

Where To Look in Times Of Difficulty

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Date: 31 July 2022

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[0 : 00] Today's Bible raising is Psalm 40 beginning at verse 1 and it can be found in page 566 of the church Bibles.

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 the Lord and put their trust in him. Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, who does not look to the pride, to those who turn aside to false gods.

Many, Lord my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. None can compare with you. Were I to speak and tell of your deeds, there would be too many to declare.

[1 : 16] Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have opened. 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, my God. Your law is within my heart. I will proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly.

I do not seal my lips, Lord, as you know. I do not hide your righteousness in my heart. I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help. I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness from the great assembly.

Do not withhold your mercy from me, Lord. May your love and faithfulness 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 to save me, Lord. Come quickly, Lord, to help me. May all who want to take my life be put to shame and confusion.

[2 : 25] 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. 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. But as for me, I am poor and needy. May the Lord think of me.

You are my help and my deliverer. You are my God. Do not delay. This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Let's pray as we sit.

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Amen. Amen. Well, what a great psalm we have to look at this morning. As has already been said, what makes the psalm special is that in all the Bible, God speaks to us.

[3 : 37] But in the psalms, we speak to him. But how will I do that with this psalm if I haven't thought about how this psalm actually works?

When I look at a psalm of more than about 10 verses, my first question is probably, what is the structure of the psalm? And Wilcock, in the Bible Speaks Today series, has, I think, the right structure for this psalm.

And I put it on the back of your notice sheet. We're going to look back. David looks backwards. He looks upwards. He looks inwards. He looks outwards.

He looks around. And he looks forwards. Sorry they don't all end in words. Seems disappointing. But there we are. Some of those six sections are identical to the paragraphing in the NIV.

But I'll say after a while that my paragraph, my divisions are slightly different. And I'll explain why. But the first three are the same. So we don't need to worry yet.

[4 : 42] Before you get going, I want also for you to note how personal the psalm is. In NIV, there are 13 I's, 14 me's, and 16 my's.

I didn't put that on the notice sheet because I didn't want you to spend the rest of the sermon counting them and discovering if I got it wrong. But those personal pronouns aren't a sign of self-centeredness in David.

They're a sign of intimacy, of his relationship with God. But when I've read this psalm before, I think I've tended always to put enormous emphasis on the first few words.

I waited patiently for the Lord. He lifted me out of the slimy pit. But as I've been preparing, it's become clear to me that in some ways, we almost have to start at the end of the psalm because that's what tells us David's present position.

Look at verse 12. 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.

[5 : 57] Or verse 14. May all who want to take my life be put to shame and confusion. Now that is the context that David is speaking in.

That's his current situation. He's in a situation where troubles and sins are more than the hairs of his head. Even my hair. You know?

An enormous amount. And it's in that context of present trouble that this psalm gave words to David to pray and gives us words to pray.

So if we're coming to God this morning in that sense of troubles, then this psalm's absolutely the words for us. We can use these words to express our situation.

So now I am going to go back to the beginning of the psalm. I'm going to go back to the very first section, those first three verses. And I'm saying this, that when David is in a situation of trouble, the first thing he does is look back to the way that God had delivered him in the past.

[7 : 08] Look at verse 2. 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.

Once you start thinking of pits in the Bible, you can think of the one that Joseph was put in, or perhaps more appropriately here, the slimy pit in which Jeremiah was put, which was so slippery where he could only be brought out with ropes.

Or, I don't know whether you like wild swimming, but when you go wild swimming in a Scottish loch, sometimes you find that strange sort of brown stuff on the rocks, and it's really difficult to get out.

Certainly you can't get out standing up. You sort of crawl out. You need help to get out. That, I think, is mud and mire. Now, we're not told what the slimy pit was for David, or what it is for us.

We don't know. It could be in the area of sin, or health, or work, or relationship problems.

