

# When We Are Lowly

Psalm 40

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## Introduction

*“To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.”*

The Psalms are interesting. They are poetry, using words to paint pictures to slow us down and appreciate the truth that they are trying to convey. They're not as straightforward as a story or a letter. They're artistic pictures meant to cause us to reflect on them, roll them over in our minds considering different angles, and sit with them over time.

Each line and each phrase is a brush stroke on a canvas that builds a large painting. Vincent Van Gogh is a great example of this. His paintings are made up of many small brush strokes that build a beautiful painting. Those brush strokes come together to show us something and cause some sort of response in us. The Psalms are that way too. They are built with truths about God that should cause in us some kind of response. And, as we'll see, David works on one of these poetic paintings so that we will do the very same thing. He assembles many brushstrokes of truth about God to cause us to respond in faith.

These Psalms are also songs. This psalm would likely have been sung by the whole congregation as a song. So as we read, it's not just David writing lonesome by himself in a room, but imagine Israelites at some point gathering together and singing this together as a great crowd, like we sing songs from the Gettys, Matt Papa, Sovereign Grace, and other authors.

## God the Great Deliverer (v1-3)

*1 I waited patiently for the Lord;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
2 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.  
3 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.*

## Patiently Waiting... (v1)

David starts off the psalm by writing that he patiently waited for God. This is a beautiful line that's way too easy to blow past. Even now, your mind may already be reading ahead in the passage. Or, your mind may be drifting off to whatever's happening later today. But I'm going to ask you to wait and sit with me on this first verse for just a moment.

From 1 Samuel, we know that David knows how to wait patiently. Despite Saul's murderous intentions and all-out war on David, David refused to attack Saul to take the throne that was promised to him.<sup>1</sup>

Patience and waiting. These are not things we are very familiar with today. We have Amazon same-day delivery. We order items online. We have inventories of millions of pre-made objects ready for us to consume. I can pull out my phone and get an answer to any question immediately. We are accustomed to immediate. We feel entitled to it. We've come to expect it. So, how often do we patiently wait? How long are you willing to wait on the Lord before you take matters into your own hands? Or, how long do you wait before your faith wavers or you stop believing?

## Confidence in the Character of God (v2-3)

There's a reason David is willing to wait. He's willing to wait on the Lord because of who the Lord is. The character of God transforms anxiousness into patience in the midst of waiting.

God inclines his ear to hear us. He bends down from his high place above the heavens to hear our cries for help and deliverance. As David talks about who God is, he speaks with confidence about the kind of deliverance God provides. David appears to reflect back on how God has delivered him before. There is no question about whether God does this. David simply says he does.

This causes David and the reader of the Psalm to respond with a new song of praise to God.

God's work is also a testimony to those who do not trust in the Lord, causing many of them to see and put their faith in the Lord. Don't miss the future tense that David uses, "...many will...". David proclaims God's character as a deliverer.

## The Blessedness of God (v4-5)

*4 Blessed is the man who makes  
the Lord his trust,*

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<sup>1</sup> See 1 Samuel 24:1-7

*who does not turn to the proud,  
to those who go astray after a lie!  
5 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.*

But this Psalm is not only about God the character of God; it's also about how people respond to who he is.

### The Source of Blessing (v4)

There are two kinds of people that our psalm outlines: Those who are blessed by trusting in the Lord and those who turn to proud and arrogant people who are willing to believe lies, rather than the faithfulness of God.

People offer you no true hope. They are empty. They are lies. When you look to people to fulfill you, make you happy, or rescue you from discomfort, you are believing lies. When you look to yourself for the same kinds of things, you are believing lies.

### The Immeasurableness of Blessing (v5)

Our almighty God, however, is not that way. He is full of wonderful works that are immeasurable. His thoughts are unlike anyone else we might know, even the most intimate of relationships we might have here on earth. David says, "none can compare with you!"

And this thought, this confident belief in God causes yet another response in David to proclaim the work of God. But don't make the mistake of thinking that we will ever fully be able to comprehend or explain the depth of God's blessing because "they are more than can be told."

