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Psalm 40: To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

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Psalm 40
To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.
(RSV)

Introduction to Psalm 40

Psalm 40 is called a Psalm of David, but it reads more like two Psalms stitched together. In the first one (verses 1-10), David praises God for deliverance after a period of desolation. In the second one (verses 11-17), the Psalmist, presumably David again, is in the middle of a battle in which he prays for victory over his enemies. We shall treat them as two interrelated Psalms, 40A and 40B.

A second thing to notice about Psalm 40A is that verses 6-8 are quoted of Jesus in the New Testament book of Hebrews (Heb. 10:5-7). That makes this *explicitly* a Messianic Psalm. For Christians all the Psalms are at least *implicitly* messianic. By that I mean to say that when we pray these Old Testament prayers as New Testament Christians, we address them to the heavenly Father in the name and for the sake of, and in company with, the Savior. We do so for the simple reason that Jesus also prayed these Psalms, and we want to stand with him, praying them along with him, as it were. Or maybe we should say that when we pray them, he prays along with us. Psalm 40:6-8 is explicitly referred to as Christ's words in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, and so we shall try to draw out the meaning of that fact at that place.

Thus, we need to think of this Psalm in at least three dimensions: of David, who composed and prayed this Psalm; of Jesus who prayed this Psalm, not only as a pious believing Jew, but also in his unique status as the Son of God; and of ourselves who in our day join the long list of those who have prayed this Psalm in the Church as Christian believers.

A

Vv. 1-3

- ¹ I waited patiently for the LORD;
he inclined (bent down) to me and heard my cry.**
- ² He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog (the mud of the swamp),
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 (the generic term for the deity).
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the LORD (the identifying Name, Yahweh).**

Both the desolate pit and the miry bog are metaphors for Sheol, the realm of the dead. David was perhaps either ill or in other deadly danger, and the LORD rescued him. For such a rescue David composed a new song, a new Psalm, this one, praising and thanking "our God" for his goodness. Our God is the LORD, Yahweh, the God who has entered into covenant with His People whom He had, in his mercy, brought out of slavery in Egypt. David's experience will lead others also to place their confidence and trust in Yahweh. Jesus likewise waited patiently for the Lord; indeed he actually went down into Sheol, the realm of the dead, and was brought back by his Father to the secure rock of the resurrection. And when we have our near-death experiences, whether

physically or spiritually, we may pray this Psalm, not only with David, but more especially with Jesus; for “our God” is Yahweh, who now is identified not only as Yahweh who rescued Israel from Egypt and David from his enemies, but more especially as the Father who raised Jesus from the dead.

Vv. 4-5

- 4 Blessed is the one who makes the LORD his trust,
who does not turn to the proud** (either people or gods),
to those who go astray after false gods (or people; literally - lies)!
- 5 Thou hast multiplied, O LORD my God,
thy wondrous deeds and thy thoughts** (gracious plans) **toward us;
none can compare with thee;
were I to proclaim and tell of them** (God’s deeds and plans),
they would be more than can be numbered.

David and Jesus describe for us from their experience what constitutes blessedness: intentionally to make the LORD our trust and consciously to avoid all rival gods. The Psalmist says literally to avoid the proud and the lies. These can refer either to people or to their gods. False, lying sources of security and safety may be called gods; more typically they appeal to us because of other people who recommend them. In either case we need to be aware that they are arrogant to try to compete with Yahweh, and that as competitors of the LORD they are lying deceivers. There is no better way to avoid false gods than to rehearse for ourselves the numberless wonderful past deeds of the true God, as recorded in the Bible and in the long history of the Church, and to recall all his precious promises of wonders yet to come. That shows him repeatedly to be the God beyond compare. (Note the parallel thought of verse 5b with that of John 21:25)

Vv. 6-8 (Hebrews 10:5-7)

- 6a Sacrifice and offering thou dost not desire;
but thou hast given me an open ear** (NIV: but my ears you have pierced).
(Heb. 10:5) Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body
hast thou prepared for me;
- 6b Burnt offering and sin offering thou hast not required.**
(Heb. 10:6) In burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure.
- 7a Then I said, "Lo, I come;
7b in the roll of the book it is written of me.**
- 8a I delight to do thy will, O my God;
8b thy law is within my heart."**
(Heb. 10:7) Then I said, “Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God,”
as it is written of me in the roll of the book.

When David says that the LORD does not desire or require sacrifices, he uses an emphatic way of saying that sacrifices are not the *only* things that the LORD wants. David also knows the Law of Moses where the LORD has commanded sacrificial offerings. But sacrifices so easily become a thoughtless routine, devoid of faith and gratitude. What David is saying is that “in, with, and under” those sacrifices he has what God wants and has given, namely, an open ear. His ear is open to hear the Word and will of God. An open ear is one that learns from what God is saying, particularly in suffering, and then responds in faith and obedience and patience under trials. (See note below on Isaiah 50:4-6). So Jesus too had an ear open to the will of God. We need think only of his prayer in Gethsemane, the prototype of the third petition of the Lord’s Prayer which he

teaches us to pray, “Thy will be done.” – The NIV translation is also possible. Look at Exodus 21:6 and Deuteronomy 15:17, and notice how a pierced ear is a sign of service to the master who pierces it. If you follow this translation, then David is saying that God has pierced his ears and David in turn gladly from the heart serves the LORD.