[8 : 21] Perhaps the point is that we're not told. We can be in any sort of slimy pit. And in that pit, we can cry to God, verse 1, and wait expectantly for him to act.

But it's fair to say that for David, that lifting and that help wasn't instant. He says, I waited patiently for the Lord, and he turned to me and heard my cry.

And that's a very characteristic Christian activity. Waiting with expectant anticipation. The Latin title of the psalm in the prayer book is *expectans expectavi*.

The Hebrew repetition of the verb is preserved in that Latin translation of the first two words, and it gives emphasis. One translation just says, I waited, waited, which is quite a good translation.

I waited with eager longing in prayer. And then God responded by inclining, by turning to me. So David looks back at the slimy pit.

[9 : 37] He looks back at his waiting. He looks back at God having heard his cry. And he looks back at the time when he sang a new song, a hymn of praise to our God.

He remembered then, and he remembers now, what God had done. And he gives thanks and praise. And obviously this transformation that David had experienced made such a difference to him that it's going to make a difference to others.

Verse 3b, Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him. A slimy pit, a present wait, a patient wait, and a new song.

In present troubles, we look back. Look back, verse 1 to 3, look upwards, verses 4 and 5. For whereas the experience in verses 1 to 3 is a very personal, perhaps in some ways a very one-off experience, one particular thing, it's just an example of how God behaves for people.

Look at verse 5a. Many, Lord my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. The word translated plans could be translated thoughts.

[11 : 14] The things you thought about for us. None can compare with you. Were I to speak and tell of your deeds, they would be too many to declare.

So it's not just this one thing he looks back to. He looks up and he sees how God does all these things for him, does many things for him.

And the crucial thing is that we have to keep looking upwards to God. Look at verse 4. Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.

What's characteristic of the proud? Well, I suppose a sort of lofty self-sufficiency. Like, I can do it my way.

And also a self-absorption. I don't need you. I don't need anyone else. So don't look to them. Look to God, who amazingly is absorbed with us and plans great things for us.

[12:25] Are you in trouble? Look back at what he's done for you before. Look up to what he can do for you today. And then verses 6 to 8, look inwards.

Well, with this great God, how will I respond to him? Now these verses here are very famous, 6 to 8. They're quoted in Hebrews, and I'll come back to that later. But first, let's just look at them as they apply to us directly. I think, if we haven't seen them before, that as a heart response, verse 6 is rather interesting.

Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have opened. Burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. If you're a Bible student, you'd know how much of the Old Testament is spent on looking at the offerings and what they are and how you make them and why they're important.

Sure, the offerings are ordained by God, which indeed they are. But Dick Lucas gives a very helpful parallel. He puts it like this. Suppose you have a not very helpful employee and you might say to him, I don't want your seven and a half hours a day.

[13:54] I want your willing cooperation with the company strategy. Now, the point that that boss is making or you're making if it's your employee, it's not that you don't want him to put in his contracted hours.

That wasn't what you were saying. But that how he works is what really matters. That's what's really important. And God is saying what's really important is that we have open ears and that we listen. We might think about Saul, for example. He was dismissed as king because he didn't carry out God's instructions. He didn't listen and obey. In 1 Samuel 15 it says, Samuel replied, does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord.

To obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fat of rams. So with us, God wants our obedience.

He's opened our ears. Literally, as it says at the bottom I think of the text, he has dug our ears. Maybe that's a different translation. Anyway, he's dug our ears.

[15:13] made these two holes so that we can hear. That's what he really wants is that we would hear through the word above all which we read which is what Amy was talking about earlier.

That's why we read our Bibles. And David says, you've dug my ears, you've opened them, and he says in verse 7, here I am, I have come, it is written about me in the scroll, I desire to do your will my God, your law is within my heart.

Once upon a time, I guess God's law had seemed external to him, out there somewhere, but through his experience of life, through reading his word, that word is now actually inside him, and he actually wants to do God's will.

