "Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD" (verse 3).

B. Out of this emphasis on rescue comes now a second part of the triumph part of the psalm, in which David takes a moment to reflect (verses 4–5). David is simply saying that he learned in this experience to reject any false source of trust. In his case, it was not turning to other gods or looking at self-sufficient people. It could be anything that we trust in a situation other than the Lord and His Word and what He's telling us to do.

In verse 5, as he reflects upon what God has done for him, he discovers that his past is filled with God's mercies. Look at "the wonders you have done"—past tense. If we take a moment in our life to look back, we will find occasions to rejoice. Occasions where God has ministered to us. If we've served the Lord for any degree of time, we can isolate those specific moments in which, had it not been for God, we would not ever have been shaped or molded or helped, but God has many areas of wonders. David finds great strength in looking at God's past mercies.

But he also does more than look at the past. He looks ahead to the future. He discovers that God has not only been in the past, but God has been in the future and is in the future. In fact, David says that the future is full of His plans. "The things you planned for us no one can recount to you. If I were to speak and tell of them there would be too many to declare" (Psalm 40:5).

I find something very important about David's perspective. In a time of discouragement we do two things: We minimize what God has done in the past and we get pessimistic over what He's

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

going to do in the future. That's always going to hit us when we're down. We're going to highlight those things that have gone wrong rather than what God is doing that is helpful. As we look in the future, we're going to be filled with fear and discouragement and think about all the things that can go wrong in the days ahead and view life as tightening in upon us rather than widening to new levels of encouragement and opportunities.

David knows that, and he knows that his attitude is one that can lead either to discouragement and pessimism or encouragement and optimism. So he says, as he reflects, that not only has he found God with him in the past, but he has given him reason to look ahead and say, "I can't count how many wonderful things God has out there in the future for me."

To be able to get up in the morning and say that is a wonderful gift of life. One of the things we need to do is to fill our mind with Scripture. The enemy is always telling us what we can't do and what's going to go wrong and how bad things are going to get if we follow God's way. We need to take good look at Scripture and go through what God is saying to us. Verse 5 is a great verse, "Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders you have done. The things you planned for us no one can recount to you. Were I to speak and tell of them, they would be too many to declare." That says there's something to live for. There are things out there.

What a marvelous parallel are the words of Jeremiah. "My plans for you are not for evil, but for good, to give you a purpose and a hope." Reflection on God's deliverance gives us optimism about the future and encouragement from the past.

C. The third part of this section on testimony is not only David's rescue and reflection, but his dedication (verses 6–8). In the Old Testament, after a person was delivered from something, they came to bring an offering to the Lord in the temple. We even see this in the New Testament, where Paul, the Christian apostle, has been on his missionary journeys, and he's coming back

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

after his third missionary journey and he takes on the sponsorship of four men who are under a vow. That was the very kind of thing that David was talking about. Someone who has made a promise to God: “Lord, if You help me and come through, I’ll come to the temple and make a sacrifice to You.”

David knows that it’s perfectly natural, when you come through a down point in your life, to go to the temple and offer a burnt sacrifice, which is meant to symbolize that the whole of life was given to God. Everything in the sacrifice was burnt up. It was simply an act of dedication. Giving yourself to the Lord is not simply something you do once when you first become a Christian, but you need times, over and over in your life, where you say, “Where I’m at now, there’s a whole lot more in my life and, as I gave myself to You when I was younger, I give myself to You again.” We keep presenting ourselves as an act of dedication to the Lord.

The sin offering, which is the other offering David refers to here, is the kind of offering given, not when there was direct sin—that was the trespass offering—the sin offering was when you omitted to do something you should have. So following that time of deliverance, you look at your life and you say, “I should have done that and I failed God by not doing what I should have done.” The sin offering is given.

