

## Prayer

Glory be to You, Lord Jesus, who saw in me the best that I could ever be, who touched my life and changed my heart and mind, who heard my cry and healed my soul, who spoke everlasting truth by Your Spirit to my spirit, trusting all that I might trust in You and be saved. Glory be to you, now and for ever more. Thank You Lord Jesus, thank You. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The food we eat

Pray today in the light of the fact that Jesus based a great deal of his ministry around food, by eating together with the disciples and using examples of food and agriculture in his parables. Pray that God's people might again make sense of these, and find new ways to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who called Himself the 'Bread of life' (John 6:35).

## Meditation (6001)

O Christian; where is your heart;  
The heart and courage to decide to live for Him  
And pay the price for being called by His name,  
To be publicly identified with Christ and Him alone?

And where is the stomach;  
The emotional intelligence to feel the love of God  
And know that death to sin and self is the only way of life,  
Then, by losing all, we gain both everlasting love and peace?

And where is the head;  
The wit, the mind and intellect to never cease to search  
Until our truth is found within humanity, beyond all academia,  
And deeper than all books; for truth is only ever touched as spirit?

O Christian, where are you? And what are you doing?  
He will come; and when He comes, He will come again for you.  
Are you ready to receive Him for who He really is?

## Bible Study - Psalm 40:11-17

<sup>11</sup> *As for You, O LORD,  
do not withhold Your mercy from me;  
Your faithful love and Your truthfulness  
always protect me.*

<sup>12</sup> *For I have been surrounded by evils  
too numerous to count;  
my sins have overtaken me,  
and I am not able to comprehend  
them.  
They are more than the hairs of my  
head,  
and my heart has failed me!*

<sup>13</sup> *Please rescue me, O LORD;  
LORD, come quickly to help me!*

<sup>14</sup> *Shame and disgrace*

*on all who seek to snatch away my  
life;*

*May those who want my ruin  
be turned back in humiliation.*

<sup>15</sup> *May those who say to me, 'Aha! Aha!'  
be devastated at the outcome of their  
dishonor*

<sup>16</sup> *But may all who seek You  
rejoice and be glad because of You;  
may those who love your deliverance for  
ever say,  
'The LORD is glorious!'*

<sup>17</sup> *As for me, I am weak and in need;  
may the Lord think of me.  
You are my help and my deliverer;  
O my God, do not delay.*

## Review

Psalm 40 is an intriguing Psalm of two halves. Yesterday, we studied the first half (40:1-10) which is full of joyful praise for the deliverance and salvation of the Lord, and it contains some wonderful and well known passages of praise to God. The second half which we shall look at today is totally different. It is a profound and open-hearted confession of sin which calls on the Lord to act and help his people. If we were to take verses 11 to 17 and place them before verses 1 to 10, then the psalm would make a great deal more sense, for the confession of sin would then flow easily into the praise of God for His acts of deliverance! There are many psalms which have exactly this structure, but Psalm 40 is not one of them, and there must be a reason for it. Even those who claim that the second half was added to the first at a later date (which I do not believe) need to offer some literary explanation as to why this should be done; but there is none. We must therefore learn from the psalm as it is, and in humility, accept the fact that it is quite common for us to realise our need to confess sin after we have begun to offer praise to God. The closer we come to Him, the more we see our own faults and failings.

Just as with the first half of the psalm, we can read this passage for what it says to us directly, or as words said by a leader of God's people speaking on their behalf. It is a little more difficult to see how the latter works, so we will study this in the main section of the Bible study.

Reading the passage directly, it begins with three verses which openly confess sin; 'my sins have overtaken me ... more than the hairs on my head' (40:12). The psalmist also confesses that he is unable to deal with these sins by himself, saying; 'I am not able to comprehend them' (40:12). This openness and honesty is exactly what the Lord calls for, and it is a direct consequence of the psalmist's realisation that true worship is not built upon ritual, but on the heart and soul of those who worship (40:6,8 – as yesterday). The same is true even now, for although we may know our salvation in Jesus, this fact should make us sensitive to the evils of this world which afflict us in our daily lives. Our call to the Lord is the same as the psalmist; 'do not withhold Your mercy from me' (40:11) and 'please rescue me, O Lord (40:13). The difference between us and the psalmist being that his words of faith were uttered before God had revealed His love in Jesus, whereas we now have this hope and guarantee.

