

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

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Psalm 40 Past blessings, present needs.

This Psalm reminds us that our struggles in this present world will never cease but that God is our Rock and salvation – an ever-present help in time of trouble. Psalm 40 divides neatly into two halves. In verses 1-10 David remembers and declares to others God's goodness to him in the past – for the Lord lifted him out of a slimy pit. But then in verses 11-17 David earnestly seeks God for his help in a current crisis.

What links Psalms 38, 39 and 40 together is the fact that David knows it's his own sin which has landed him in trouble. Psalms 38 and 39 both speak of the Lord's discipline of David because of his sin. And this is what we also read in Psalm 40 – **read verse 12**. The title tells us that this Psalm is for *the director of music*. And that in turn reminds us that David intended it to be used for worship at the temple. His experience of the Lord is to be used by others when they come to worship the Lord. The other thing to say by way of background is that the Psalm is Messianic, it points us forward to the Lord Jesus - to Christ's life, ministry and death. Many of the Psalms do this of course, but Psalm 40 does it especially. Verses 6-8 in particular are quoted in Hebrews chapter 10 and applied to Jesus. And there are other verses which also point us forward to the Saviour and what he has done for us.

Let's divide the Psalm into these two sections, and we shall spend more time in the first half. In verses 1-10 David is **declaring God's goodness in the past**. First we have *David's testimony* in verses 1-3. **Read verses 1-3**. It's typical that we are not told what event or time in David's life he is referring to. But clearly it was difficult. Some think it was a near death experience the Lord rescued David from. Others think it was a time when David was very low physically and spiritually.

He describes himself as being down a slimy pit (2). The Hebrew literally says a 'noisy' pit. Not an actual pit, but a dark and distressing time when David felt trapped and unable to escape. He also talks about mud and mire. This adds to the sense of how horrible the experience was, and also that there was no foot hold. David could not rescue himself. Some think of Jeremiah's experience when he was literally thrown down into a pit (Jeremiah 38). The cistern had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud, probably past his waist, until the Lord rescued him through his friend Ebed Melech using ropes and padding.

Now David doesn't tell us *how* the Lord rescued him. Only that he had to be patient. David prayed to the Lord for salvation and then had to wait. But in time, the Lord turned to David and heard his cry. The Hebrew describes the Lord bending down both to hear and to help David. And out of the noisy, muddy pit, the Lord lifted David up and set his feet on a rock. God delivered him and gave David a firm place to stand. And then the Lord filled David's heart with gladness and praise. The new song (3) does not necessarily mean a new composition, it may simply mean a new *appreciation* of the kindness and mercy of God.

But then the words at the end of verse 3. **Read verse 3b**. It implies that this deliverance is something the Lord does and would do for many people – not just David. This is typical of the Lord's nature. This is what he is like – a God of mercy and salvation, responding to those who call on him.

These opening verses point us forward to the experience of our Lord Jesus when the sin of the world was laid upon him and he died an atoning death on the cross. Christ willingly endured the most awful pit for us. Yet like David, Christ cried out to his Father and the Father rescued his Son from death and hell. And after 40 days the resurrected Lord Jesus ascended into heaven.

And yet these same opening verses have always reminded the Christian of our spiritual salvation through Jesus Christ. The slimy pit describes our situation as sinners. We were in the pit of Satan's kingdom and could not get out. There was noise all around which excluded peace and it was all very unpleasant. But when we cried out to God for salvation, the Lord lifted us up and set our feet on the Rock who is Christ, and we were given a firm place to stand and a new song to sing – the song of the Lord's salvation.

Do you know such an experience in your life? If so, it's something to think about every day – and to give thanks for what the Lord has done for me. But then following on from *David's testimony* we have *David's response* to the Lord's salvation. How does he respond? In two ways. First, David responds by *telling others* about God and his goodness. We find David *telling others* in verses 4, 5 then verses 9, 10. **Read verses 4, 5.** David wants to tell this to the gathered congregation in the temple. He affirms the goodness of the Lord and the blessing of trusting in him and considering his great wonders.

