

“I Delight to Do Your Will, O My God”

A Sermon on Psalm 40

Texts; Psalm 40:1-17; Hebrews 10:1-17

One of the best-known Psalms among our contemporaries is Psalm 40. No doubt, this is because the Irish band U2 closed out their concerts for many years with a very moving rendition of it, in which huge audiences sang along with the band. As written, Psalm 40 reflects the author’s (David) thanksgiving for deliverance from urgent danger. In light of this sense of immediate need for deliverance of which David is speaking, John Calvin—who was very reticent to speak about himself—describes his conversion as being pulled from the mire of his addiction to the papacy, a direct reference to verse 2 of this particular Psalm. Calvin goes on to say, “God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life.”¹ In light of this Psalm’s historic importance, and current familiarity, I thought Psalm 40 would be a good place to begin as we spend the next few weeks surveying select Psalms.

The Book of Psalms was the hymnal of ancient Israel. The Psalter is also one of the most beloved portions of God’s word, provides Christ’s church with much of its song, and also serves as the foundation for the devotional life of God’s people. My goal in preaching on the Psalms is to direct our attention to them so as to stir in our hearts a desire to read, study, reflect upon, and sing this wonderful portion of God’s word. The more we know about the Book of Psalms, the greater our desire to read and sing them as God’s people have done throughout the ages.

The Psalter is composed of 150 songs which reflect the entire range of human emotion—from despair to jubilation. Although the Psalter was written by different authors over the course of much of Israel’s history, most Psalms are closely tied to the life and times of David (Israel’s most prominent king). Many of the Psalms reflect Israel’s worship of YHWH during this turbulent period in the nation’s history. There are a number of different types and genres of Psalms. There are Psalms of praise, Psalms of lament (sixty-seven of them), there are imprecatory Psalms (which invoke God’s judgment on his enemies), there are messianic Psalms (which prefigure the coming of Christ), there are “enthronement” Psalms (which speak of God as king and ruler of all), there are wisdom Psalms (which reveal to us wisdom from God), and there are Psalms of trust, (which express confidence in God’s power, and in God’s faithfulness in keeping his covenant promises).² And then, there is the famous “shepherd Psalm,” the twenty-third Psalm.

There are also a number of names attached to the 150 Psalms (i.e., David, Solomon, Moses, Asaph, the Sons of Korah). 73 of the Psalms are ascribed to David (king of Israel). Twelve Psalms are ascribed to Asaph (who was one of David’s three temple musicians, along with Heman and Jeduthun). Eleven Psalms are ascribed to the Sons of Korah (who were a guild of temple singers), three are ascribed to

¹ J. Calvin, “preface” to Commentary on the Book of Psalms, trans. James Anderson, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), pp. xl–xli

² See, for example, the discussion in Daniel J. Estes, Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 152-199.

Jeduthun (a Levite), two are connected to Solomon, as well as one each to Moses, Heman (a grandson of Samuel), and Ethan (a symbol player in David's court and thought by some to be another name for Jeduthun). The remainder of the Psalms are unattributed. With the exception Moses, the others to whom various Psalms are ascribed are mentioned throughout the two books of Chronicles, so we know certain details about them and their service of YHWH. Even though not all of the Psalms were written by David, it is reasonable to speak, as many do, of the "Psalms of David" since the vast majority of them are ascribed to David or his known associates.

The Psalter is divided into five books, which, as some have suggested, mirror the five books of the Moses (the Pentateuch). Book One includes the first 41 Psalms—all of which (with the exception of a couple of unattributed Psalms) are ascribed to David. Most of these Psalms speak of distress and trial, and there is a constant refrain throughout Book One that God alone can save his people. Book Two (Psalm 42-72) includes several Psalms attributed to the Sons of Korah, and one ascribed to Asaph (Psalm 50). These Psalms include laments and prayers for deliverance during times of trouble. Book Two ends with a Psalm ascribed to Solomon (Psalm 72), a royal Psalm with strong messianic themes.

Book Three of the Psalter includes Psalms 73-89. Most of the Psalms of Asaph are included in Book Three, as are more Psalms from the Sons of Korah. The dominant theme in Book Three is distress and tribulation, including the darkest of the Psalms—Psalm 88. Yet the theme of hope is found throughout the Psalms which make up Book Three as well.

