

Psalm 40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 40. To the Choir Master, a Psalm of David. I waited patiently for the Lord. He inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

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. 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. You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us. None can compare with you.

I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told. 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.

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.

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.

[1 : 1 6] I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation. I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation. As for you, O Lord, you will not restrain your mercy from me.

Your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me. For evils have compassed me beyond number. My iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see.

They are more than the hairs of my head. My heart fails me. Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me. O Lord, make haste to help me. Let those be put to shame and disappointed altogether, who seek to snatch away my life.

Let those be turned back and brought to dishonor, who delight in my hurt. Let those be appalled because of their shame, who say to me, Aha! Aha! But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you.

May those who love your salvation say continually, Great is the Lord. As for me, I am poor and needy. But the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer.

[2 : 2 1] Do not delay, O my God. Psalm 40 is quoted at a key juncture in Hebrews chapter 10, its expression of complete personal devotion to the performance of the will of the Lord being placed upon the mouth of the eternal Son coming in the flesh.

The psalm initially takes the form of a testimony concerning a past deliverance. The psalmist, David, has experienced a great deliverance by the Lord in the past, and he declares what was done for him.

In his trouble, he waited patiently for the Lord, looking to and calling upon the Lord for deliverance, trusting in him to act in his cause. The Lord responded to David by listening to him, inclining to him and hearing his cry, by delivering him, drawing him out of the pit, by establishing him anew, setting his feet upon the rock, and by putting a new song of praise for deliverance in his mouth.

The imagery of the pit in the miry clay is an evocative one. It is a place where one is trapped, overwhelmed, and likely to sink to one's death if no one comes to your rescue. The pit is an image connected with Sheol and the grave.

One might also think of the pit into which Jeremiah was placed, in Jeremiah chapter 38, or perhaps the pit that Joseph's brothers left him in, although that pit was empty of water.

[3 : 37] Others in the history of interpretation have seen an allusion to the story of the Red Sea crossing in these verses. Whether or not such an allusion is present, it does follow the same pattern. In delivering David, the Lord places his feet on a secure rock, a place where he can stand fast against all threats.

The imagery of the rock is elsewhere used of the Lord himself, who is the refuge and source of strength and security for his people. One of the immediate results of the deliverance is to provoke a joyful song of praise in the mouth of the psalmist.

The experience of deliverance produces praise and testimony. These, in their turn, draw in others. When they see the Lord's rescue of the psalmist, listen to the psalmist's testimony of the Lord's goodness, and hear the joy that it has produced, they, in their turn, will learn reverence for the Lord, placing their trust in him.

David draws out the implications of his deliverance for others. The person who trusts in the Lord is blessed. The Lord has regard for those who aren't proud, or drawn after the lie, possibly idolaters in the context.

Rather, he answers those who look to him in dependence. From relating his own experience, and making a general statement about the blessedness of those who wait upon the Lord, David turns to address the Lord directly, praising him for his many great deeds on behalf of his people.

[4 : 58] He wishes to proclaim all that the Lord has done, but discovers that there is far too much of which to tell. In verse 6, we return to David's response to his experience of deliverance.

Within it, he lists a number of the sacrifices of the book of Leviticus, in order the peace offering, the tribute offering, the ascension or whole burnt offering, and the sin offering. He declares that the Lord does not delight in these, or require them.

This, of course, is hyperbolic. The Lord had ordained the sacrifices. However, the Lord does not care about these in the way that he cares about obedience and faithfulness from his people.

The sacrifices were supposed to be a means of performing the approach of the person to the Lord. Similar statements can be found elsewhere in Scripture. 1 Samuel 15, verse 22 Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord?

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. Hosea 6, verse 6 For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.

[6 : 04] What the Lord is really concerned about is the integrity of heart and action. The sacrifices were always to be confirmed in obedience. People were supposed to present their bodies as a living sacrifice in faithful worship and then in obedient practice.

The expression, you have given me an open ear, or more literally, you dug ears for me, is not clear in its meaning. The ear is the organ of submission in obedience. It's how we hear and obey.

Perhaps that is the point. James Jordan has suggested another possibility, a connection with the ritual described in Exodus chapter 21, verses 5 to 6. But if the slave plainly says, I love my master, my wife, and my children, I will not go out free, then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost, and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.

If this were the connection, David would be describing himself as the loving bondservant of the Lord, who has willingly been bound to the Lord and his house. Some versions of the Septuagint have body instead of ears here, which provides the version of these verses used in Hebrews chapter 10.

David has come before the Lord like an offering himself. He presents himself as like a living sacrifice, which was always what was supposed to happen. He has come to fulfil the word of the Lord, the intent of his law, in faithful action and obedient mission.

[7 : 31] Hebrews chapter 10, verses 5 to 10, relate these words to Christ. Consequently, when Christ 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. When he said above, You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings, these are offered according to the law.

Then he added, Behold, I have come to do your will. He does away with the first in order to establish the second, and by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Animal sacrifice always related to the communication and offering of oneself and one's works to God. The author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 40, verses 6 to 8, As if it were the statement of Christ just before taking human flesh.

Animal sacrifices were unable to deal with sins and establish righteousness. They constantly recall the presence of an obstacle and the need for something to deal with it. And while they might symbolize the solution, they were unable to affect the solution themselves.

[8 : 46] They were not ultimately pleasing to God. God wanted something more, the true obedience and self-offering of human life. David's words to the Lord in the psalm are most fully realized in his greater son, who accomplishes the true will of God by coming to render the true service and human offering that the sacrifices were unable to achieve.

The original reading is, Ears you have prepared for me, but Hebrews expresses it as the body you have prepared for me. Perhaps the author of Hebrews wants his hearers to hear the divergence from the original text and to recognize that he is unpacking the point of the original.

The open ear or the prepared ears are bodily instruments given and prepared by God for obedience. Christ in his incarnation realizes and more gloriously fulfills what the psalmist is speaking of.

And the author of Hebrews' tweaking of the verse, which follows some versions of the Septuagint, makes this more apparent. It reinforces the argument. Christ's incarnation body is a God-given means of full obedience to the will of God, a means by which what God always most deeply desired from humanity can be realized.

God the Son became man in order that the will of God might be fulfilled in true human obedience. This was written of in the scroll of the book, which now refers not merely to the law of kingship, or even to the Pentateuch more generally, but to the entire Old Testament, which anticipates and speaks of its expected fulfillment in the obedience of one who is to come.

[10 : 16] When such human obedience is offered, and we are by the Spirit caught up to participate in Christ, animal sacrifices and offerings are no longer needed, and indeed can be done away with.

The once for all decisive and final offering has now occurred. Animal sacrifices are nullified, now that the true human obedience that the law always anticipated and awaited is established.

The psalm takes an unexpected turn at this point, We might to this point have thought that we were hearing a psalm bearing testimony to a past deliverance, but David now turns to prayer.

[11 : 21] He is once again in a difficult situation and in need of the rescue of the Lord. His current troubles are at least in part of his own creation, a result of his iniquities. He needs forgiveness, restoration and deliverance, for he is once again overwhelmed.

He may be suffering on account of his sins, but he does not want to give the enemies of the Lord cause for rejoicing. Their celebration of his fall would be from a delight in the failure of the righteous.

In the Lord's mercy, he hopes that this might happen again. He is weak and in a situation of desperation. He has nothing to commend himself to the Lord's favour. However, the Lord is graciously mindful of him, and so he looks to the Lord, waiting patiently upon him, in much the same way as he had in the experience with which he began the psalm.

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