And David understood this to be his role as king. He was to shepherd his people spiritually. His role was not just ruling over the people in terms of administration and bringing judgements. His role was primarily a spiritual one. David led the people in their worship of God and in their approach to the Lord. So in verse 4 David is encouraging his people to trust in God. "Don't trust in men. Don't look to false gods, or idols or superstition. They cannot save. Only the Lord can save." The situation David faced back in verses 1 and 2 was one which no man could rescue him from – far less a pagan god that was no god at all! "Look to the Lord, as I did. And you will be blessed" says David. A word to you today? Have you forgotten God in your situation?

Then David reminds the people (5) of the wonders the Lord has performed for his people – so many! Not just for David, but going back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Going back to Moses and Joshua. So many we can't count them. The Lord has not left himself without testimony of his goodness and power. And yet these are things which he planned. In other words, the Lord planned to reveal his greatness and power through such experiences.

One commentator compares this with the interesting verse at the end of John's gospel where John tells us that if all the things Jesus did were written down, then he supposes the world would not be big enough to hold all the books that could be written.

Who knows the number of the wonders of God? God's people are to think about them and consider them. We are to do this as we read the Bible. These things are written for our learning, that we may trust in the Lord, call out to him in our own distress, that in turn we may know him and his salvation too.

Then David continues to tell others in verses 9, 10. **Read verses 9, 10 again.** Some commentators see this as the equivalent of David preaching the gospel to the people! "Let me declare to you the Lord's righteousness, his salvation, his goodness and truth. Here is my experience of him. This is what he did for me. This is what I know he's like. I cannot keep this all to myself. I cannot contain it. No, I must speak out about the Lord from the rooftops!"

And every Christian knows this same desire to tell others about the Lord Jesus. In one sense, we don't need any training on how to evangelise. The best definition of evangelism I know is that evangelism is *overflow*. You cannot help telling others what the Lord has done for you. You overflow Christ. If God has

saved you from sin and its terrible consequences. If God has given to you the righteousness of Christ. If God has revealed to you his great love, then you cannot conceal this from people. You have to tell it out. And many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord too. Even through your testimony.

So here's the first response of David to what the Lord has done for him when he lifted him out of the slimy pit. He gratefully tells it to others. He cannot keep the Lord's salvation to himself. He sings songs of worship to the Lord so that others may hear. And if we have lost this desire to share Christ with others, well, we need to pray that the Lord will restore to us the wonder of his salvation and rekindle within us zeal for the Lord and his glory.

But the second response of David to the Lord's deliverance from the pit is his *commitment to serve the Lord*. He not only wants to tell others. He also wants to serve the Lord from a full heart. And we see this in verses 6-8. **Read verses 6-8**. It's not that David despises the sacrifices that the people bring to the temple (6). He simply remembers the attitude of heart which must accompany such offerings. They are to be given with a humble and willing heart, a heart that loves the Lord and desires to serve him with my whole being.

David probably knows how the prophet Samuel criticised David's predecessor, king Saul, who brought many sacrifices to the Lord when *he* was king, but Saul's heart was not right with God. Saul simply went through the outward motions of empty religion. And the prophet Samuel famously said to king Saul – **read 1 Samuel 15:22**. And many prophets emphasise the same basic message. For example – **read Micah 6:6-8**. And it's this attitude that David is expressing here.

The words, "My ears you have pierced" (6) can also be translated, "My ears you have opened". And this is probably a better translation. The Lord had opened David's ears to his word and his law. The Lord had given David an understanding of his word and a sensitivity to it. David's ears were attuned to the word of the Lord. And he puts this plainly in verse 8. **Read verse 8 again**. This is David's response to the Lord's deliverance. He wants to serve the Lord. He wants to obey the law which is in his heart. He loves the law of the Lord because he loves the Lord.