This Psalm is an example of that attempt to proclaim them. It's partly why David wrote it. It's why Israel sang it together. It's why we preach it now. It's why we'll sing in response in a few minutes. And, it's why we share with others the faithful work of God.

Let me pause to ask, is your hope and trust in the Lord? It's easy to say yes and move on, but how do we show our hope and trust in him? Are we regularly filled with gratefulness and wonder at the marvelous works of God?

But so far, we may still be wondering what kind of blessing David's talking about. What is causing such a response? Verses 6-8 give us a glimpse into the mind and heart of David's meditation.

## A Heart of Righteousness (v6-8)

*6 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.  
7 Then I said, "Behold, I have come;  
in the scroll of the book it is written of me:  
8 I delight to do your will, O my God;  
your law is within my heart."*

There are certainly inherent blessings in following the Lord. His words give us the wisdom to live in his world the best way. But it appears that David's mind is looking forward to a much greater blessing, the blessing of Jesus.

This may feel like a confusing passage since almighty Yahweh gave Israel a law that required sacrifices. However, David is painting a picture for us through the words of poetry. So, we should ask ourselves how these brush strokes contribute to the whole picture of this Psalm.

### Righteousness over Repentance (v6)

David is pointing us past the requirements of the law that God gave to Israel on Mt. Sinai. Yes, they were required to follow God's law and offer sacrifices, but God's desire for his people is to be righteous. The law functions to put their sin on display. Whenever they fell away from God's standard of being wholly devoted to him, a sacrifice was there to remind them.

As we consider what we know of David's life, this may be reflecting on the life of King Saul. In 1 Samuel 15, we see the story of Saul defeating a great enemy of Israel. God had given instructions for Saul to completely destroy everything in this nation, even down to the animals. Saul partially obeyed by defeating them in battle and destroying *most* of what was left. He kept back some of the spoils of war, giving the excuse that he wanted them as a "...sacrifice to Yahweh."<sup>2</sup> Samuel, the priest, responds with words of correction that sound like echoes from this Psalm:

*"What is more pleasing to the LORD:  
your burnt offerings and sacrifices  
or your obedience to his voice?"*

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Samuel 15:21

*Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice,  
and submission is better than offering the fat of rams.  
— 1 Samuel 15:22*

Saul's disobedience led to Yahweh rejecting him and David being selected as the next king. His disobedience brings rejection. It's a tragic situation and a stark reminder of the consequences of sin and how seriously God views it. Sin brings rejection and the need for restoration. For Saul, that was not possible. For us, praise God that we look forward to Jesus. And that's just what this Psalm does. It points us ahead.

As we reflect on the words of David here in Psalm 40, we can see the importance of our hearts in how we live. Sacrifices are not the ultimate thing that God wants. He wants righteousness. Following the letter of the law is not what pleases the Lord. What pleases our Almighty God is a heart that's devoted wholly to him. A holy heart. But, just like Saul, we have no power to be holy on our own. We need someone outside of us to restore us. We are desperate for help.

### The Hope of Christ (v7-8)

Fortunately, God, our loving Father, has provided us with exactly that in his son Jesus Christ. This Psalm looks forward to Jesus. Behold, Jesus *has* come. Just as the Old Testament prophets have told us about. He came to do the will of his Father. He came as the perfect, holy sacrifice. He is the only one who could have accomplished this for us.

Now, we may also hear echoes of Deuteronomy 17:18-19, where the Kings of Israel are instructed to be students of the Law. Each king was to "...copy for himself this body of instruction on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. He must always keep that copy with him and read it daily as long as he lives. That way, he will learn to fear the Lord his God by obeying all the terms of these instructions and decrees." But, as we know throughout the Old Testament and we've already observed in the example of Saul, the kings of Israel were utter failures in this.

As we look forward into the New Testament, the Book of Hebrews uses this Psalm to remind us of our need for Christ. When Jesus did the will of the Father by dying for us as the pure and holy sacrifice for humanity, the demands of the law were done away with for us. He established a new covenant where the perfect sacrifice was offered once for all. We don't offer sacrifices; we put our faith, hope, and trust in Jesus as the only sacrifice needed to pay for our sins and free us from its penalty.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See also Romans 5:19

Praise God that he does not require perfect obedience from us for salvation. He requires sin to be dealt with and the only way that was possible was through Jesus. And not only the sin that we do but also the sin that we are born into. The work of Jesus is the answer for both.

## Proclaiming God's Deliverance (v9-10)

*9 I have told the glad news of deliverance  
in the great congregation;  
behold, I have not restrained my lips,  
as you know, O Lord.  
10 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.*

With great news like this, we should be bursting forth with praise. Our lives should shine so brightly with thanksgiving and praise for the deliverance he provides. This is exactly what David is doing. As he looked into the future, he knew of the deliverance that God would bring. He may not have understood how, but he has an unwavering belief that it was an “already but not yet.” Maybe David was looking forward to the mystery of Christ, or maybe he was looking forward to knowing that God would deliver him from his situation, or it could be that he was sharing the deliverance that God had already provided. Maybe, in this poetic picture of this Psalm, all three are going on.

In any case, this causes him to proclaim outwardly to the congregation. Imagine being David under the weight and everyday burden of the law. Their lives were directed and dictated moment by moment by an impossible measure. It was a picture of the impossible debt of our sin that David addresses in the next section. But that's not the case with us. Through faith in Jesus, that debt is gone.

Now, in this Psalm, David proclaims what he understood of the deliverance of God far and wide. He does not, he cannot be silent. I want to pause for a moment and ask, is this how we respond to the saving work of Jesus? We have the clearest picture of the deliverance of God. Do we live moment by moment in gratitude for what he has done? Do we live it out far and wide? Do we speak of it as part of who we are in Christ? It's good for us to meditate on this Psalm and consider David's example.

## The Greatness of God's Mercy (v11-12)

*11 As for you, O Lord, you will not restrain your mercy from me;  
your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me!  
12 For evils have encompassed 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.*

But now, the Psalm turns our attention back to our God, this time with a focus on his mercy.

### The Mercy of God (v11)

David talks to the Lord, proclaiming the character of God to God. Yes, God already knows this, but David sees fit to write a song that encourages himself and the readers speak the truth of God's nature to him. And what wonderful attributes they are: steadfast in love and faithful. These kinds of attributes flow from a merciful king.

Notice the confidence that David has. In the face of verse 12, which puts the depth of his sin on display, he first stands confident in verse 11 that God *will* pour out his mercy on him. Why? We can look back a few verses for the answer. David is a man who meditates on who God is and what his character is like. In David's mind, there is no doubt of God's mercy or power. And, in light of the next few lines, you can easily see how doubt might be a struggle.

Do we stand so confident in the mercy of God? Does our faith in the all-sufficient work of Jesus cause us to look at the horrific depth of our sin yet stand with our eyes to our heavenly Father, who pours out his mercy on us through the sacrifice of Jesus? Do we? We ought to because Jesus is all we need!

### The Overwhelmingness of Sin (v12)

We see many examples of humans still stained by sin, encountering our holy God, and they fall on their faces in fear. God is holy and pure. That nature, combined with power, strikes fear and reverence in the hearts of sinful people.

This moment in verse 12 is a similar kind of fearful recognition of sin. David recognizes his utter depravity and hopelessness. He cannot number his sins because they are so abundant; they overwhelm him, causing his courage to waver. Perhaps the consequences of sin are facing him. Perhaps it's evil people pursuing him. Perhaps it's the weightiness of sinful failure pressing upon his soul. David recognizes his sin is before a merciful God. He knows it all depends on the mercy of almighty Yahweh, king of heaven and earth.