How is it written about him in the scroll? Well, we don't exactly know the answer to that question, but a pretty reasonable answer is the scroll in Deuteronomy 17, verses 18 to 20, on which it says the king is to copy out this law.

So perhaps it's that particular thing for David, he was to copy it out, because he was the king, and then he was to obey it, it's written about me, I'm to do what it says. And this is difficult, and I'll come back to it at the end.

[16:47] What David is saying is God opened my ears, here I am, to do your will. look backwards to what he's done, look upwards to the God to whom we come, look inwards, how is my heart?

Am I listening and obedient? And in verses 9 to 11, look outwards, I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly.

Now interestingly, I think this fourth section the center of it are the negatives. I do not seal my lips, Lord, as you know.

I do not hide your righteousness in my heart. I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness from the great assembly. And the reason I think those negatives are the key to this section is that there's an alliteration in the Hebrew.

Seal, hide, and conceal are kala, kasa, and kakad. They all start with that same sound. I think the emphasis goes on those three negatives.

[18:03] Not sealing, not hiding, not concealing. And then once you see that, then I think that draws verse 11 into the same section because in fact, do not withhold, or it could equally well be translated, you will not withhold, that verb withhold is the same verb as the one in seal.

So it's another one of these when it's kala, are alliterative verbs. From this assembly, the great assembly, I do not withhold my lips, but I show your love and truth, he says.

From me, he says to God, you do not withhold your mercy, but show your love and truth. God's love and truth go out to us from God and then they go out from us to others.

There's that passing on. We've just said that your law is within my heart, but the point is it doesn't just stay there, not just there.

I share my experience with others. That's what David says he's been doing. His experience of God has been going out to other people. And so my heart isn't, if that's true of me, my heart isn't like the Dead Sea because it has an outflow.

[19:31] And that passing on of the Christian story is very important. It's perhaps especially important in our day as it's less and less well known.

proclaiming your saving acts, not sealing my lips, not concealing your love and faithfulness is very important. But it's perhaps more challengingly in this passage, he's not really just talking about the Christian story in general, he's talking about my story.

He's talking about how God had rescued him, how God had lifted him and brought him out. Well, he's saying, I've been doing my bit, I've been passing that word out to other people.

Look backwards, look upwards, look inwards to my heart, looking outwards. And then verses 14 to 15, we come to the difficult bit.

For troubles without numbers surround me. He's no longer describing what happened in the past, or even the good things he's been doing.

[20:47] He's now saying, I'm still in trouble. That's where we actually are today, is verses 12 to 15.

It's interesting, in verse 5, he says, many, Lord God, are the wonders you have done. Now, he says in verse 12, for troubles without number, surround me.

There seem to be two causes for trouble in the actual passage. There are troubles due to my own sin, that's verse 12, my sins have overtaken me, and there's troubles due to bitter enemies, in verses 14 and 15, those who want to take my life, those who desire my ruin.

there's an interesting fact that has no particular obvious resolution, which is the fact that these verses from 13 to the end are almost identical to Psalm 70.

It seems, there's no certainty of which comes first, which comes second, but I think, but I've got no real evidence for this, that perhaps Psalm 70 was written by David first, and now he's brought those words into this Psalm, using words he'd previously spoken, and now he's slightly reworking them, it's a possibility, he's using words that he himself had used earlier, and now he's using them again.

[22:25] That's what we do all the time, of course, when we read the Psalms, we're using David's words and making them our own, and he's perhaps taking what we now know as Psalm 70, to be the words that he needs to use in this situation.

And the first verse, verse 13, is similar to the first verse of Psalm 70, which, if you come to nine o'clock, you'll know well, it's that famous prayer, O God, make speed to save us, O Lord, make haste to help us.

That's his prayer in this trouble. He looks around at a difficult world, and he says, Lord, help me. And then we have the last two verses.

He looks forwards. Verse 16, 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.