Verse 7 probably refers to Scriptures which speak about the responsibilities of Israel's king. And David says, "Yes, I am willing to fulfil this as king. I will serve the Lord. Perhaps the words of Deuteronomy 17 are in David's mind. **Read Deuteronomy 17:14-20**. And David is saying, "Yes I believe that these words were written about me and for me. I believe Lord that you have called me and anointed me to serve you as king in this way. And I'm willing to do it with all my heart."

Now it's verses 6-8 that the writer to the Hebrews picks up and applies to the Lord Jesus. Only in Hebrews, we have *yet another* possible translation of the same words. **Read Hebrews 10:5-7**. There came a point in the earthly life of Jesus when he knew who he was and what the task of the Lord was for him. And the Lord Jesus expresses this same, but perfect response to the mission his heavenly Father gave him. Christ was willing to carry out the plan of the Father to be our Saviour and king. Christ was willing to give himself for us in response to God's plan.

And for all eternity, Christians are thankful for that. And the New Testament reminds us that our response to the salvation of the Lord is to be the same as David's – a willing submission to give and serve. It's interesting that David's words, "your law is in my heart" (8) are fulfilled by the sending of the Holy Spirit into our hearts. Jeremiah prophesied that with the sending of the Spirit, God would write his law onto our hearts. And so Christians have a love for the law and the commandments of God – because we love the Lord.

And the words of Romans 12 remind us what the Lord requires of us who know his salvation in Christ. **Read Romans 12:1**. It's interesting that this same desire to serve the Lord comes as a *response* to the Lord lifting you out of the pit. Does it describe your attitude to the Lord's service today?

But then secondly from verses 11-17 and much more briefly, we have **seeking God's help in the present. Declaring God's goodness in the past** but now **seeking God's help in the present**. **Read verses 11-17**. This almost seems a different person to the one we have listened to in verses 1-10. We could also be excused for thinking that David seems to go from one crisis to the next. No sooner is he rescued from one slimy pit, he has to ask the Lord to deliver him from the next! But life can be like that. When one answer to prayer is given we are soon aware of the next thing we need to pray about. And the Lord seems to keep his people dependant on them as he trains us to be like his Son, the Lord Jesus.

But the other thing to notice is that the trouble David now experiences comes because of his own sin and folly. **Read verse 12**. And again we could be excused for saying, "But hang on a minute David, I thought you dedicated your life to serving the Lord. "Your law is within my heart and I desire to do your will." Are we to doubt David's sincerity in verses 6-8? Well no. This I how it is in this world. We can and must determine to give ourselves fully to the Lord. That is what it means to repent and turn to God after all. But does that mean we stop sinning? No, not in this world. There is a tension. In the passage we shall study this evening, John says – **read 1 John 2:1**.

Some people talk about reaching a point of 'full surrender' in their lives. Well, ok – we should all have this attitude of heart. But let's be under no illusion about the strength of the battle we face against sin and temptation, or the fallen heart that is still within us. Only in heaven shall we know deliverance from sin. David struggled with sin. So do we. But we have a Saviour in heaven who lived a sinless life for us, who loves us and gave his life for our sins upon the cross. And in heaven, where he sits at the right-hand of the Father, our great Shepherd prays for us. And until we see him face to face we shall know his cleansing from sin day by day, and we shall know his mercy.

Look again at the final verse. **Read verse 17**. One commentator says in effect that this is the only healthy position to be in - to *know* that we are poor in spirit. Didn't Jesus say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The time to worry, says this commentator, is when we don't realise our need of God and say like the Laodiceans, "I am rich and do not need a thing". But we are not rich in spirit. We are all poor and needy. And every day we need to ask the Lord for his grace.

This Psalm then reminds us then that our struggles in this present life will never cease. But the same Psalm reminds us that God is our Rock and our salvation. Through Jesus Christ he has lifted us out of the slimy pit and put a new song on our mouths. And until the day we see him, he is an ever-present help in time of trouble.