Book Four includes Psalms 90-106, and opens with the only Psalm attributed to Moses (Psalm 90). This particular Psalm may have been placed here to open Book Four, because in this Psalm Moses reminds the people of Israel that God has been with them throughout their trials in Egypt and in the wilderness, all of these things occurring well before the time of David and those current woes facing Israel that appear throughout the first three books. A number of the Psalms in Book Four remind us that "the Lord reigns."

Book Five of the Psalter includes Psalms 107-150. Some of these Psalms treat God's promises to David, there are fifteen so-called "Psalms of ascent" which were sung by pilgrims making their way up to Jerusalem during the celebration of the various feasts and holy days. This section also includes the longest Psalm (119) which reflects upon the beauty and perfection of God's law.

Before we turn to Psalm 40, a brief word about the Reformed use of the Psalms is also appropriate. You have probably noticed that many Reformed churches do not have a hymnal *per se*, but a "Psalter" (or a Psalter-hymnal). This is because from the time of Calvin (the 1530's and later) Reformed churches have devoted themselves to the singing of scripture (especially the Psalms). A number of the tunes still used to sing the Psalms come to us from Calvin's Geneva and are known as Genevan tunes. You can identify these tunes by looking at hymn text for the tune and the composer. Many were sung in Calvin's church and have been used in the Reformed churches since that time.

The doxology ("Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow") is sung to the tune of what is perhaps the most famous of these Psalms, Psalm 100 (Old Hundreth). To this day there are many Reformed and Presbyterian churches which sing Psalms exclusively, often without instruments. As an aside, the church in Geneva sang the Psalms so loudly and with such gusto that they became known as Geneva "jigs." It is a shame that we Reformed Christians are lampooned today as the "frozen chosen," but this is largely because we've lost our collective enthusiasm for the singing of God's word.

Here at Christ Reformed we take seriously the singing of Psalms—the bulk of what we sing are Psalms. Article 30 of the church order of the URCNA states, “The 150 Psalms shall have the principal place in the singing of the churches. Hymns which faithfully and fully reflect the teaching of the Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity may be sung, provided they are approved by the Consistory.” I hope that a brief sermon series on the Psalter stirs our love, interest, and enthusiasm for the singing of Psalms, just as the ancient Israelites did, and just as our tradition has done from the beginning. In fact we’ll sing a paraphrase of Psalm 40 for our closing hymn today.

As for background to Psalm 40—which is found toward the end of Book One of the Psalter—the Psalm is attributed to David and reflects a triumphal outcome after several previous Psalms dealt with the theme of “waiting” for God to act, as in Psalm 37, and again in Psalms 38-39. Whatever David was facing—either serious illness, palace intrigue, some sort of terrible sin, or the fact that his nation was in great peril—the period of distress ends with David offering praise to YHWH, because YHWH rescued him from the calamity for which he had long been waiting to be delivered. In the opening lines of the Psalm, David recounts that YHWH has mercifully saved him from his circumstances. He describes how his own heart is stirred to respond, but David understands that a formal ritual cannot be the proper response. His response to YHWH’s mercy must be heart-felt and sacrificial.³

Structurally, the Psalm is divided into two halves. Verses 1-10 recount David’s heartfelt thanksgiving, while verses 11-17 are a lament and/or affirmation bearing strong similarities to Psalm 70, and which takes the form of David’s determination to continue to wait upon the Lord. Thanksgiving followed by a lament is found in Psalm 27 (which also deals with “waiting upon the LORD”). In Psalm 40, David’s prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance (vv. 1-10), leads David to realize although one crisis has ended, others remain. Israel’s king recounts how God has delivered him from his trials, and then boldly reaffirms that God will deliver him from future predicaments (vv. 11-17).

This Psalm also has a chiasmic structure in which the thought progresses from the first and last verses of the Psalm back toward the middle (like a “greater than” sign). The conclusion (or the literary climax) of a chiasm is found in the middle of the Psalm (vv. 9-11), not at the end. The climax of Psalm 40, therefore, is that David proclaims God’s perfections in verses 9-10 (YHWH delivers, YHWH forgives, YHWH saves) and then David can profess (in v 11) his firm hope that God will continue to grant him mercy, love, and remain faithful to his covenant promises. What David cannot yet see, but which Christians can, is that the things for which David offers praise—God’s deliverance, forgiveness, salvation, mercy, love, and God’s faithfulness to his promise, are all realized in the person and work of Jesus Christ who will come nearly a thousand years later, as mediator of the new and better covenant.

As we turn to the text of the Psalm, in the first three verses David recounts the things God has done for him as he waited patiently. *“I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. 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. 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.”* The opening line can be rendered, “I waited, waited” for the Lord, who bent down help to me.” In Psalm 27:14, David expressed the need to wait for deliverance. *“Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!”* David has waited, and waited, and now deliverance has blessedly come.

³ Kidner, Psalms 1-17 (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 158.

The “pit of destruction” refers to the depths of David’s trial and despair. It were as though David was trapped in quicksand (a miry bog)—slowly sinking deeper and deeper into the mire, trying to remain still, knowing that if he flails about in anger or restlessness he would only sink in deeper and be consumed that much faster. A number of commentators understand this to be a reference to a serious illness, while others suggest this is a reference to defilement after sin, or even danger (a threat to David’s life).

Because YHWH rescued David—after David waited, and waited—David is not left trapped in the pit. YHWH lifts him up and sets David in an unshakable and secure place—on a rock. YHWH has healed him, forgiven and restored him, or rescued him from imminent danger. Regardless of what it is to which David is referring, it was YHWH who rescued him—bending down, lifting him up and putting him in a safe place high upon a rock, as one picks up a small child to rescue them from peril, and then holds them close to console them. The rock is a reference to YHWH himself, as David tells us in Psalm 18:2. *“The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”* David’s place of safety—the rock upon which he stands secure—is YHWH, the rock of our salvation, the object of David’s faith and trust.

When YHWH rescues David and places him safely on a rock, David is using the rock as an image of a secure place from which he will now sing a new song, a song which recounts God’s mighty acts of redemption. This is the very essence of proper worship, and is the reason why we sing (or should sing) Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (to quote Paul), which recount those mighty acts of redemption which God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The result of recounting these mighty works of God, David says, is that *“many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD.”* David was trapped with no way of escape. But he waited, and waited. When YHWH delivered him it is clear to everyone that it is YHWH who bent down to rescue him, placing him safely within YHWH’s covenant promises.

In the next stanza of the Psalm (vv. 4-5), we read, *“blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie! 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.”* That God delivered him moves David to pronounce a blessing upon those who trust in God’s promise, just as he has done. Blessed are those who not interested in lies—the claims made by false religions. Blessed are those who do not go astray after idols. Blessed are those who know that any pride in our own righteousness and accomplishments is deadly sin. Blessed are those who realize that the Lord is our rock.

God’s people also know that he does wondrous and supernatural things which the idols (of mere wood, stone, film, and social media) cannot—like rescue his people from Egypt and the Pharaoh, or provide manna in the wilderness—which demonstrate YHWH’s power over all of creation and its various creatures. Who can compare with YHWH? No one! Yet our God bends down to think of his people when we suffer, and he truly cares for us, his people. Who among us can tell of all the wondrous things God has done for us? We can only come up with even the small beginnings of a list. As John expresses in the closing words of his gospel, God has done too many wondrous things for us to tell. Therefore we trust in YHWH. We wait and wait on YHWH, knowing that at just the right time, he will bend down and deliver us from the miry bog of sickness, sin, danger, or the scheming of others.

In the third stanza (vv. 6-8), David offers us remarkable words when he writes, *“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. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’* After becoming mindful of all the

things that God has done for him in delivering him from the pit, David speaks of his desire to sing the new song of praise, knowing that because of human sin, rituals do not supplant praise. Empty religious rituals and ceremonies only condemn us. There's a fair bit of biblical background here.

We know from 1 Samuel 13:9, that king Saul (David's predecessor) offered sacrifices before battle, and from 1 Samuel 15:21, that he offered sacrifices after battle. But these sacrifices were not offered in faith. In speaking these words, David knows that Saul's sacrifices did not please YHWH, because Saul disobeyed the LORD.⁴ David knew that the mere ceremonial offering of a ritual sacrifice (i.e., going through the motions and doing your religious duty) was not acceptable to God. As he says here, those who properly worship YHWH must keep their ears open—they need to listen to what God says in his word, and to be ready to do those things written in the law—in David's case, fulfill YHWH's requirements for kingship. Because he is Israel's king, David knows he must fully submit to the will of God, and that it must be his heart's desire to commit himself fully to the Lord.

