

## **Psalms for the Summertime: Psalm 40**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

August 27, 2023 AM Sermon

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Psalm 40

We come to our second to last sermon in our Psalms for the Summertime series. Today we will look at another formative psalm. When we pray this psalm, meditate on this psalm, study this psalm, the Holy Spirit uses these words to give our lives a godly shape. Each psalm shapes a different part of us, and that's certainly true of Psalm 40. I've chosen to read only the first 10 verses of the psalm. The second half of the psalm is more of a lament. It's more of a cry for help, and we've spent a lot of time talking about lament psalms earlier in the series, so I want to concentrate on the first 10 verses which teach us something new. Something we haven't talked about yet. I'm going to read the psalm in three sections and comment on each section so you can get a clear picture of what the psalm is asking from us.

Read verses 1-3. The psalmist starts with a story. The psalmist starts with a story of something that God has done in his life. It's not clear exactly what God did. Was he lost in depression? Did he have some other life-threatening illness? Was he in a conflict with someone he loved? We don't know exactly, but whatever it was he felt like he he'd fallen to life's bottom and he was stuck in the mud and mire. He cried out, he waited patiently, and the Lord showed up. Lifted him up out of the mire. Put his feet on a rock, stabilized him. Put a new song in his mouth, rekindled his joy. And now, after this deliverance the psalmist is eager that many will see and hear his new song. The Psalm starts with a story of what God did in his life.

Let's keep reading. You will hear the psalmist draw some conclusions from his story. Because God saved him, he wants to say something about who God is and why we should trust him. Read verses 4 and 5. So the psalm moves from the story of his deliverance to statements about God's character that come out of the psalmist's experience. God is faithful! He is wonderworking! His wonders are too many to declare.

So far, so good. Those two sections are pretty clear. The last part of our reading will be a little less clear. Let me set it up for you. After experiencing deliverance, the psalmist wants to express his gratitude to God by offering a thank offering. That's a pretty typical response, God does something wonderful in your life and you respond by bringing a thank offering to the temple. Usually a thank offering is an animal, a blood sacrifice. But, as you will hear, the psalmist doesn't want to bring a typical thank offering. He doesn't want to bring a blood sacrifice. Can you tell what he brings instead? Read verses 6-10

So what does the psalmist bring instead of an animal sacrifice? He brings the offering of his story. He tells his story in the great assembly and that is his thank offering. Here's what's happening in these verses. The psalmist takes his story into the great assembly, into the community of God's people, into the congregation, and he tells everyone what God has done for him. Not only does he tell everyone with his mouth, he writes it on a scroll and leaves that scroll in a temple so that future generations can read about how God saved him. "It is written about me in the scroll." My story is on the temple scroll. Commentators think that there might have been a collection of deliverance stories in the temple. Over the years, people would write down the stories of what God had done in their lives and these 'new songs' were collected in the temple as an encouragement to future generations. They were written down so that many would see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him.

So what is the Holy Spirit forming in us in this psalm? What habit, what practice is the Holy Spirit teaching us through these words? The Holy Spirit is teaching us to be a storytelling people. More specifically, the Holy Spirit is shaping us to be the kind of people who share our stories of God's faithfulness. When God does something in our life, we don't just keep it to ourselves, we share it with others, so that they can be encouraged, so that they can be strengthened. Psalm 40 shapes us to be a story-sharing community so that many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him.

Psalm 40 isn't the only psalm that gives our life this shape. That pattern of bringing your testimony to the congregation is found in other psalms too. Psalm 22 - "I will declare your name to my people, in the assembly I will praise you...From you (O Lord) comes my great theme of praise in the assembly." Psalm 35:18 - "I will give you thanks in the great assembly." We don't keep our God stories to ourselves, we share them with others."

There's something here that changes our conventional way that we think about giving thanks. In most of our regular interactions, when we say 'thank you' it's a closed loop. Mom bakes you a cookie and she gives one to you. You take the cookie and you look Mom in the eye and you say, "Thanks for the cookie, Mom!" And that's it. The 'thank you' is between you and Mom. Someone invites you over for a nice dinner, you enjoy yourself, and you say 'thank you' when you leave and maybe send a thank you note later. It's a closed circle: the thank you stays between you and your host.

But look at how the gratitude works in the psalm. Look especially at verse three. Who creates the spirit of thanksgiving, the joy of it? God does. "He put a new song in my mouth." Thanksgiving is God's gift. And the gift is not for us; it's given so that "many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord." God doesn't light the flame of thanks in your heart so that you can warm your hands by that fire on your own; you are meant to invite others to sit around that fire with you. "Come and let me tell you the story of what God has done in my life."

Why is story-telling so important and what does the Spirit do when we become the kind of community that tells stories to each other? A couple of things here. First when we share our stories, the Spirit creates real community. 10 years ago when I first came to LaGrave, I remember walking into church and seeing this sea of faces and wondering how I was ever going to connect with all these people. At first I was focused on trying to learn names. I would take the picture directory and try to put names and faces together. But I soon realized that just knowing a name isn't really enough; you don't just want to know people's names you want to know their stories. Just knowing a name is great, but community starts with stories.

