

August 28, 2022

WHEN WE'VE BEEN PULLED FROM THE PIT

Psalm 40

(5 of 12 in a series of selected Psalms)

The most dangerous times in our lives may well be when everything is going well. Now, our immediate reaction may be to think that this can't be true. After all, many of us have found ourselves greatly struggling in times when we feel weak, tired, depressed, and hopeless. That's true. But it's also common in those moments to *feel* our need for the Lord and cry out to him, which is a good thing. Think about the cycle of Israel in the book of Judges. Every time they sinned and the Lord raised up a people to oppress them so that they suffered, what did they do next? They cried out to the Lord, who would raise up a judge and deliver them—whether Gideon, Samson, or the like. In other words, the suffering proved good for them. But what happened after they were delivered and things seemed to be going well? They forgot the Lord, lost sight of any need they had for him, and went right back to their sinful ways.

This is why when the Lord was about to bring the Israelites into the promised land, he constantly warned them against the dangers of coming into the blessings that they were about to receive—a land flowing with milk and honey—warning them constantly not to forget him and his grace. Times of blessing can be times of great danger. And what makes these times more dangerous is that most of us have a blind spot when it comes to these dangers that come with blessing. We all, no doubt, know people who gained wealth, fame, and power and it ruined their lives, pulling them away from the Lord entirely. And yet, my guess is that you and I have never heard anyone say to us, “Be praying for that family. He just got a promotion at work, she’s been deemed cancer free at her ten year appointment, and their daughter just received a full ride at the university.” And yet, if we paid attention to the threat we face in times of blessing, wouldn't we pray for those tasting success more often? Jesus warned us about the dangers of wealth or times when all men speak well of us, and so how do we handle those times when we find ourselves in the midst of great blessing? I think Psalm 40 provides an answer for us there. It gives us a path forward to avoid these dangers.

Psalm 40 was written by David after he'd received great blessing. The Lord had delivered him from some difficult circumstance in his life. He outlines the situation in verses 1-2. David mentions that he'd been in the “pit of destruction” and a “miry bog” (v. 2). My guess is that this is a metaphor and that he wasn't literally trapped in a pit at some point in his life. But this image that he uses suggests his suffering was great. Imagine being trapped down in a pit, like a cistern in the ground. You're down there in the darkness, with no way of escape, and water is seeping in slowly through the walls that imprison you. It's not enough that it's going to rise up, overtake you, and drown you. But it's making the ground that you're standing on a muddy pit so that with each passing second, your feet feel more and more stuck in this dark prison. That's the metaphor David uses. Clearly, he'd been in a difficult place in life. And yet, he notes that he waited for the Lord, cried out to the Lord, and the Lord heard him. And not only did the Lord lift him up, but he lifted him up and put his feet that were once seeking in the muddy ground onto a

rock so that he might stand secure. David had been delivered. He had experienced a great blessing from the Lord.

So what did he then do at that moment? Again, the answer to this question is more important than we might think it is in light of the multitude of dangers that come with blessing. Well, let's look at some things that David did according to this psalm. First, David praised the Lord.

David praised the Lord

As we've noted, David opens the psalm sharing what the Lord had done for him, so he begins with a word of testimony of God's deliverance. But then he instantly moves to praise. He says at the beginning of verse 3, "He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God." In the Scripture a new song follows a time of deliverance (as we saw a couple of weeks ago in Psalm 33) in order to praise the Lord for his new redeeming act. And since David has been delivered, he's singing a new song. In verse 5, he further notes that he will praise God because this specific act of deliverance is really just a taste of what has done and does toward his people. He writes, "You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you!" specifically noting, "I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told." And finally, in verse 9-10, he repeats this theme, writing, "I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; behold, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD. I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation." David's clear response to the Lord blessing him in this act of deliverance is that he praises the Lord. He does not keep secret how God has shown him mercy.

One of the reasons the Lord shows mercy toward us and delivers us from the pit and out of the miry bog is so that we might praise him. When Peter proclaims who we are because of Christ's redeeming work, he tells us that we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession," and then he adds "that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9). In other words, we've been redeemed *so that* we might proclaim the excellencies of our redeeming God. And if that's true of our redemption in general then we should also understand that it's true in every particular act of deliverance or blessing the Lord brings into our lives. David understood this, and so must we.

And yet there's not the same kind of desperation rising up in us when the Lord brings blessing and deliverance into our lives. When we're in the pit, you don't have to conjure up the desperate feeling of needing to cry out to the Lord. But when you've been delivered, we can be quick to ignore our need to praise. Remember when Jesus had ten lepers come to him for healing. Not one of them had to be reminded to ask Jesus for healing. All ten naturally and eagerly said, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us" (Luke 17:13). But only one returned to praise him. Therefore, praising God publicly for his act of deliverance must be a discipline we develop in our lives. Praise and thanksgiving require discipline, and it's one we must pursue. But even in the praise David shows us that there's an additional goal. David longed for others to trust the Lord.

