

# I Waited Patiently – Psalm 40

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## Joseph in the Pit

Earlier this year, we looked at the story of Joseph in Genesis and we read about the horrendous and terrifying betrayal of Joseph when his brothers threw him down a well and then sold him into slavery. When people look at that story today, they often focus on the appalling idea of a family of brothers selling Joseph into slavery. But I think that the writer of Genesis wanted us to think that being thrown down a well was worse than being sold into slavery. Now, we find that hard to understand because we have been taught that making people into slaves is one of the most evil things a person can do. But being sold as a slave meant that Joseph was still alive and would be able to go to Egypt and save the world from famine. There was still some kind of hope, even if it was the smallest of hopes, because Joseph was out of the pit and alive.

Now, the word that was used for pit is the same word that is used for cistern or well. A cistern or well is just a deep hole in the ground with water at the bottom of it. When the bucket could not draw any more water, it became known as a dry well even though the bottom of the well was not completely dry. There would usually be a thick layer of slimy, gooey mud at the bottom of a dry well. Joseph's feet would have sunk deep into that mud. The bottom of the well would have been cold, dark, and damp. Joseph could not climb out of the well as the slimy muddy walls of that well would have been far too slippery to grab hold of. And if he did manage to climb a metre or so up the well and then slipped down to the bottom again, he would have sunk even deeper into that thick gooey layer of mud at the bottom. Being thrown into the well was a death sentence. A long, cold, and lonely death sentence. The only way to get out was for someone else to lift him out.

## David's Slimy Pit

David starts Psalm 40 as if he was Joseph at the bottom of a dry well.

**Psalm 40:1-2** *I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry. <sup>2</sup> 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.*

The word for "pit" in Psalm 40 is exactly the same word that was used in Genesis to describe the hole which Joseph had been thrown into. So, what kind of hole was David in? What made David feel like he was stuck at the bottom of a dry well which had slimy walls and a thick layer of mud at the bottom of it and meant certain death if God had not lifted him out? I think we can see what kind of hole it was in...

**Psalm 40:12-13** *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. <sup>13</sup> Be pleased to save me, LORD; come quickly, LORD, to help me.*

I think the beginning of verse 12 is meant to remind us of David being stuck in that pit. His troubles surround him like the walls of the well. His sins have overtaken him so he cannot see over them, or as the New Living Translation says...

**Psalm 40:12b** *My sins pile up so high I can't see my way out. (NLT)*

It was like he was stuck at the bottom of a dry well, unable to see out, because the depth of his sinfulness and troubles made him feel completely isolated and alone. Without someone to help him, David was doomed to despair and destruction.

For the last 2 weeks, we have looked at some very dark and difficult psalms. They have talked about the pointlessness of life, of how sin has made everything broken and meaningless, and that David's only hope was for God to save him because he could not save himself. Nobody can save themselves from the slimy pit of sin. All a person can do is to call out to God for his love, grace, and mercy in order to be pulled out of their slimy pit of sinfulness and be saved. But there is a big difference between this psalm and the previous 2 psalms. This one not only has a lot more hope in it, it also shows us how David became a changed person.

## **Ritual Problem**

So, if sin was David's great problem, how was he supposed to deal with his sin? How was David supposed to fix his problem? The most obvious answer is through the Old Testament system of sacrifices. God's Old Testament people had been told that when they sinned, they were to pay for those sins. Payment meant that they were supposed to die for their sins. But instead of being put to death for their sins, they could use an animal substitute whose life would be sacrificed as payment for those sins that the Old Testament people had committed. But there was one big problem with ritual sacrifice. It is the same problem that all rituals have. When you get used to doing something all the time, it can lose its impact and meaning. You might find this to be true in your life. The ritual of confession in church may not mean as much for you as it did in the past. Or maybe you have been doing devotions regularly for years and it was great to begin with as God spoke into your life daily and you spoke to him in prayer, but it doesn't have the same zest in your life like it once did. David recognised this problem and said...

***Psalm 40:6-7** Sacrifice and offering you did not desire-- but my ears you have opened-- burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. <sup>7</sup> Then I said, "Here I am, I have come-- it is written about me in the scroll.*

Now, David is not saying that God did not tell his Old Testament people to sacrifice animals for their sins. God did tell them to do this and David knew that God had told them to do this. The problem was that they had become so used to the ritual of sacrifice, it had lost its meaning. They were supposed to see the tragic cost of sin in the death of an animal, and they were supposed to turn away from sin and turn back to living God's way. In other words, they were not just supposed to tick a meaningless box by sacrificing animals, they were supposed to repent from their sinful way of life and live God's way. We see David working this out when he said that his ears have been opened. Suddenly, he was listening to God again. Then in verse 8 we read...