Whatever the case, there was an offering expected when God brought him through. But David does a marvelous prophetic leap forward, because he jumps right into the spirit of the New Testament in verse 6 and says, “Sacrifice and offering you didn’t desire.” As he thinks about bringing his animal to the temple, he’s realizing that in the last analysis, God really doesn’t want cow meat or sheep meat. He wants me. But there’s this phrase, “but my ears You have pierced,” which does not mean that David, at the end of his troubles, got a new set of earrings. It is a proverb. The “piercing of the ears” stood for the fact that one’s acuity, one’s hearing senses to

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

God, had now been opened up and God's Word had gone straight through into the inner life and the deepest levels of the human personality. God's Word and God's will and God's ways had been heard and understood and accepted. "You've gotten my attention, Lord. You got straight through to me." "Burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, 'Here am I. I have come. It is written about me in the scroll. To do your will O God is my desire. Your law is within my heart'" (Psalm 40:6-8).

Verse 7 is a parallelism. Verses 7-8 are simply a restatement of what is in verse 6, only cast in a different way. When you read this psalm as it's quoted in the New Testament—you find it quoted in Hebrews 10—it's a reference to the Lord himself, whose sacrifice at Calvary replaces the Old Testament animal sacrificial system. The writer of Hebrews, in quoting this psalm, says, "Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but a body you have prepared for me" (Hebrews 10:5). We wonder about the different language here. The reason is that the writer is quoting from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. The meaning of the words are the same, that is, "God, You have all of me."

Some think it is a reference to a person who was a slave who had an awl bored through their earlobe to signify that from now on they were a slave to God. That could be a possibility here. Those who work with the Hebrew text, though, feel that the primary meaning is meant to convey a spiritual meaning of, "You've gotten through to the core of me." And what is at issue here is not slavery but sacrifice. We're using here the language of sacrifice and not the language of slavery.

Here is a great example in the Old Testament of David praying something which is beyond Him. Through the unction of the Spirit, he literally leaps forward and prays a prayer that can only adequately be prayed by one person in all of human history. That's Jesus. For only Jesus could

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

say this psalm. Only Jesus completely and sinlessly had God's law in His heart. Only Jesus had the authority and power to dispense the Old Testament sacrificial system and bring in a new system by which He becomes a sacrifice for us.

David is simply expressing that, since God has put my feet on a solid rock, I know I need to give Him thanks and I know that the ritual system says I need to bring an animal. But what really counts is that my whole life is given to God. And that I become a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to Him.

He lays down words that the writer of Hebrews will later pick up and say, "Here is a phrase that can only be fulfilled adequately in the life of our Lord."

D. Rescue, reflection, dedication. The fourth part of the triumph side is proclamation (verses 9–10). "I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly." How do we take that and make it applicable? It's the king who's saying this. When you're the king, whenever you make a speech—when the king talks—everybody listens. So when something happens with him, he's got a platform to be able to tell it in a great assembly.

If God's done something for you and you're not a king, don't feel bad if you don't get to tell it to a great assembly, just tell it to somebody. Proclaim the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord.

David said, "I could have kept quiet but I didn't seal my lips. I didn't hide Your righteousness in my heart. I did not conceal Your love and Your truth. I shared it with others." The great thing about the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that, in the English, the first two letters of the word "gospel" are "go." Go. Go tell others what has happened to you.

Everything up until now has been upbeat. But it wouldn't be the psalms if we didn't get into some pathos now. All of a sudden, it takes a downward turn. That's what the psalms continually bring us to and why we all like them so much. We can identify.

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

II. In verses 11–17, the emphasis is not upon triumph but upon trouble.

This is the first hint in the psalm that something is wrong (verses 11–12), that trouble is still at hand. One of the real psychological and spiritual realities that David reflects on is that, in a very quick time, you can dive from the mountaintop to the valley. You can go from “I’ll never be tempted or tried or be psychologically discouraged again, because God’s won a wonderful victory,” literally as quickly as you can bat your eye, you can make a change.

David focuses on three things. He talks, first of all, about “my iniquities,” then he talks about “my enemies,” and then he talks about “my help.”