David longed for others to trust the Lord

David makes clear throughout the psalm that he praises and thanks the Lord because, of course, the Lord is worthy of praise and thanksgiving. He's explicitly stated that none can compare with the Lord. And yet there is another reason why David is so bent on praising and thanking the Lord before the people. He wants others to trust the Lord as well. Notice in verse 3 what he sees as the result of his praise. He says, "He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord" (v. 3). He believes that his song of praise will result in others trusting the Lord.

No doubt we've seen the same. The first Sunday night of the month we set aside for a time of prayer. We gather in this room, hear the testimonies of those whom we're recommending for membership, share requests, share praises, and then pray. If you've never been, it's a service that I want to encourage you to be a part of. And it's amazing how many times I've referenced in private meetings with people, the public praises that have been shared in that time. Now, I won't mention you by name in case it would be embarrassing to you. But I've encouraged people who saw what seemed like a hopeless marriage by reminding them of the time we heard one of our members share that after years of prayer, his parents reconciled. I've encouraged them in giving and trusting the Lord financially by reminding them of the time one of our members shared how he gave and trusted the Lord and the Lord cared for his needs. And I could continue all day with specifics. But I want to make very clear the responsibility we have to share our praises publicly in how the Lord has answered our prayers because he didn't answer your prayer merely for your sake. He did it so that you might praise and thank him publicly so that others of his children might learn to trust him in similar situations. That's how the body works. So, I know you can feel embarrassed to share or feel like you're drawing too much attention to yourself, but encourage yourself to overcome that thinking by remembering that the Lord helped you because he wants you to share and be the means of helping others trust.

Nor do I want you to think it's some small deal. David makes clear that the alternative to trusting the Lord is idolatry. Notice what he writes in verse 4: "Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie." Do you see how David doesn't contrast trusting the Lord with simply not trusting the Lord? He contrasts trusting the Lord with going astray after a lie. Why so extreme? The reason is because you're going to trust in something or someone in any situation in life. It may be that your primary trust is in yourself, or the doctors, or your boss, or the bank, or any number of persons or things considering what issue you're facing. But every time you choose to trust any of those people or things above trusting the Lord, you're committing idolatry. This is one reason why public praise and thanksgiving is a vital part of belonging to the church—you're helping your brothers and sisters fight idolatry by reminding them that the Lord is trustworthy. But David also modeled obedience to the Lord, which we see in our third point: David devoted himself to the Lord.

David devoted himself to the Lord

In verses 6-8 David notes how he has responded to the Lord's answered prayer with personal devotion and obedience to the Lord. Let's work through verse 6 first, as it can be a bit complicated. David writes, "In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required" (v. 6). The idea isn't that the Lord never required burnt offerings and sin offerings. Of course he did. You can read through the law of Moses and see specific laws requiring these sacrifices and regulations that outlined how the offerings were to be made. So, David isn't saying, "The sky is green," in the midst of a people who can all look up and see that the sky is blue, just hoping they'll believe what he claims over what they see. David knew that God required offerings. What he's noting is that God never required *mere* offerings.

In other words, if you came to bring a sin offering but weren't interested in personally confessing or acknowledging your sin then the Lord wasn't interested in merely the sin offering. To use David's words, that's not the kind of thing God required or delighted in. God wanted the obedience that should accompany those kinds of offerings. That's why David says, "In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, *but you have given me an open ear*" (v. 6).

Now, I don't expect us to immediately understand what that phrase means because it's a Hebrew idiom. The actual phrase is "ears you have dug for me," which you can see in the footnote of our ESV pew Bibles. An idiom is an expression that means something different than what it literally says. So, for example, we might say, "Get off my back," when there's no one literally on our backs, and what we mean is that we want to be left alone. But instead of saying, "Leave me alone," we use the idiom, "Get off my back." Well, the Hebrew idiom of digging out one's ears is an idiom of devotion or obedience. We say something similar when we tell our kids to do something, and then if they don't immediately respond we say, "Did you hear me?" We're not actually inquiring in that moment whether or not they literally heard what we said. We're saying, "Get to obeying." After all, hearing should result in obeying, right?

That's how this Hebrew idiom works. Digging out one's ears means that you're bent toward hearing and obeying. You've devoted your whole self in obedience toward someone if you've dug out your ears. Therefore, when the Hebrew OT was translated into Greek (known as the Septuagint), the translator didn't translate this idiom word-for-word. That would have made no sense to the Greek reader. So, he translated its meaning, writing, "a body you have prepared for me." And that would have made sense to the Greek reader. Remember, for example, when Paul wrote to in Romans 12:1 that we should present our "bodies" as a living sacrifice? That's what he was getting at. We should devote our whole selves in obedience to the Lord. That's what the Greek translator understood David was saying and adjusted his translation accordingly.