The central verses of the passage sound a little vindictive, calling shame and disgrace upon those who have attempted to draw the psalmist away from the ways of the Lord. It is, however, very important to clearly identify the evil that has assailed us and the opponents who have led us astray; and it does no-one any favours to try and be 'nice' to everyone all the time. Sometimes it is necessary to make the hard judgement, with God's help, that this or that person or situation is not right for us, or has been an evil influence. This is the discernment we need which enables us to truly confess all our sins and turn away from them.

In the light of this, the psalmist rejoices with all who know the Lord's deliverance; and the psalm ends with his acceptance of a fundamental human truth which is not accepted by the world, but which is the heart of all faith in God. We are weak and in need; and the Lord is our deliverer (40:17). In these words there is no difference between the Old and New Testaments; it is all God's Word.

## Going Deeper

As with yesterday, we will now use the model of a leader of God's people to delve further into this text. There are strong reasons in the first half of the psalm which indicate we should read the psalm in this way (see yesterday's study), and although those reasons are not found in the second half of the Psalm, we should not drop this important way of understanding this psalm.

### **Collective confession of sin**

It is our assumption that confession of sin is a wholly private matter that bedevils the life of God's people today. Yes, each should 'die for their own sin' according to the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 18:4) but many of the sins we commit which prevent the work of God being done in our midst are collective, and involve God's people as a whole, either as a nation or a denomination or in individual churches and fellowships. This truth was evident to ancient peoples who were not so 'privatised' in their social life as we are today.

A good Scriptural example of this comes in the work of the priest Ezra, who was responsible for following through the order of King Cyrus of Persia that all the Jewish exiles in Babylon should return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1,7,8). When Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, he found that the Jews who

had arrived before him had intermarried with people of other nations and everything that was distinctively Judean was being lost from Jerusalem, including the worship of the one true God! He was not simply mortified, he prayed to the Lord and fasted as if this was his own sin, and confessed this sin before God on behalf of the people even before they accepted that they had done wrong (see Ezra 9). As a leader, Ezra knew that this same sin (the worship of other gods in Judea and Israel because of intermarriage with other tribal groups), was the reason why God had brought judgement and destruction of Jerusalem in the first place.

In the light of this cultural difference between us today and peoples of ancient times who also used psalm 40, we can see that our passage today speaks to us in different and important ways. The 'me' and 'I' of verses 11 to 13 are the voice of a leader who is distraught at the sins of the people that 'have overtaken me' (40:12). This is the same leader who has offered the worship of the first ten verses of psalm 40, but now faces his responsibility to confess before the Lord the sins of the people; and he must do so as if they are his own sins. If you read these verses carefully, you will notice that there is a tension between a voice which seems to be confident in the love and support of God Almighty (see 40:11) and a voice of despair at sins which have overtaken him which he is 'not able to comprehend' (40:12). It is the voice of one leader who is caught between his own feelings and his leadership responsibilities. It is his duty in Israel to personally accept the sins of his people and bring them to God.

Before we move on, there is one interesting phrase within this passage, and it comes when the leader says about the sins of the people, that they are 'more than the hairs on my head' (40:12). It was not unknown for people of ancient times to tear out hair as a sign of abject repentance (e.g. Ezra 9:3, Nehemiah 13:25), and the expression in the psalm is akin to saying that the psalmist would be bald if he pulled some of his hair out for all the sins that had come to his attention! However, there is one more occasion in Scripture where this phrase is used, and it is in Matthew 10:30; 'even the hairs on your head are all counted'. If you read the passage carefully, Jesus is teaching not simply about his detailed knowledge of us (the popular understanding of this passage), but about the importance of recognising evil and sin. The climax of his teaching is that all who have faith in Him will be presented to the Father!

### ***The disgrace of the enemies, and succour in the Lord***

When we read this psalm purely in an individualistic sense, verses 14 and 15 sounded rather pretentious, but we accepted earlier that it was important for us to recognise the nature of the enemies we face in this world; and this appeared to be the function of these verses. Read as the words of a leader making intercession to the Lord for his people, they have a very different feel. They sound more like the justified wrath of an Ezra or a Nehemiah who had fought hard to do what was right and rebuild Jerusalem and the Jewish state, and do so legally; yet faced continual opposition and needed to identify those who opposed them and actively plan God's work (the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple) with armed defence. The men worked with 'one hand on their swords' (Nehemiah 4:18). Certainly, Ezra's life was under threat at this time as he sought to lead God's people at a time of great difficulty, and if you read any of this story from Ezra or Nehemiah, you will see how closely it fits Psalm 40.