A. First, “my iniquities” (verses 11–12). Part of his trouble is his iniquity. I indicated earlier that the miry bog in verse 2 is left unidentified. We don’t know what it was. We don’t know if his troubles without number, in verse 12, are in reference to the miry bog. But we do know that whatever he’s facing here in this trouble part of the psalm is largely of his own making. “My sins have overtaken me and I cannot see. They’re more than the hairs of my head. My heart fails within me.” Interesting that in verse 5 he said, “The things you planned for us, no one can recount to you.” No one can tell what great things You’ve got out there. Now he’s saying, “My troubles without number surround me”!

I think that David is not so much wrestling with unconfessed sin, because his relationship with God throughout the psalms seems intact and secure. He seems, in verses 11–12, to be wrestling with the consequences of some sin that he’s committed in his life. God will forgive our sin but it doesn’t mean we don’t have to live with the consequences of what we’ve done wrong. It’s the distinction between theological forgiveness and sociological consequences. David found that God forgave his sin with Bathsheba, but the consequences in his family were enormous.

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

After David's great victory, there is no sense of self-sufficiency or not needing God's help anymore. But he says, "Lord, I still require Your mercy. Don't withhold Your mercy from me, Lord. May your love and Your truth always protect me."

B. Then in verses 13–15 the focus is on "my enemies." These two things go together. The internal failures of the heart and the external realities of people who don't like us. "Be pleased, O LORD, to save me; O LORD, come quickly to help me. May all who seek to take my life be put to shame and confusion; may all who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace. May those who say to me 'Aha! Aha!' be appalled at their own shame" (NIV).

Sin disheartens David, but his enemies rouse him. Notice the difference in tone between 11–12 and 13–15. In verses 11–12, he's a basket case because he's failed God. But when he thinks about what his enemies are doing to him, his spirit gets strong all of a sudden. Which is a sign of a positive, healthy spiritual and mental mindset. He's not letting people dump on him. You can be such a compliant person, submissive and passive, that you can destroy yourself by letting people walk all over you and believe all the negative things they heap on you. I think when people do stuff to us that is inappropriate, we need to—as a more mature person in the body of Christ—try to minister to the hurt that is being reflected in what is being said rather than strike back. David never really got there, I don't think. But his descendant Jesus certainly did.

C. Then "my help" (verses 16–17). There is, first of all, in verse 16 a general admonition to everybody to exalt the Lord. "May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you. May those who love your salvation always say, 'The LORD be exalted.'" Praise must be a continual theme of our life. Then David comes back and closes it with a very personal saying, as he looks at his help. "Don't forget me, Lord. I still need help. Come to my aid."

A PSALM OF TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE

Psalm 40

It's a wonderful spirit of honesty and supplication before the Lord, to have exhorted other people to rejoice and be glad, and then in the midst of all that rejoicing, say, "I need help." The last phrase he uses, "Oh my God, do not delay" (verse 17), should be melded to the first phrase in the psalm. "I waited patiently for the LORD." Now, the psalm closes when he's in trouble again, "Lord, do not delay." "Last time, Lord, I waited and waited. This time, don't make me wait so long." It's just the way we ought to feel. "You brought me through the last time, but don't do that to me again. Help me and get it resolved a little bit quicker this time. Bring me through it. Do not delay."

What a marvelous prayer to pray to the Lord. "I waited patiently for the LORD." A psalm of triumph and trouble.

Closing Prayer

Lord, David's prayer becomes our prayer in life. You do come through for Your people, Lord. When no one else can be our help, You are our help. You see us whenever no one else is praising You, You see us when we're poor and needy. You are gentle in responding to our cry, "Help me!" Thank You. You know the cry of the heart, "Lord, please help me! Put my feet on a solid place. Bring me out of this bog. I've slipped and slidden around too long. I need a solid place to stand." We ask You bring Your people through to that solid place. Thank You for your presence. Thank You for your blessings. We praise You.