## A Plea for Deliverance (v13-15)

*13 Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me!*

*O Lord, make haste to help me!*

*14 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!*

*15 Let those be appalled because of their shame  
who say to me, "Aha, Aha!"*

### Seeking Help from the Lord (v13)

In the midst of David's current trouble, he cries out to God for deliverance and help.

This psalm seems to be moving towards this moment by reminding us of who this almighty Yahweh is and what he is like. He is a powerful, gracious, and merciful God. And David is utterly sinful and in need of that kind of God. So, David pleads with the Lord to be faithful to the kind of God that he is.

### Immediate Danger (v14-15)

Whatever David's current situation is, there are apparently people out to catch him and kill him. And, from what we know of David's life, that's not hard to imagine. David humbly requests that God would quickly deliver him.

This is a contrast from earlier in our Psalm where we saw a blessing on those who trust the Lord (verses 4-5). In these verses, David is confronted with a very different kind of person. These are the kind of people who are proud and turn away from God toward lies. They are people bent on destroying him.

And because of David's pattern of rehearsing who God is he can write this kind of Psalm, in the middle of incredible distress and cry out to God. Do we allow the character of God (gracious, merciful, powerful) to shape us in our time of distress and trouble? Does it drive us to call on him? Do we have an eye towards eternity in our distress, knowing that without a doubt, Christ is our redeemer? Not because we're deserving of it, but because of who God is?

## Rejoice in God's Deliverance (v16-17)

*16 But may all who seek you  
rejoice and be glad in you;  
may those who love your salvation  
say continually, "Great is the Lord!"  
17 As for me, I am poor and needy,  
but the Lord takes thought for me.  
You are my help and my deliverer;  
do not delay, O my God!*

Our psalm ends very similarly to how it began. David waited patiently on the Lord, and the Lord answered. This echoes that opening.

### Those who Seek the Lord (v16)

Our psalm again highlights the contrast between proud and evil people and those who seek the Lord. Those proud people after David's life will be put to shame, dishonored, and appalled. But David stands saying that, like him, those who seek the Lord can rejoice and be glad. Yes, we can rejoice and be glad in the unfailing faithfulness and mercy of God.

### As for Me, Poor and Needy (v17)

Well, while proud and arrogant people seek his life and David humbly recognizes his own sinfulness, the Psalm closes with the "as for me" moment. David says, "I am poor and needy". But he doesn't stop there. He continues, "but the Lord takes thought for me."

We are in great need. Day by day, moment by moment we are sustained by the loving hand of our heavenly Father. We are fed daily by him. We are preserved by him. We are not abandoned in the midst of our hardship.

If deliverance is going to come for David, it will come by the hand of his almighty God. Proud people may attempt to carve out their own deliverance through sinful means, but David stands firm, waiting patiently on the Lord yet still begging for his help. because deliverance comes from the Lord.

Many of us struggle with difficult situations. Life is full of hardship. Can you say, along with David, "...the Lord is my deliverer"? Is that where your hope is? Despite your circumstances or difficulties, can we look to him with confidence, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt what he is like? Do you believe that God actually thinks of you as you go through hard times, or people are mean to you, or you lose your job, or relationships are messed up, or you are sick or struggling with poor health, or your mind is racing out of control...

Do you grit your teeth under the arrogance of your human limitations...or do you fall on your knees and beg for help from the only one who can provide deliverance? And, not forgetting that we must patiently wait on God, who provides any and all deliverance.

## Conclusion

Are we content to wait on the Lord in our situations, knowing that our greatest need for redemption has been fulfilled in Christ? This doesn't mean we don't cry out to God for help or that he doesn't listen...no, this Psalm shows us quite the opposite.

Praise be to God that his mercy of God is greater than all of our sin. And, no matter what evil surrounds us, we know that his mercy will greet us on the other side of death. His mercy is on you now, even though we may struggle to see it.

As for you and me, we are poor and needy, but Christ has done the work to redeem us. Let us rejoice in that. Let us hope for that. Let us remind ourselves and each other of that. And may that drive us to cry out to God in times of help because he *is good*. And of that, we can be sure.