Leadership which risks all in order to achieve something is certainly reflected in verses 14 and 15. For example, if you imagine a football manager who has been upset by unfair criticism and then read these verses with this picture in your mind, they will make perfect sense! How much more should we expect the public loyalty and vigour of our leaders in defence of God's people and the Kingdom of God in days when the world is hostile to most of what is done by the church. The issue is not their individual merits or sins, but their ability to represent the people both before God and before the world.

The final two verses of this great psalm are open to misinterpretation. Verse 16 is clearly a verse of praise to God and thanks for His deliverance. We know that even in Old Testament times, the Lord did save His people as a sign of the salvation he would bring through Jesus. These great events, principally the Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 2-14) and the return from Exile (Nehemiah and Ezra) were a genuine cause for all God's people to be united with their leaders and say 'the Lord is glorious!' (40:16).

However, the last verse is often translated 'as for me, I am poor and needy' which sounds strange and certainly at odds with the idea that these words were said by a king or leader of Israel. Looking carefully at the Hebrew, I have translated them 'as for me, I am weak and in need ... may the Lord think of me'. This is a statement of spiritual need, indeed, the Hebrew word for 'needy' is related to the Greek word in Matthew's Gospel which comes in the first of the Beatitudes, where Jesus blesses the 'poor in spirit'. Such humility is the mark of true leadership, and unless it is patently obvious that our leaders are those who actively know their Lord as their own helper and deliverer (40:17) then they should not be leaders at all.

## Application

The second half of Psalm 40 illustrates the importance of the confession of sin not merely as an individual exercise but as something that is done by God's people as a whole. If we were to analyse what is happening within the church today there are great sins of bitterness and division between Christians, indeed, many church groups will simply not accept the existence or validity of others. If you follow my writing on this website, you will know that I regard this as possibly the saddest feature of the life of the church today, ignoring the express dying wish of our Lord that His followers be 'one' (his prayer in John 17). Even the sectional interest within our churches of what is called ecumenism is a sad reflection of the spiritual unity which our Lord calls His people to, and the lack of our unity directly compromises our mission to the world, as is clearly prophesied by Jesus (John 17:20f.) and recognised by the apostles (who found it necessary to unify the '12' by replacing Judas before the day of Pentecost – Acts 1:21f.).

We need leadership of the church today which recognises the sins of God's people for which we should repent together, so that God's judgement upon us is averted and we can be liberated again into the kind of revival and renewal that so many pray for. Psalm 40 and the associated Biblical example of Ezra and Nehemiah show us how Godly leadership can radically change God's church through confession and repentance, starting with the leadership. I long to see such leadership emerge within our churches, but I do not. Rather, I see highly individualistic leaders who are often spiritually remote from the people they serve, whether or not they inspire followers and generate great churches with large numbers. The Lord continues to bless the work of His people, but I believe He longs for those whom He has called to take up the global challenge to mission. This will require repentance from the past sins of the church and the leading of God's people into an age of new 'reformation'. There are plenty of Scriptures which point the way forward, and amongst them is Psalm 40.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you find it simpler to read this Psalm as a personal expression of praise and confession? What does the Psalm say to you?
2. Do you believe it is right for church leaders to be willing and able to make public confession of their sins, and of their relationship with God?
3. Do you think that the author is right to highlight the lack of unity of God's people as a sin which requires repentance in leadership and in the church?

## Discipleship

As with yesterday, you will respond differently to this study according to whether you are a leader within the church or not. There are a number of issues within this psalm which you can explore individually such as the heart of repentance (40:11-13) and whether this passage helps you to identify sin and deal with it. However, if you are a leader, I hope you will think through carefully whether you are willing to 'confess the sins of the people' even though they are not your own personal sins; for the sake of the mission of the church.

## Final Prayer

Gracious Lord, who lived a life of leadership and understood the difficulties and trials of helping others, teach us how to live with Your example in our minds. May all our leaders learn from You, and may we who are led be inspired by what we see of You in those who lead us within the Body of Christ. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN