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## WHEN YOU'RE IN THE PIT

Psalm 40

By

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## When You're in the Pit Psalm 40

The late Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis, said to his frustrated, impatient daughter, "My dear, if you would only recognize that life is hard, things would be so much easier for you." (Source unknown.)

Jesus told the disciples to expect trials. He begins John 16 by stating (16:1, 2), "These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling. They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God." He ends that chapter in a similar vein (16:33), "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

Yet in spite of these words and many other similar Scriptures (John 15:18; Acts 14:22; 1 Thess. 3:3-4; 2 Tim. 3:12), many that profess to know Christ stumble and fall away when they get hit with various trials. If you're going to persevere with Christ, you must know in advance that you will face times when you are in the pit, and you must know what to do when you're there. Rather than turning away from the Lord, you must learn to turn to Him to rescue you from life's pits.

Psalm 40 is a song about the pits. It falls into two sections. In the first half (40:1-10), David tells how God got him out of one pit and he sings God's praise for doing so. But he did not then live happily ever after. Rather, it is evident from the second half of the psalm (40:11-17) that he is in another pit, crying out to the Lord to deliver him from this one. Because David waited intently on the Lord to rescue him from the first pit, he knew how to wait on the Lord to get him out of the second pit. So it's a psalm about what to do when you're in the pit.

When you're in the pit, wait intently on the Lord  
and proclaim His goodness when He answers.

Rather than follow the structure of the psalm, I want to follow David's plan for getting out of a pit and his example of what to do when the Lord rescues you.

1. When you're in the pit, wait intently on the Lord.

What is "the pit"?

- A. The pit could be any of a number of life's trials.

David does not specify exactly what the trials of the first pit entailed. The second pit clearly involved the consequences of David's sins (40:12) and many enemies that were trying to destroy him (40:14-15). But he doesn't exactly say what the first pit was, except to describe it as a "pit of destruction" and "the miry clay" (40:2). Some think that it was David's enemies, while others think that it could have been physical illness or some deep emotional distress. Perhaps as with Paul's "thorn in the flesh," we are not told so that we can relate all of our trials to David's situation.

Marla and I do a fair amount of hiking, and we have encountered a lot of mud. We were hiking a muddy trail in Kauai when the man in front of us fell flat on his face, covering his entire front side with mud. We were hiking in the rain in Nepal when Marla slipped and hurt herself. Arizona mud is especially sticky and slippery. It gets on your shoes and you can't walk. If you fell into a pit whose walls and bottom were mud, you would be in big trouble! That's where David was. He was trapped and unable to free himself.

If you have not yet cried out to God to save you from judgment and eternal punishment for your sins, then you are in a deep pit with no human way out. You may not feel like you're in that pit. You may feel as if life is going reasonably well. But Paul describes your future this way (2 Thess. 1:7b-9), "when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power." It's the worst of all pits to be in!

Your pit could be poor health, the loss of your job, former friends that turned against you, an unfaithful mate, rebellious children, or any other overwhelming problem. You may be responsible for being in your pit, or you may be a victim of the sins of others.

David's situation in the second pit seems to have been a combination of both. He acknowledges his many sins, which have overtaken him like a fog, so that he can't see his way clear (40:12). I think that he is not referring to sins that he was currently committing, but rather to the *consequences* of past sins that were now coming home to roost. But, also, the consequences involved wicked people who were wrongly intent on destroying David (40:14).

- B. When you're in the pit, you'll be tempted toward pride or falsehood to get out of the pit.

In verse 4, David writes, "How blessed is the man who has made the Lord his trust, and has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood." When you're in a pit, it's very easy, even if you profess to trust in the Lord at other times, to grab onto any seeming way of escape, even if it means compromising your faith. The proud are those that boast in their own abilities. They don't recognize or admit any personal weakness. Rather, by their own ingenuity and effort, they will get out of their crisis on their own. Or, if you're in a jam and it looks like a little "white" lie will get you out of the jam, you can be tempted to use it. You justify it by thinking, "Well, it's just this once and I do need to get out of this pit." But you're trusting in your lie, not in the Lord.

King Asa was a classic example of a good man who fell into this trap. He was a good king who instituted many reforms in Judah. When a million-man Ethiopian army invaded Judah, Asa called out to God and affirmed his trust in God alone to deliver them (2 Chron. 14:2-12). But many years later, after a long reign that God had blessed, when the king of Israel came up against him, Asa sent tribute to the king of Syria and enlisted his help against the enemy. Interestingly, his ploy worked. The king of Israel had to abandon his invasion of Judah to defend his northern flank.

But, a prophet rebuked Asa for relying on the king of Syria instead of relying on the Lord (2 Chron. 16:7-9). Asa's final days were plagued with painful gout. But 2 Chronicles 16:12 reports, "yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but the physicians." It's not that it's wrong to go to doctors, but it *is* wrong to *trust* in doctors if your primary trust is not in the Lord. The lesson is, it is always wrong to trust in anything or anyone other than the Lord to get out of your pit, *even if it works*.

C. The way out of the pit is to wait intently on the Lord.

David says (Ps. 40:1), "I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me and heard my cry." Waiting on the Lord is a common theme in Scripture. For example, Psalm 37:7: "Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes." Again, Psalm 37:9: "For evildoers will be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord, they will inherit the land." And again, Psalm 37:34: "Wait for the Lord and keep His way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you will see it." But, what does it mean to "wait" on the Lord? Our psalm gives us at least seven clues:

- (1) Waiting on the Lord is intently active, not passive (40:1).

The Hebrew of verse 1 is an intensified form of the verb, literally, "Waiting, I waited." The New English Bible translates it, "I waited, waited for the Lord." It's not a passive, ho-hum kind of waiting, like you do at the doctor's office when you thumb through a bunch of magazines to pass the time. Rather, it is an intently active time when your situation in the pit tunes your heart to the Lord in ways that you would not normally experience. It means to wait expectantly as you hope for God's promises to be fulfilled on your behalf. The more intense your situation, the more intently you wait upon the Lord to fulfill His promises.

- (2) Waiting on the Lord means to cry out to Him for deliverance (40:1, 13, 17).

God's timing often does not coincide with our timing. We want it done instantly, but God has other purposes. But when you're in a pit, there is a sense of urgency. In verse 1, David mentions his *cry*, which may have been as simple as, "Help, Lord!" In verse 13, he directly cries out, "Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me; make haste, O Lord, to help me." In verse 17, he repeats, "Since I am afflicted and needy, let the Lord be mindful of me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God."

One reason we often do not cry out to God for deliverance is that we do not see ourselves as afflicted and needy. This is especially true in the case of those who do not see their own need for

salvation from God's judgment. They're like the guy I mentioned last week, who saw himself as a "good sinner." Good sinners may admit that they need a little assistance now and then, but they don't need a Savior. You don't need a Savior unless you are helpless at the bottom of a slimy pit. Because our tendency, even after salvation, is to think that we can do it ourselves, the Lord graciously keeps putting us in one pit after another, so that we cry out to Him.

- (3) Waiting on the Lord means trusting Him alone (40:3, 4, 11).

In verse 3, David expresses his hope that because of his testimony of waiting on the Lord, others will also come to trust in Him. In verse 4, as we've seen, he mentions how blessed is the man who has made the Lord his trust. In verse 11, some versions translate it as a prayer. The NIV, for example, translates, "Do not withhold your mercy from me, O Lord; may your love and your truth always protect me." But Derek Kidner (*Psalms 1-72* [IVP], p. 160) says that unquestionably it is *not* a prayer; it's a statement or reaffirmation of trust: (NASB) "You, O Lord, will not withhold Your compassion from me; Your lovingkindness and Your truth will continually preserve me." Waiting on the Lord means, "Lord, You're my *only* hope for deliverance."

So waiting on the Lord is not just a passive biding your time. It is an active crying out to the Lord, trusting Him to answer because of His love and compassion.

- (4) Waiting on the Lord means recounting His many wonders and His providential care (40:5).

Waiting on the Lord gives you time to think. But you've got to direct your mind to think about the right things. If you think, "Oh no, God has abandoned me! I'm doomed!" you will either panic or turn to the world for help. But if you think about God's many wonders and how He has worked in the past to deliver His people, you will wait with expectant hope in Him.

As David waits on the Lord, he thinks about who God is and what He has done. He says (v. 5), "Many, O Lord my God, are the wonders which You have done, and Your thoughts toward us; there is none to compare with You. If I would declare and speak of them, they would be too numerous to count." Maybe David was

thinking about the wonders of creation (see Ps. 104). God established the earth so that it is hospitable for us to live here. He placed the earth at the proper distance from the sun, so that we do not burn up or freeze. He waters the earth, providing crops for our food. He preserves us from many catastrophes that we don't even know about. I heard recently that a meteorite came uncomfortably close to earth. If it had hit, it would have wreaked major damage. And yet I never heard any newsman giving thanks to God for preserving us from destruction!

David also was probably thinking about God's many wonderful acts of delivering His people from trouble. He brought them out of Egypt in the Exodus. He preserved them in the wilderness. He enabled them to conquer the powerful Canaanite nations and occupy the Promised Land. He saved them time and again from powerful foes that threatened to destroy them. On the personal level, David had seen God deliver him from the bear and the lion, not to mention from Goliath and from Saul's repeated attempts to kill him. If you have known the Lord for any length of time, you can think back to many times when you were brought low and the Lord delivered you. So as you wait on Him now in whatever pit you may be in, recount His many wonders and His kind thoughts toward you. Truly, there is none to compare with Him!

(5) Waiting on the Lord means obeying Him (40:6-8).

"Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; my ears You have opened; burnt offering and sin offering You have not required. Then I said, 'Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart.'"

The thought of verses 6-8 in the context is (I am following J. J. S. Perowne, *The Book of Psalms* [Zondervan], p. 335), "My heart is full of Your abundant goodness towards me. How can I express it? In times past, I might have thought that an offering was the proper thing to do. But now I realize that what You really desire is an obedient heart that delights to do Your will." In other words, David is affirming what Samuel told the disobedient King Saul (1 Sam. 15:22), "Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams."

As you know, the author of Hebrews applies these verses to Jesus (Heb. 10:5-7). There, the author quotes the LXX, which translates the second line of verse 6, "a body You have prepared for Me." This was apparently an interpretive paraphrase, where they used a part (the ear) and expanded it to the whole body (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 232). The Hebrew text (of Ps. 40:6) is literally, "My ears You have dug." It has wrongly been interpreted to refer to the master's piercing the servant's ear with an awl (a different Hebrew word; Exod. 21:6; Deut. 15:17). But the idea here is that God opened the ear of His servant so that he would be obedient to His Word, which was in David's heart. Applied to Jesus, that obedience was unto the cross (see Isa. 50:5-7).

The application for us is that when we're in a pit, we must focus on continuing to obey the Lord, even if He does not deliver us quickly. The devil will tempt us to give up trusting in the Lord and to seek fulfillment in other ways. He will whisper, "God isn't meeting your needs. If you want to get a mate, why keep waiting on the Lord? Look at all these nice, available non-Christians who could meet your needs!" Keep obeying God's Word as you wait.

(6) Waiting on the Lord means seeking Him (40:16).

"Let all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; let those who love Your salvation say continually, 'The Lord be magnified!'" In this context, seeking the Lord is a synonym for crying out to Him in expectant prayer. If you're seeking the Lord and not just deliverance from your pit, you won't forget about God after He delivers you. Sadly, many "use" God like Aladdin's Genie and put Him back on the shelf when they get what they want. But here, the reason that David waits on the Lord and seeks Him is so that He will be magnified, or glorified. If David turned to some human scheme for deliverance, then David and his ingenuity would get the credit. By seeking the Lord alone, when the Lord answers, He gets the credit.

(7) Waiting on the Lord means rejoicing in Him (40:16).

No doubt, David was rejoicing and glad about his deliverance when it came, but he makes the point here to rejoice and be glad *in You* ("in the Lord"). The joy is not just in the deliverance, but in

the Lord who delivers. It means finding God as our eternal treasure, so that we rejoice in all that He is, as well as in all that He does for us.

So when you're in the pit, wait intently on the Lord. Don't turn to the world for answers. Turn to the Lord. Waiting on Him means crying out to Him; trusting Him; recounting His many wonders; obeying Him; seeking Him; and rejoicing in Him. Then,

2. When the Lord rescues you from the pit, proclaim His goodness.

David hammers this theme throughout this psalm. In verse 3 he says, "He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many will see and fear and will trust in the Lord." In verse 4, David testifies to the blessing that is on the man who makes the Lord his trust. In verse 5, he extols God for His many wonders and His thoughts towards us. In verses 9 and 10, he again affirms, "I have proclaimed glad tidings of righteousness in the great congregation; behold, I will not restrain my lips, O Lord, You know. I have not hidden Your righteousness within my heart; I have spoken of Your faithfulness and Your salvation; I have not concealed your lovingkindness and Your truth from the great congregation."

Why does David repeat himself so determinedly? It is because he knew that if he did not repeatedly make it plain that *the Lord* had done great things for him, others would chalk it up to David's good luck or to his natural abilities. But David wants everyone to know that he was helpless in a pit of destruction, sinking into the slimy mud. He never could have rescued himself. All he did was cry out to God and wait expectedly for God to deliver him. And when God did rescue him, David made sure that God got all the praise.

### Conclusion

A telescope takes what looks like a tiny object in the night sky and magnifies it so that we get some idea of how awesome it really is. Without a telescope, people either ignore the stars or maybe look up and think, "Twinkle, twinkle little star." *Little* star? With a telescope, astronomers know that many of those stars are anything but little. They dwarf our own sun, making it look like a speck of dust by comparison!

Many in the world either ignore God or think of Him as small and distant with regard to their lives. As Christians, we have cried out to the Lord to save us from the pit of destruction. We were mired in our sins with no way out. He sent His Son to offer Himself obediently on the cross on our behalf (as Ps. 40:6-8 predicts). Since He has delivered us, we are to be like telescopes. We are to magnify the Lord and His great salvation to a world that shrugs Him off, while they waste their lives watching inane TV shows or pursuing riches that will perish at their deaths. We should also tell others about how the Lord rescued us from other trials, so that they will join us in saying continually, "The Lord be magnified!"

### Application Questions

1. How can we determine the balance between trusting completely in the Lord versus using legitimate means or methods?
2. Why is pragmatism ("if it works, it must be okay") dangerous? Do ungodly methods sometimes "work"?
3. Study Genesis 41:1 and Acts 24:27 in their contexts. Why does God make His choice servants wait, especially when they could accomplish so much if they were free?
4. Read the story of King Saul (1 Samuel 15). Why was he tempted *not* to wait on the Lord, but to take matters into his own hands? What were the consequences?

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