

## Prayer

Lord God, through the Scriptures You have bidden us to show a spirit of 'love and power and of self control' (2 Tim 1:7). Help us to demonstrate these qualities through all we do and say, and give us the grace to do this without giving the mere appearance of religion, but by living our faith in honesty and integrity all our days. Thank You Lord God; AMEN.

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The food we eat

Pray today for issues of conservation raised by the farming and fishing practices employed throughout the world, which endanger life throughout the world, indeed, the world itself. Pray that international agreements on such things as farming and fish stocks will be negotiated in good faith and properly enacted, for the good of all who live in the world.

## Meditation (3001)

It can be hard for young people to find their way

In a complex world with many questions and few answers:

'What will you do?'	The teacher said.
'Why won't you listen?'	The parent said.
'Where does it hurt?'	The doctor said.
'What's the problem?'	The engineer said.
'Have another credit card!'	The shop assistant said.
'How will you pay for it?'	The accountant said.
'Read more about it!'	The professor said.
'Do an experiment!'	The scientist said.
'Find some perspective!'	The critic said.
'Get religion!'	The Church said.
'Why would you do that?'	The counsellor said.

'But the hole in my heart!' the young person said.

'I can fill it!' God said; if that's what you want: I love you!

## Bible Study - Psalm 40:1-10

*For the director of music.  
Of David. A psalm.*

<sup>1</sup> I waited and waited for the LORD;  
he turned to me and heard my cry.

<sup>2</sup> He lifted me out of the desolate pit,  
out of the swampy bog;  
He set my feet on a rock  
and made my feet secure.

<sup>3</sup> He put a new song in my mouth,  
a hymn of praise to our God.  
Many will see and fear  
and put their trust in the LORD.

<sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who find security in  
the LORD,  
who do not turn to the proud,  
or to those who stray into falsehood.

<sup>5</sup> You have done so much, O LORD my God,  
extraordinary things, and great plans  
for us.

No-one can organise them like you;

*were I to speak out and tell of them,  
they would be too many to number.*

<sup>6</sup> You do not want sacrifice and offering,  
but You have opened both my ears;  
You do not want burnt offerings and  
sin offerings.

<sup>7</sup> So then I said, 'Look, I have come;  
it is written about me in the scroll.'

<sup>8</sup> I delight to do your will, O my God;  
Your law is embedded within me.

<sup>9</sup> I bring good news of righteousness  
to the great assembly;  
I have not held back my speech,  
as you know, O LORD.

<sup>10</sup> I have not hidden Your righteousness in  
my heart;  
I speak of Your trustworthiness and  
salvation,  
And have not concealed Your love  
or Your integrity towards the great  
assembly.

## Review

Psalm 40 is an outstanding and appealing psalm with many memorable words and phrases which are well known to us from their use in Christian worship, for example, 'He set my feet on a rock and made my feet secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God ... (40:2,3). The psalm is neatly split into two, beginning with a mixture of testimony and praise (40:1-10) and concluding with a prayer to God for help in times of trouble (40:11-17). We will study the first part today and the second part tomorrow.

If you were to read some commentaries on the Psalms, you would find that the majority opinion about this psalm is that it originated as a liturgy spoken by a king of Israel at an annual festival occasion which would include a rededication of the King to serve God and the people. There is little evidence however for such a festival, and no real consensus about the details of how to interpret the psalm in this way. The most we can say is that the psalm is one of a collection associated with David (see the superscription before verse 1) but that there are some indications from within the psalm that it reflects views held in Israel long after his time. This line of thought will not help us find an explanation!

Thousands of years have now passed in which people have used the psalm in differing ways, both before the time of Christ and after. Individually, we could use the psalm as a prayer of faith in God which directs us to demonstrate our faith publicly through its emphasis on openness, boldness and trust in God (40:2,3,9,10). In reading the psalm like this, we will notice that it calls us to be aware of the sheer greatness of what the Lord has done for us (40:5,10) and also asks us to reflect upon the nature of our worship and praise (40:6f.). The description of worship in the psalm is remarkable because it strongly opposes the Mosaic laws of worship through sacrifice, given to Israel at the time of the Exile (40:6), and it implies that the true worship God requires is embedded in our hearts and is expressed in what we say (40:8f.). The last part of today's passage also speaks boldly of what we would call 'preaching', by stressing the importance of declaring the truth of God 'to the great assembly' (40:10). For these reasons, Christians find the sentiments of the psalm helpful and easily amenable to their use, either privately or in public.