Although David speaks as though his own dedication will put an end to all improperly offered sacrifices, as one commentator so eloquently puts it, "David outruns [his zeal] by speaking as if his self-offering will put an end to all sacrifices. If this is the implication of his words, he is not speaking of himself but the Messiah."⁵ David's words foretell of a new covenant and a sinless Messiah who can actually do the things David knows he must do but ultimately cannot. David's commitment to YHWH then, is typological. His words point us ahead a thousand years to the obedience of Jesus unto death, as David's word are quoted by the author of Hebrews in Hebrews 10:5-7 and applied to Jesus.⁶ "Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" David's zeal is proper and his desire is correct. But as a sinner himself, David could never fulfill what YHWH requires of him in the scroll of the book, (i.e., the law). The one of whom David speaks as being written of in the book (of the law) is none other than Jesus Christ, whose death upon the cross did indeed put an end to all sacrifice.

This brings us to the high point of the Psalm, the proclamation of God's gracious salvation in vv. 9-10, followed by an invocation of God's love and mercy in verse 11. "*I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; behold, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD. 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. As for you, O LORD, you will not restrain your mercy from me; your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me!*" In light of what God has done, David proclaims God's mighty acts to the people as they assembled for worship. He has not restrained himself, nor kept things hidden. David told the people the story of how God delivered him from his trials. David has spoken of God's love, God's mercy, God's faithfulness to his promises, and of God's salvation of the people's king.

As the Psalm shifts into its second half—David's prayer for his people (vv.11-17)—he knows more trials

⁴ VanGemeren, Psalms (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), EBC.5.367.

⁵ Kidner, Psalms 1-17 (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 158.

⁶ VanGemeren, Psalms (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), EBC.5.368.

are yet to come, and that God will remain merciful and faithful to his promises. Israel's king begins by confessing his own sins unto the Lord (v. 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."* Since we cannot hide our sins from God it is pointless not to confess them, no matter how great they are, or no matter how many sins there may be. His sins trouble him so deeply that he feels as though his heart will fail him. David is overwhelmed by his guilt. He feels compelled to confess his sins to God. He knows that this is what God wants from us—not more rituals and ceremonies, or promises to “try harder” next time. He knows that true repentance comes only after genuine sorrow for sin.

David also seeks YHWH's mercy and protection (vv. 13-16) for the nation. He cries out, *"be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me! O LORD, make haste to help me! 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! Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, 'Aha, Aha!' But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, 'Great is the LORD!'"* Having waited, and waited, for deliverance preciously, David now pleads with the Lord to act quickly. David knows that only YHWH can protect and deliver both himself and the nation he rules. Israel's king prays that YHWH put his enemies to shame, so that Israel is spared—for David knows that his enemies are Israel's enemies too. David also knows that when YHWH delivers his people, only then will the enemies' taunts be silenced and the people of Israel will rejoice. Having been rescued himself from the miry pit, David now desires the same for his people, and his nation.

The Psalm's final verse returns to a strikingly personal note. The Psalm opens with David recounting how he waited, and waited, before the Lord heard his cry. The Psalm closes with David appealing to YHWH not to delay in delivering his people. David will wait patiently because the LORD is faithful to his promises. His people will wait too. But his people are in desperate need of deliverance, and this is something only YHWH can bring about. David humbly casts himself before the Lord. *"As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me."* David does not presume that God owes him something, but having witnessed God's faithfulness, David cries out to YHWH on behalf of himself and his people, *"you are my help and my deliverer."* He pleads with the Lord *"do not delay, O my God!"* David desires both the people of Israel and their enemies to acknowledge, *"great is the LORD!"* His hope is that God will be glorified through his great and mighty acts on behalf of his people.

This is why when we read through the Psalms, we so easily and often think of Jesus—the promised Messiah and descendant of David—who fulfills so many of the prayers, petitions, and promises found throughout the Psalter. When laboring under similar distress on behalf of his people, Jesus prays to the Father in John 12:27-28, *"now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'"* As David prayed that the people of Israel would see that *"great is the Lord,"* so too Jesus prayed, *"Father, glorify your name."*

In his death and resurrection, Jesus demonstrates that he is the one who finally puts an end to sacrifice, and he is the one who is written about in the scroll of the book (the law). Jesus not only offers the final and perfect sacrifice for sin, he is the one who perfectly obeys God's law. When we wait, and wait for deliverance, Jesus is the one in whom God bends down to rescue us from the pit. Jesus is the one who gives us the new song (the story of his redemptive works), and it is his praises that we sing. It is Jesus who heals, forgives, saves, and in whom God's faithfulness is realized. And it is Jesus, not David, who can truly say, *"I delight to do your will, O my God."* And it is because of Jesus' obedience that we sing our new song, *"great is the Lord."*