

The sequence of Good Friday Psalms continues. Each psalm (Psalms 34-41) demonstrates in a particular way our inability to save ourselves, followed by a prefiguration of God's redemptive provision in Christ. The message is clear. We need a deliver, whose silence and speech, forgiveness and faithfulness, suffering and sacrifice, are sufficient to save. Our failure is real. We cannot save ourselves. Our only hope is in the Lord, who alone can deliver us from "sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from others; pressures of the world; a meaningless life."¹

The Joy of Deliverance

*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 proud,
to those who turn aside to false gods.
Many, Lord my God,
are the wonders you have done,
things you planned for us.
None can compare with you;
were I to speak and tell of your deeds,
they would be too many to declare.*

Psalm 40:1-5

The psalm begins not with "finger-tapping impatience or yawning boredom" but with the eager expectation that the Lord will provide all the deliverance that is needed.² Calvin translated the first verse, "In waiting I waited," to convey the meaning of the Hebraism signifying earnest desire and patience.³ In other words, "I waited and waited and waited for God" (Ps 40:1, MSG). This is not the tedium of waiting room waiting, but an inner longing of the soul that finds total satisfaction and peace of mind resting in God's hands. "At last he looked; finally he listened. He lifted me out of the ditch, pulled me out of the deep mud. He stood me up on a solid rock to make sure I wouldn't slip" (Ps 40:2 MSG). David's first person experience is personal. He

¹ White, "Salvation," 968.

² Wilcock, Psalms 1-72, 142.

³ Calvin, Psalms, 89.

vividly recalls the Lord coming through as only the Lord could come through. When he writes this way he includes like-minded worshipers in his first person reference. We share his helplessness and experience “stage by stage, the mighty deliverance of God who first heard his cry, then stooped down and drew him out of the mud, then set his feet securely upon rock, and finally put a fresh song of praise in his mouth, leading many to believe” (Ps 40:1-3).⁴ We are included in David’s first person experience of deliverance. David puts himself in the worshiper’s situation and writes us into his thanksgiving praise. We are the “many” who see and fear the Lord with holy reverence and awe. We are the “many” who put their trust in the Lord. But the “I” belongs not only to David and all who pray the psalm in faith, but it belongs first and foremost to the Incarnate One, to whom belong all the psalms.

Echoes of Psalm 40 can be heard in the life and work of Jesus. He is the picture of complete dependence upon the Father, always waiting for the will of the Father, doing nothing apart from the Father and everything according to the timing of the Father. He is also the human face of God, the Coming One who lifts us up out of the pit, sets our feet on the rock, and puts a new song in our mouth. The meaning of this psalm lies in Christ. “We pray it properly when we pray it as His own words to the Father. The ‘will’ of God to which He is obedient was that ‘will’ to which He referred when in the Garden he prayed: ‘Not my will, but Yours be done.’”⁵

“The shape and dynamic of the Psalms can most usefully be understood according to the theological framework of crucifixion and resurrection,” writes Walter Brueggemann. The flow of the psalms “are for Christians most clearly played out in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. . . .and especially the passion narrative.”⁶ Even so, Brueggemann adds, “I do not want to turn the Psalms into a ‘Christian book,’ for I have repeatedly stressed the profoundly Jewish character of the material.”⁷ Thankfully, Brueggemann is not responsible for turning the Psalms into a Christian book, Jesus Christ and the apostles did that in the first century and they did it by stressing the profoundly Jewish character of the psalms. The exposition of the Psalms does not depend upon dealing with an “original meaning and application” that is independent of the coming of Christ.⁸

We cannot know the meaning of the psalms apart from Christ anymore than we can understand Abraham’s offering of Isaac on Mount Moriah or interpret the significance of the bronze serpent in the wilderness apart from Christ. Meaning is not served by pretending not to know the very truths the psalms were inspired to reveal. The text cannot mean what it never meant, but the biblical meaning of the text has no meaning apart from Christ. There is no revelational vacuum in which the Old Testament meaning exists today independent of Christ. Just as we cannot understand who we were as a child independent of who we have become as an adult, we cannot understand the Old Testament apart from Christ. The whole Bible undivided is the Christian book and it is equally Christian at every point.

David’s graphic description of the joy of deliverance contradicts the easy way some Christians speak of disappointment with God. To cry out from the depths, was for Augustine the first sign

⁴ Stott, *Psalms*, 50.

⁵ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 78.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984. 10-11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, 856.

of hope, because many “proud despisers” were unaware that they were even in the mud and mire. “There are some deeper in the deep, who do not even perceive themselves to be in the depth,” so “the very act of crying is already lifting them up.”⁹

All disciples have a history of deliverance that outweighs whatever the burden or the crisis of the moment may be. Augustine rightly understood the “horrible pit” to be “the depth of iniquity.” The psalmist had in mind a deliverance worthy of salvation from sin and death. Disappointment sets in when we become indifferent to what God has done for us. As the author of Hebrews wrote, “We must pay more careful attention, therefore to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away” because “how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” (Heb 2:1-3).

Past deliverance lifts the soul and blesses the redeemed with three things: a place to stand, a song to sing and a testimony to keep. These three strong images reinforce God’s deliverance. The old gospel hymn captures the first: “On Christ the solid rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand.” Peter’s pivotal confession in the Gospel of Matthew is followed by the promise of Jesus, “upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of death and hell will not overcome it” (Mt 16:18). We not only have a secure place to stand but a new song of praise to sing. We hardly feel like groaning and moaning, grumbling and complaining, when our heart is singing. The picture of strength and song has its public impact: “Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.” Thanksgiving has the upper hand on disappointment when believers remember their salvation in Christ.

Mary Newton played a vital role in the conversion of her husband John Newton who later became a pastor and hymn writer. They were so close that he had a constant yearning for her presence. After having been married for twenty-two years he wrote of her, “Every room where you are not present, looks unfurnished.” When Mary died of breast cancer, their friends worried how he might react to her death. Newton had preached that even though a Christian might suffer “he cannot be properly unhappy” and trials were an opportunity to show “the power of divine grace.” He had hoped that he would die first, dreading what life would be like without his Mary, but he discovered the strength of God’s amazing grace when he needed it most. “The day of her death, he preached. The next day he visited parishioners, and when it came to her funeral, he delivered the sermon. ‘The Bank of England is too poor to compensate for such a loss as mine,’ he later wrote. ‘But the Lord, the all-sufficient God, speaks, and it is done. Let those who know him, and trust him, be of good courage. He can give them strength according to their day.’”¹⁰

Humility and exuberance characterize the true joy of deliverance. Blessing belongs to the one who trusts in the Lord, “who does not look to the proud” or “turn aside to false gods.” The worshiper is thrilled with the many wonders that the Lord has done and will do. She is overflowing with enthusiasm for the works of the Lord. The melancholic frustration that often accompanies our fixation on the self is dispelled by the impulse to praise the Lord and to tell of all his deeds.

In writing to a young pastor, Eugene Peterson, comments on what it means to him as a pastor not to look to the proud. “The ‘proud’ for me in this context are those pastors who look like they

⁹ Augustine, Psalms, 120.

¹⁰ Steve Turner, Amazing Grace, 105.

‘know what they’re doing’ – who are competent and recognized as such, who have an honored position in society and among their colleagues. And going ‘astray after false gods’ amounts to living in response to something manageable, turning my vocation into a depersonalized job that I can get good at. I’m probably reading more into this text than it warrants, but it has given me a couple of images (‘proud’ and ‘astray’) that set off little alarm signals when I have sensed that I was betraying or avoiding the uniqueness of pastor.”¹¹

The effectiveness of Psalm 40 in de-constructing disappointment with God can be measured in how it transforms a low grade fever of disappointment into robust thanksgiving. To really put the psalm to the test may require a congregation of the walking wounded, made up of self-absorbed, pity-seeking, blame-casting believers who feel that God has let them down. Such a congregation of disappointed believers may prove more formidable than Goliath, the nine-foot tall Philistine warrior who confronted David on the battlefield. But David’s Psalm 40 has five smooth stones that are sufficient for the challenge.

(1) The first stone is gratitude for the Lord’s past deliverances (Ps 40:1-3). Failure to remember the Lord’s blessings is a major contributor to disappointment with God.

(2) The second stone involves lifting our eyes to the horizon to see the big picture of God’s wonderful acts and providential plan (Ps 40:4-5). God’s plan is far better than we could have ever designed for ourselves. Thanksgiving means that we don’t have sufficient time or energy to recite all that God has done for us. That’s a far cry from saying to God, “What have you done for me lately?”

(3) The third stone used to knock down disappointment with God is heart-felt devotion and a passion for obedience. Ritual practices are one thing, but sacrificial surrender to the will of God is altogether different (Ps 40:6-10).

(4) The fourth smooth stone is an honest assessment of the enemy within and the enemy without (Ps 40:11-15). The psalmist confesses his besetting sins and acknowledges he has enemies who seek his ruin. He does not blame God, rather he pleads with God to save him.

(5) The fifth stone to sling against the Goliath of disappointment calls all who seek the Lord to worship him with a shout, “The Lord is great!” and to openly confess, “I am poor and needy” (Ps 40:16-17).

The Sacrifice of Deliverance

*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 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.*

¹¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*, 316.

*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.*

Psalm 40:6-11

The only response worthy of this joyous deliverance is the sacrifice of all we are and will be to the Lord. Ritual practices and verbal exclamations are inadequate. External religious observances can't compare to the obedience and devotion that flows from heart righteousness. David's response recalls the words of the prophet Samuel, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams" (1 Sam 15:22). Similar concern is expressed by Isaiah (1:10-17), Jeremiah (7:21-26), Amos (5:21-24), Hosea (6:6), and Micah (6:6-8). David returns to this theme in his personal confession, when he prayed, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifice of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Ps.51:15-17).

Religion by the book is no substitute for hearing and responding to the voice of God. David credits the Lord for enabling him to comprehend and obey his will. The metaphor is graphic: "Ears you have dug for me." Peterson explains: "There must be something more involved than following directions for unblemished animals, a stone altar, and a sacrificial fire. There is: God is speaking and must be listened to. But what good is a speaking God without listening human ears? So God gets a pick and shovel and digs through the cranial granite, opening a passage that will give access to the interior depths, into the mind and heart. . . . The dominical command is Listen: 'he who has ears to hear, let him hear.'"¹² Only after David is all ears to the voice of God does he evoke a seven-fold first person response: "Here I am: I have come . . . I desire to do your will . . . I proclaim righteousness . . . I do not seal my lips . . . I do not hide your righteousness . . . I speak of your faithfulness . . . I do not conceal your love" (Ps 40:7-10).

David describes the personal life-transforming impact of the Lord's deliverance; the author of Hebrews describes the person who makes this deliverance possible – Jesus Christ. His lengthy quote in Hebrews 8:1-10:18 from Jeremiah 31 and Psalm 40, along with references to Exodus 24 and 25, were meant to be remembered with delight. The tension between type and antitype generates a momentum that carries the logic and the pathos of his message forward. In the context of the pastor's sermon in Hebrews, Psalm 40 draws the pastor's expository spiral to a conclusion. He explains the enduring efficaciousness of Christ's sacrifice by finding "a prophetic utterance which he recognizes as appropriate to the Son of God at the time of his incarnation."¹³

He paraphrases the line "my ears you have dug for me" to fit the incarnation, "a body you prepared for me," and to underscore the offering of Christ himself.¹⁴ The external obligation to

¹² Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 70-73.

¹³ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 239.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 103. Calvin writes, "The Apostle, in Hebrews 10:5, seems to wrest this place, when he restricts what is spoken of all the elect to Christ alone, and expressly contends that the sacrifices of the Law, which David says are not agreeable to God in comparison to the obedience of the heart, are abrogated; and when quoting rather the words of the Septuagint that those of the prophet, he infers from them more than David intended to teach."

offer animal sacrifices is compared to the perfect sacrifice made possible by the Incarnate One: “Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, my God” (Heb 10:7). “His incarnation itself is viewed as an act of submission to God’s will and, as such, an anticipation of his supreme submission to that will in death.”¹⁵ “Hebrews goes beyond Psalm 40; the perpetual sacrifices of the past have become obsolete in terms of the permanent sacrifice of Christ.”¹⁶ But in another sense the pastor captures the original essence of the psalm calling for the king’s “obedience and profound spirituality” because “sacrifices in and of themselves achieved nothing.”¹⁷ Only this time, Jesus Christ is the King-Priest who is perfect in his obedience and perfect in his sacrifice.¹⁸ In him Psalm 40 realizes its true *objective correlative*.

The pastor underscores the Christological interpretation explicitly, when he says, “By that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10). James Denny wrote, “It is the Atonement which explains the Incarnation: the Incarnation takes place in order that the sin of the world may be put away by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ The law, with all of its ceremonial procedures and external regulations, including the priesthood, the tabernacle, and the sacrifices, was designed by God to point exclusively to Jesus Christ, who “was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Heb 9:28).

The author of Hebrews begins and ends this section with the prophet Jeremiah’s description of the new covenant, and in both cases he underscores two important truths.²⁰ First, he stresses the internal transformation wrought by the grace and mercy of God – “I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds” (Heb 8:10; 10:16), and second, he emphasizes God’s everlasting forgiveness – “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Heb 8:12; 9:17). He then sums up the whole section with a single line: “And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary” (Heb 10:18).

When we combine the *impact* of deliverance (Psalm 40) and the *source* of deliverance (Hebrews 10) we are given a vivid sketch of the Christian life. The “I” is transformed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We offer ourselves up to God with a deep desire to do his will with a righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (Matthew 5:20). We proclaim Christ’s “saving acts in the great assembly” (Ps 40:9). We do not seal our lips, nor conceal the good news (Ps 40:9-10). The psalmist description corresponds to

¹⁵ Ibid., 242.

¹⁶ Craigie, *Psalms*, 317.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, 865. Ross refers to Perowne who explains “that the change in words from “ears” to “body” which is found in Hebrews 10:5,7 does not materially affect the argument of the Psalm or the passage in Hebrews. The point in Hebrews was not only that the Lord’s sacrifice was the sacrifice of the human body, which was already implied in his coming into the world, the incarnation, but that it was the suffering of his obedient will. The writer found these words which once expressed the devotion of a true Israelite to be far more strikingly expressive, indeed, in the highest sense, only truly expressive of the perfect obedience of the Son of God (Psalms, I:336).

¹⁹ Denny, *Death of Christ*, 234.

²⁰ The new covenant was by no means new to God. Everything in the Mosaic covenant pointed forward to this new covenant. The essence of being God’s covenant people was never a matter of external religion, ethnic identity, ritual conformity and legalistic duty. The new covenant was not new in the sense that over time God came up with a better plan. Jeremiah was not introducing a new improved program that promised to work better. God’s promises through Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, all pointed forward to a personal relationship with God based on God’s love and mercy. What was new was that God was making the means and the power of his redemptive purposes more fully known.

the apostle's mission, "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ" (Col 1:28). Paul provides the perfect summation of this sketch in the psalms of the Christian life when he writes, "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:1-2).

The Plea for Deliverance

*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;
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.*

Psalm 40:11-17

On this side of eternity we need daily deliverance from our many sins and from those who seek our ruin. The psalmist cries out for help because of the enemy within and the enemy without. The deliverance out of the slimy pit must be accompanied by a life of deliverance. We need multiple deliverances, daily deliverances, constant deliverance. The recipient of grace needs the steady flow of mercy. The psalmist felt what the apostle John expressed, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9). Neither David nor John could understand a person, who claimed to be forgiven and purified from all unrighteousness, complaining that God hadn't done anything for them lately. Their counsel leads us to examine our lives and the consequences of our actions and respond to the Lord in gratitude

for his mercy and forgiveness.

Having faced the enemy within, the psalmist turns to confront the fierce opposition from without. This enemy too, is formidable and threatens to ruin his life. “Be pleased, O Lord, to save me; O Lord, come quickly to help me.” He has no grounds for self-reliance. He is thrown back on the mercy of God, which is where he belongs, *which is where we belong*. His only hope is for the Lord’s deliverance. Our only hope is for the Lord’s deliverance.

David’s concluding note of exaltation holds no hint of disappointment with God. How could there be? “But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation always say, ‘The Lord is exalted!’” The bottom line is praise in spite of personal sin and social evil. Disappointment with God contradicts the confession that Jesus is Lord. One can hardly praise the Lord and exclaim, “The Lord is exalted!” and then turn around and blame the Lord. The conclusion of the psalm fits with the admonition of the apostle, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16).

David’s final note is personal. If the king must be delivered from the pit, struggle with personal sin and face mean-spirited opposition, what should the people of God expect for themselves? David fostered no illusion of grandeur. “Yet I am poor and needy,” is a worthy refrain of a thankful king, who sees himself as fully dependent upon the Lord. His self-assessment reminds us of the first line of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins where David leaves off, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The poor acknowledge their desperate need for God and their inability to merit salvation. The psalmist concludes in the spirit of the first beatitude, “You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, do not delay.”

Augustine concluded his exposition of Psalm 40 with a riff on David’s phrase, “I am poor and needy.” “There is nothing in me that may be praised as mine own,” he wrote. “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). “For I am poor and needy.” And again, “Now I am not rich, because I am not proud. . . ‘Lord, be merciful to me a sinner!’ (Luke 18:13), adding, but “as for me, I am poor and needy.” Like a guitarist playing a riff, Augustine used the phrase, “I am poor and needy,” to describe the Christian life. “The members of Christ – the Body of Christ extended everywhere – are asking of God, as one single person, one single poor man, and beggar! For He too was poor, who ‘though He was rich, yet became poor, that you through his poverty might be made rich’ (2 Cor 8:9). It is He that makes rich those who are the true poor; and makes poor those who are falsely rich.”²¹

²¹ Augustine, Psalms, 127-128.