This is how most of us will have read the psalm and how we have used it in worship. However, there is some value in seeing how the psalm works not merely as a liturgical statement by a king, as mentioned above, but as a poem spoken by a leader of God's people. Read like this, it is the testimony of a leader who gives praise to God for the work he has been given (40:1-3) and gives praise to God for His amazing works (40:4,5). He then accepts the spiritual nature of his calling as a leader; 'look, I have come; it is written about me in the scroll' (40:7) and then publicly accepts the work of ministry to which he is called. Significantly, this features the proclamation of the 'righteousness of God' (40:9) and ministry to the 'assembly' (40:10) which in Old Testament times meant the gathered people of Israel.

## Going Deeper

Although it is tempting to comment upon the psalm with no reference to who we might think it represents, there is no doubt that there is a strong personal feel to Psalm 40 which could well have come from someone like David, who is mentioned in the superscription. For that reason, we will study the psalm from the point of view of its being spoken by a leader of God's people, and see what the psalm can teach us. It yields more than we think!

### ***The Leader and the Congregation***

We must accept that the exact origins of this psalm are lost in antiquity, but the reasons why it could well be a form of address made by a leader are reasonably clear. Most of the text is in the first person ('I'), and verse 9 'I proclaim your righteousness in the great assembly' indicates addressing God's people, and the style of verses 3, 5 and 10 are also that of a spoken address. We can think of the person speaking as David, an ancient King, a Priest or prophet at the time of the Babylonian exile, a Rabbi in the days of Jesus, or a Christian leader of the church. All of these have probably been true at one time or another in the history of this great psalm.

The leader begins by describing to the people the fruits of waiting patiently upon the Lord (40:1,2). This is interesting, coming as it does after the three immediately preceding psalms

which all talk about the great importance of waiting on the Lord (see Psalms 39:7, 38:15) and 37:7,9,10,34). The Lord's response to righteous waiting is to bring victory and salvation to the leader of His people; and this is portrayed by means of a graphic contrast. He is taken out of a 'pit', or 'swampy bog', the Hebrew text uses almost every word available to describe the tar pits and bogs found in those days to the south of the Dead Sea, far below sea level, which was notorious for stopping armies in their tracks (see Gen. 14:10). This is compared to the security of the soaring heights of the Judean hills (40:2) upon which stood Jerusalem, a suitable place for the singing of songs in worship (40:3).

The contrast between standing on a swampy bog and standing on a rock also reminds us of the teaching of Jesus about building upon sand or on stone. Perhaps Jesus' story about building a house in Matt 7:24-27 was inspired by this psalm! Certainly, the idea that being securely placed or founded upon 'stone' is a picture of salvation that is used throughout scripture, right up to the letters of Paul who says of the Gospel 'there is no other foundation stone except Jesus Christ' (1 Cor 3:11). In Psalm 40 the result of God's salvation of the leader is twofold; a 'new song' is sung (40:3), meaning a song of renewal to commemorate God's Covenant, followed by public response 'many will see and fear and put their trust in God' (40:3). In the light of what we know about the work of the church after the day of Pentecost, this Psalm is prophetic of the success of evangelism at least in the days of the early church!

Back in Psalm 40, the leader then goes on to speak as a preacher to a congregation about the marvellous saving acts of God. Firstly, he calls on the people to recognise that their 'security in the Lord' is based upon discernment which turns away from evil and falsehood (40:4). In verse 5 he goes on to talk in expansive terms about the work of the Lord. There is hardly a place in Old Testament Scripture where there are so many superlative expressions attached to the work and the plans of God. The end of this long verse bears remarkable similarities to the famous ending of John's Gospel 'there are also many other things that Jesus did, if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the whole world itself could not contain the books that would be written!' (John 21:25)

#### ***Direction to worship and whole hearted commitment***

Another amazing feature of Psalm 40 comes next, with the verse which declares that the whole sacrificial system of Mosaic law (as in Leviticus) is questionable (40:6). As stated by the psalm, there is no qualification offered in this condemnation of the 'sacrifice', 'burnt offerings and sin offerings'. This is remarkable itself, and most scholars believe that such sentiments could only have arisen after the sacking of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. when the Judean people began to formally question the Temple, what it meant, and the history of the Kingdom of Judah which was brought to an end by the Babylonian invasion (see, for example, Isaiah 57:1f.). However, there is even stronger evidence in Scripture of a questioning attitude towards the sacrificial system going back before these times to the eighth century prophets, some 200 years previously; for example, 'even though you offer me your burnt offerings ... I will not accept them ... I will not listen' (Amos 5:22,23; see also Isaiah 1:11ff, Jeremiah 7:21ff, 14:12ff, 31,31ff, Hosea 6:6, Micah 6:6-8).