He's not only interested in himself. He wants all Christians to rejoice and be glad. He wants them all to rejoice in the Lord's greatness. yes.

[23:48] But then the last verse is a final personal thought in a very personal psalm. As for me, I am poor and needy. May the Lord think of me.

The Lord, the ESV translates verses 17a, as for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. That's just as likely a translation as the other one.

That's the same word taking thought as we had for planning in verse 5. The Lord thinks of us and makes plans for us.

I find that a hugely encouraging thought. As I go out into a difficult week, possibly, I go with that encouragement. But I also go knowing that it is difficult.

And even at the end, his prayer is still, you are my God, do not delay. Whatever your situation is this morning, that may be the one that you're praying, I need your help now, Lord.

[25 : 06] So I want to summarize, and then I want to make a very important point at the end. I hope you find that six-fold structure memorable and helpful.

It's the same structure that I was taught, almost the same structure as I was taught when I was much younger than I am now, to use as I come to Holy Communion, as I come to the Lord's table. We only had the woods ones, we didn't have look around. I was taught to look backwards to the cross, to look upwards to Jesus risen and ascended.

I was taught to look inwards, and perhaps that verse from Matthew was quoted, the one that says, if you're offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar.

First go and be reconciled to them, then come and offer your gift. Back, up, in, look outwards to one another.

[26 : 11] We being many are one body because we all share in the one bread. And then looking forwards, the verse that was quoted was, as often as you drink, as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

And that's a very helpful way of getting ready for communion. But actually, when you do that with Psalm 40, it perhaps has a more challenging and personal quality.

When I did it thinking about the Lord's table, those were mostly, it was mostly quite generic, quite general. But this is really personal.

I'm coming, looking back at how God has delivered me in some situation. I'm looking up and thinking what he has done for me. I'm looking in and, well, that's a difficult one.

Am I absolutely there on open ears and desiring to do your will? And then I'm thinking about the people I have told and the people I haven't about God's work work for us and for me.

[27 : 31] And I am looking forward to go on with him. But of course, I did promise you something which I haven't yet delivered, which is that to look at how Hebrews uses verses six to eight, or six to seven, I think it perhaps is.

Hebrews 10 puts it like this. Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said, sacrifice an offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.

With burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, here I am. It is written about me in the scroll. I have come to do your will, my God.

In Hebrews chapter 10, we hear Jesus speak these words. Now, sacrifice and offering are no longer required because Christ has made the once-for-all offering.

Christ is the one about whom it is written in the scroll. We think of how he had enemies who surrounded him and mocked him, and yet he resolved to say, here I am.

[28 : 56] I have come to do your will, my God. He is the servant who says, the sovereign Lord has opened my ears and I have not been rebellious.

His is the perfect obedience and offering. We see Jesus living out. his obedience for us.

We see Jesus doing all the things in verses 6 to 8 that we want to do and ought to do, but maybe don't.

And thanks to his work as our perfectly obedient king, we have a sacrifice that cleanses us once for all so that we can approach God's throne with confidence and find our help in time of need.

Jesus, the one whose ears were fully open, the one who came as it was promised in the scriptures, the one who desired and indeed did God's will, is the one who brings us out of the slimy pit, who lifts us out of our sins or lifts us out of our attempts to work our way to God.

[30 : 27] And through him, we come with a new song, a song of praise. We come rejoicing in his many wonders for us. We come perhaps rather tentatively proclaiming them to others.

And through the troubles, and we get to the end of the psalm and they're still there, we press on. For the Lord takes thought for me.

Let's pray as we sit. Heavenly Father, thank you for your word. Thank you for what you've done for us in the past.

thank you above all for Jesus coming and perfectly doing your will for us. And we pray for one another, especially for any who have particular troubles this morning, that you will be with them, that you will help them, that you will encourage, enable them to look back and to look up.

Give us boldness that we may look outwards to others and help us to go forward with you today.

[32 : 00] For you, Lord, take thought for me. Amen.