There are different levels to that, too. You can tell me your story: "I work at Gordon Foods. I grew up in Jenison. I have three sisters." Or you can tell me your story: "When I was fourteen my sister died. It was really hard on my parents. My Mom was depressed and I was angry. But I had two really good friends at school who really helped me. God used them to get me through all this. I thank God for those friends." There are stories and there are stories. When someone tells you where they work and where they're from, it's nice. When someone tells you about what it was like to lose their sister, the Spirit is creating a bond, the Spirit is creating a community of faith.

Which of those kind of stories is the psalmist telling in verses 1-3? Is it "Hi, I'm David. I'm from Bethlehem. I have seven brothers, and I used to be a shepherd, but now I've got a job in Jerusalem at the palace."? No. David tells a deeply personal story. He tells a story about being down in the pit, and how God did not abandon him there. When we tell each other those kinds of stories, we form deep attachments. The Spirit uses those stories to knit the fabric of community. That doesn't mean that everyone who has any story of faithfulness needs to get on this pulpit and tell it, or that everyone who has a God story needs to write it in the LaGrave news. But you should share it with someone, a friend, a family member, a small group, a child. If all you do is sing your new song to God, you are keeping the circle closed, and God put this new song in your mouth so that others will see and hear and sing your song with you.

Second, the Spirit uses our stories to show people that God is alive and moving in this world. Remember that scroll I mentioned; the scroll the psalmist mentions in verse 7 of the psalm, the one with the accumulated stories of God's goodness? We have a version of that scroll here at LaGrave. Actually it's not a scroll; it's a YouTube channel. It's called the Psalm 40 project. Before Covid, while Mike was still here, we began recording people's stories. We asked a number of you from church to come and share stories of how God has worked in your life. We filmed them, edited them and put them up on our YouTube channel. They're still up there today. Why did we do that? For the same reason the temple had those scrolls. The YouTube channel is a slightly more advanced technology than the temple scrolls, but the idea is the same. Listen to those stories and you will see God acting in the life of your fellow believers. You will hear testimonies, some simple some more dramatic, of how the living God has been working right here, right now. We recorded these in the hope that many would see and fear the Lord, and put their trust in him.

The fact is, there are thousands of stories in this room right now. Hidden in the heart of your neighbor are stories of God's grace. Some of those stories are simple, some are spectacular, some of them are heartbreaking and raw, some of them are warm and beautiful, all of them are signs that God has placed in this world. All of them are little fires of hope. All of them are places where God is saying I am here I am not an idea, or a concept. I am the living God, and I am in your midst. To love you, to save you. We all need these

stories. I need your stories. You need my stories. And God has given these stories so that we, in an appropriate way, at the appropriate time, can lift each other up. The grace is all around you, it's just waiting to be told.

Here's one of those stories. Someone in this church sent it to me after a sermon about a year ago. It's a story of this person's Mother. Her name was Elizabeth. Elizabeth was a Hungarian immigrant, she immigrated from Hungary in 1930, before it came under the control of the Soviet Union and the communists. She came to America, married a Dutchman and started a family. But her family was back in Hungary, behind the iron curtain and she worried about them.

She worried especially about her brother Steve. Mom came from a devout, churchgoing, Lutheran family, but when she was young, her brother was killed during the war on the Russian front. Her brother Steve was devastated by this loss. He became angry. He used to be a good violinist, but he threw his violin into the fireplace. He abandoned his faith. "I will never go to church again! I don't want God in my life anymore." When she immigrated, Steve was as far away from faith as a person can be. All while she was in America she worried about Steve and the rest of her family, and it got so bad that finally in 1971, she managed to get a visa to go to Hungary. Unannounced, she went to visit her family town and found the place where Steve lived and knocked on his door. Steve was overjoyed to see her, of course, and he invited her to stay with him.

The next morning, she went to the local church and, lo and behold, Steve went with her. When they sang the old hymns, she looked over at him and noticed that he sang them with gusto. That night they had dinner together, and to her surprise he pulled out his Bible after dinner and read it, then he closed the meal with a sincere meaningful prayer. When he said "Amen" she said, "Ok. What happened?!"

Steve told her that in the 50's he resisted the communist rule, and as punishment they made him spend two years attending a re-education camp. A re-education camp that taught communist party doctrine and atheism, and reinforced the message with a rubber hose. Steve experienced torture. In those awful years, it was as if he was down at the bottom of a miry pit. But in the bottom of that pit, with everything else stripped away, Steve realized that he was and always had been a child of God. He realized who he was and whose he was. He realized that God was down at the bottom of the pit with him. God pulled him out of that pit and set his feet on a rock and gave him a place to stand and put a new song in his mouth. He was singing that song with gusto.

I hear this story and I think, if God can find you in a re-education camp, he can find you anywhere. I hear that story and I think that the promises of God sealed to us in our baptism are the strongest thing in the world, stronger than communist regimes and the political powers of the moment, stronger than our bitterness and disappointment. I hear this story and I think God is alive and on the move in this world. When that story was shared with me it encouraged me. And now I share the story with you, I put it on the scroll, so that you may see and fear and put your trust in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Because all our stories are gathered together in Him. All our stories cohere in his story. The story I just told you, all the stories hidden in your neighbor, the stories hidden in your own heart, all these bright streams of grace are gathered together by his death and resurrection, into the great river of His covenant faithfulness. It reminds me of how C.S. Lewis ended the last book in his Narnia chronicles. After he told all the stories of his characters through six books, he summed it all up with these final words: "And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at least they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

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