Well, David makes clear that's what he's saying because he follows verse 6 by saying in verses 7-8, "Then I said, 'Behold, I have 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.'" David acknowledges that the commands of the Scripture were written for him. He's eager to do them. What we see is David responding to God's answered prayer with a commitment to devote himself wholly in obedience to the Lord.

When we taste God's deliverance and blessing and answers to prayer in our lives, our response should be to praise and thank the Lord publicly and encourage others to trust him, but it should also spur a renewed commitment to obey the Lord in all that he commands. Why wouldn't we obey the one who has been so gracious to us? But there's one more thing I want to mention. In verses 11-17 we see that David prayed for more grace.

David prayed for more grace

Imagine that a man had a cure for malaria and went into an African village to administer this cure and save the lives of hundreds of people who were afflicted with the illness. He has the cure in pill form, and so he loads up bag after bag with this pill so that he has thousands of them. He packs them up, gets on the plane, gets to the village, is eager to distribute, and yet no one comes to him. Even when he announces through a translator that he's offering the cure for malaria, everyone stays away.

Now, let's say that you see this, and you know the man well and the people well, and so you go to speak to them, asking them why in the world they won't come to the man. And they begin to give answers that vary. Some say they don't trust him. Some say they're just too busy. Others say that they understand what he's doing and even think it's good, but they'd feel selfish by going and asking for one of those pills. After all, he'd already been gracious to them in just coming. How can they expect him to do more for them by actually giving them the pill? In each case, wouldn't you correct them? You'd say to those who do not trust the man, "He is trustworthy!" You'd say to those who say they're too busy, "Don't you understand that there is nothing more pressing than the healing this man can provide?" You'd say to those who think it's selfish to ask for the pill, "But this is why he's here. He's actually honored by you coming to him and asking."

This perhaps seems silly, but aren't these all excuses we give when we don't pray? Maybe we are afraid to trust the Lord and feel more comfortable trusting ourselves or others (which is, again, idolatry). Maybe we feel like we're too busy, without realizing there's nothing more urgent than pursuing the Lord. Or maybe we feel that it is selfish when in fact it honors the Lord when we come to him in prayer, acknowledging that we have great need of him—again and again. David takes all these excuses head on in verses 11-17.

In verse 11 he acknowledges God's trustworthy character, saying, "You will not restrain your mercy from me; your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me." And then as he acknowledges the Lord's grace, it moves him to prayer, which he knows he needs to do. In verse 12, he looks around at evils that are haunting him, even caused by his own sin, and so he asks God for help in verses 13-15. He cries out in prayer, asking God to deliver David—like he did before—to stop those who seek his life, and to shame those who mock him. He remembers the greatness of God and prays in verse 16 that others may see how good and faithful the Lord is and declare his praise, saying, "Great is the LORD!" Finally, he acknowledges in verse 17 that he is poor and needy but also that he knows the Lord loves and cares for him, declaring, "You are

my help and my deliverer,” knowing that this declaration and the accompanying prayer he offers are honoring to the Lord.

Prayer shows that we know that God is who he says he is. It shows that we trust in him. It shows that we’re eager to praise him for answers to more prayer. One way we honor the Lord when he hears our prayer and delivers us is by going right back to him faithfully in prayer and asking him to pour out his mercy on us again and again, knowing that he loves us.

But before we get too excited about this, let’s ask an obvious question. How could David trust that God would hear and answer him when he acknowledges his own sin in verse 12? I mean, I get how he could have such hope in God if he were just being attacked, but he acknowledges that part of his mess was caused by his sin. How can he think that God might be eager to hear and help him? More pointedly, can we trust that God is willing to hear and answer us, especially if we’re going to have to include in our prayer our confession of sin against him? Yes. And the reason we can say yes is because of how this psalm is used in the New Testament.

Verses 6-8 of this psalm are picked up and quoted in Hebrews 10. After noting that the blood of bulls and goats don’t take away sins, the author of Hebrews noted that when the Son came into the world he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book’” (vv. 5-7). And Jesus did indeed obey his Father, all the way to the point of death, even death on a cross, so that we might be forgiven of our sins. He is our advocate before the Father, and so we can cry out to our Father, even when our prayer must include the confession of our sin because we trust in the sufficiency of Christ’s work for us, knowing that our Father hears us and loves us.

What then do we do when we’ve been blessed, when the Lord has heard our prayer and delivered us? We praise and thank him publicly, encourage others to trust him, devote ourselves in obedience to him, and we keep crying out to the one whom we know is for us. Let’s do these things now even as we come to the table. Amen.