Here, in psalm 40, the whole sacrificial system is included in the condemnation because all the key technical words of the Levitical system are employed; 'sacrifice', 'offering', burnt offering', and 'sin offering'. Nothing is exempt from the criticism; but what does the Psalm say about true worship? In verse 6 there is a strange Hebrew expression which reads literally 'you have dug two ears for me!', and the best sense we can make of this is that the Hebrew is a colloquial expression which means having your ears 'cleaned out' so that you can hear! The place of this in the text indicates that the leader has now clearly heard a revelation from God that real worship must be underpinned not by the outward forms of worship but by the heart; as in 'I delight to do your will, O my God, Your law is embedded within me' (40:8). This reflects not only the prophetic revelations of the eighth century prophets, but also what Moses himself said about the Law; 'you must obey the Lord ... with all your heart and with all your soul' (Deut 30:10).

Two important things must be noted about this important message from the psalm. Firstly, after this point is made, verse 7 describes a form of commitment to God; 'here I am, I have come ...'. The passage is almost untranslatable, referring to some written scroll; most translations of the Bible give the impression that the leader's name is written in it. However, it is better to read the passage as if the leader has discovered that his experience of God is true to what is already

written within 'the scroll'. Here is Scriptural evidence that the leaders of God's people need to be 'people of the Book', by which we mean people who know the Scriptures and what they say. God's revelation is not just a matter of personal experience, it is God's historic and written revelation, and a leader who does not recognise this should not lead God's people.

Secondly, the remainder of the passage is strongly associated with the open and public proclamation of the righteousness of God and the doing of His will (40:7-10). If a leader of God's people has the truth of God's revelation embedded inside him, then he will be fully committed to doing those deeds which make the good news of God known, firstly to the congregation of God's people (40:9,10) and also to the world.

## **Application**

I have chosen to expound this psalm by reference to its use by a leader for two reasons. Firstly, because there is good reason to believe that the psalm is indeed connected with the leadership of God's people; and secondly, if this is so, then the points that it makes are significant for the leaders of God's people today. I pray that God will raise up leaders who have that bedrock of faith which is the starting point of this psalm. I am concerned that the pressures of leadership too often dampen the spiritual heart of many clergy who often end up as managers of organisations rather than spiritual leaders. There is a heart of joy and enthusiasm within this psalm that should typify the good leader, and if it is present will quickly be noticed and picked up by a congregation. Great things happen, worship is transformed and the Good News is proclaimed when great leaders preach and congregations instinctively recognise the power of God. I am not saying that Psalm 40 is a programme for revival or reform, but it is a description of what happens when God comes upon leader and people for spiritual renewal.

Yet that does not stop any of us taking this wonderful psalm and reading it for what it will say to us individually. We may not be leaders, but we can rejoice when the Lord lifts us out of 'a desolate pit' and makes our 'feet secure' (40:2). We can sing songs to bless the Lord when we come to know our salvation, and encourage others to bless the Lord for the amazing and wonderful things he does (40:3-5). Through Jesus Christ we can now offer true worship to the Lord based upon His sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins, and preach the 'good news of righteousness' (40:9). We can also rejoice in our salvation in the great assembly of the faithful, the church (40:10). God's Word is always bigger than our ability to interpret it!

## **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. Can you identify with this Psalm? Which part of it speaks to your own experience?
2. Does the 'relationship between leader and congregation' idea help you understand this passage better, or does it not matter?
3. If God does not require sacrifice, why did Jesus have to die in order to save us from our sins?

## **Discipleship**

What you can gain from this study may well depend upon whether you are a leader or not; and whether you are someone concerned to gain as much as possible from the text as it speaks to you. Whichever you are, I suggest that there is a powerful call within this psalm for each of us to make sure that our faith is 'embedded' in us. If the saving work of the Lord means anything less to us than 'everything', then we will have a problem with any practice of the Christian faith, any church fellowship or any programme of Gospel work. We alone can answer to the question this poses us about the reality of our faith.

## **Final Prayer**

Gracious Lord, who meets us all in the doing of everyday things, lift our hearts, minds and emotions to see that all things have a purpose in You. Inspire our souls to rise above the ordinary and see the extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit all around us. Grant us the privilege of joining in Your work O Lord. AMEN