***Psalm 40:8** I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart."*

The sacrifice of an animal was meaningless without the desire to truly listen, repent, and follow God. How much worse is it for us to see the forgiveness we receive from God through Jesus' sacrifice as something we can have but not let that sacrifice and forgiveness change our lives. We need to be like David and recognise that our rituals of repentance and confession, bible reading and prayer, even being part of church regularly, is

not something we just tick off. They are things that are supposed to be speak to the inner part of our lives and we need to open our ears and listen to God. This will change the way we live and how we relate to God and to those around us.

## **A Joyful Change**

So, what did those changes look like for David? In Psalms 38, 39, and 40, we have seen how self-absorbed David became because of his own sinfulness. When you are stuck at the bottom of a dry well, all you can think about is yourself and the despair you feel about your own impending doom. But after God had raised David from that well of sin and despair, David could see just how awesome God was.

*Psalm 40:5 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, they would be too many to declare.*

David was no longer holding his own pity party. He was now experiencing the joy and wonder of God, who had saved him. That joy overflowed into songs of praise and thankfulness.

*Psalm 40:3 He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.*

David had said in verse 5 that God's deeds were too many to declare, but that did not mean that he would not declare them.

*Psalm 40:9-10 I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, LORD, as you know.  
<sup>10</sup> 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.*

David would be silent no more. He had a new song of praise in his mouth. He had things he needed to declare about God. He wanted to tell all of God's people about God's love, faithfulness, righteousness, and salvation. All these things that he felt so deeply inside needed to come out as an expression of great hope and joy.

## **Losing Our Own Joy**

Have you ever met one of those new Christians who are just so full of joy because God has recently saved them from their own slimy pit of sinfulness? Their joy just bubbles up from deep within them and they are bursting to tell people about Jesus, but they don't always have the words because they are still so young in their faith, they are still so new to knowing Jesus. But David was not new in knowing God when he wrote this psalm. David had been a believer, a follower, a man after God's own heart for many years. What I love about this psalm is that it is a great encouragement to both new and more experienced Christians. You see, so many followers of Jesus who have known Jesus for many years, maybe even our whole life, can become a bit jaded in their faith. By that, I mean that we have lost our joy and excitement about being a Christian. But how sad is that? How sad is it to think that God coming down to us to save us is just a normal, everyday, thing to happen? That knowing we have the righteousness of Jesus in us is just a bit boring now. That Jesus' love, forgiveness, and sacrifice is something we just take for granted. How sad is that? But I wonder if we lose that sense of joy because we do not spend enough time thinking about where we would be without Jesus. Some people have told me that they have not liked reading Psalms 38 and 39, because they are too depressing. But if you do not understand the desperate situation you are in without Jesus, if you do not realise you are in a slimy pit of

sinfulness, if you have forgotten how great the depths of your depravity is without Jesus, then how could you remain joyful at what Jesus has done for you?

I have been involved in a lot of funerals and one of the Bible verses I like to read at funerals is...

***Ecclesiastes 7:2*** *It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.*

It sounds backwards. A house of mourning is depressing and sad, a house of feasting sounds like a much better place to be. But the point is that if you never think about your destiny of death, then you will never prepare for it. You will never live with the wisdom of knowing that life is short and that you need to make the most of this life while you can. You need to be like David and spend a bit of time examining yourself. You need to know your weaknesses, your areas of temptation, what leads you away from God, and how easily that happens. You need to then recognise just how far down the pit you would be if Jesus had not pulled you out. It is like you need to stand at the edge of the slimy pit of sin which Jesus pulled you out of and remember just how desperate your situation would be if he had not saved you. Remembering where you would be without Jesus, destined for judgement and hell, should remind you of where you now are because of Jesus, destined for eternal life and heaven. That is why I love the way David ends this psalm...

***Psalm 40:17*** *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.*

David was out of the slimy pit, his feet were on solid rock because God had lifted him out. But he did not want to forget that without God in his life, he would be on his own, in that pit, and so he was still poor and needy. David still needed God in his life to save him.

I do not know what kind of slimy pit of sin you are in, or would be in, without Jesus. But there is not hole too deep for Jesus to reach down and pull you out. This does not mean that you will never struggle with sin. You will. David did, that is why he wrote this psalm. The best thing you can do is to return to the beginning of this psalm.

***Psalm 40:1-2*** *I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry. <sup>2</sup> 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.*

Waiting patiently for God is to wait with expectation. He will come and save and the saved person rejoices.

***Psalm 40:16*** *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!"*