Because his ear is open to the will of God, David then comes before the LORD. He does so because in the scroll of the sacred book something is written of him. He is the king of Israel, and of the kings of Israel it is required in Deuteronomy 17:14-20 that they rule according to the Law of God. David here declares himself ready and willing to be such a king. Indeed, he delights in the will of God, not only because God has written it in a book, but much more, because God has written it in his heart.

When the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews quotes this Psalm, it quotes from the Septuagint. (The Septuagint is the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek language, dating from about 200 B.C. It was the version of the Old Testament Bible that New Testament writers most often seemed to use.) The Septuagint translates “the open ear” as “a body.” Thus Jesus says to the Father, “I know that you do not want the sacrifices of animals; that is why you gave me a body. You want a sacrifice that will finally accomplish the salvation of mankind. You want, dear Father, my sacrifice of myself on the Cross for the forgiveness of the sins of the world.” That is the higher will of God that is written between the lines, as it were, of the Old Testament scroll.

We are not kings like David, and we are not Messiahs like Jesus. When we pray this Psalm, therefore, we need to pray it with a new understanding that is given in the sacrifice of Jesus. God does not desire offerings that are thoughtless routine, mere habitual and external custom. David and Jesus both knew about the open ear to hear the Word and will of God, the ear that leads to faith and obedience and patience under trials. That is what we too need to cultivate more and more. But Jesus also teaches us about our bodies. Not only what is external to us (money, clothing, goods, etc.), but our very bodies God has given to us that we might offer them back to God. That is the teaching of St. Paul in Romans 12:1: “I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” That is written in the Book about me and you. And in the Psalm we pray, “I delight to do they will, O my God; thy law is within my heart.”

Vv. 9-10

- ⁹ I have told the glad news of deliverance
in the great congregation (the full assembly of the believers)!
lo, I have not restrained my lips,
as thou knowest, O LORD.**
- ¹⁰ I have not hid thy saving help within my heart,
I have spoken of thy faithfulness and thy salvation;
I have not concealed thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness
from the great congregation.**

David did not conceal his personal glad news of deliverance from the full assembly of the believers. He was not timid about narrating what great things God had done for him. And what God did to Jesus, and through Jesus, in his death and resurrection is the glad news we share every time we go to worship in the full assembly. In the praying this Psalm, we embolden ourselves to do likewise.

B.

In Psalm 40B David is in desperate straits of some sort, probably from the attacks of his enemies. He is in danger of his life (verse 14a), surrounded by enemies (verse 12a), and he does not want them to be able to taunt him (verse 15). These are not mere external evils, however; he speaks of his iniquities as overtaking him (verse 12b). He seems to diagnose that the success of his enemies is a punishment for his sins against God. Therefore he appeals as one who is poor and needy (verse 17), for the merciful deliverance of the LORD (verse 13). It is not possible to tell what the particular circumstances are which called forth this Psalm. Unlike Psalm 40A there is no song of praise for deliverance and there is no sharing with the full assembly of believers the glad news of deliverance from enemies. You may notice that verses 13-17a also reoccur later as Psalm 70.

Vv. 11-12

- ¹¹ Do not thou, O LORD,
withhold thy mercy from me,
let thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness
ever preserve me!**
- ¹² For evils have encompassed me
without number;
my iniquities have overtaken me,
till I cannot see (because of the flood of tears);
they (my iniquities) are more than the hairs of my head;
my heart fails me.**

Vv. 13-15

- ¹³ Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me!
O LORD, make haste to help me!**
- ¹⁴ Let them be put to shame and confusion altogether
who seek to snatch away my life;
let them be turned back and brought to dishonor
who desire my hurt!**
- ¹⁵ Let them be appalled because of their shame
who say to me, "Aha, Aha!"
(“Aha. Aha” is an expression of taunting.)**

The Psalmist's prayer for the defeat of his enemies is based on the conviction that in opposing him, his enemies are actually showing hostility against the LORD himself. That is all the more understandable if the Psalmist is David, the Anointed of Yahweh.

Vv. 16-17

- ¹⁶ But may all who seek thee
rejoice and be glad in thee;
may those who love thy salvation
say continually, "Great is the LORD!"**
- ¹⁷ As for me, I am poor and needy;
but the Lord takes thought for me.
Thou art my help and my deliverer;
do not tarry, O my God!**

These verses make good Christian mottos, independently of the fuller context of the Psalm. We want to seek the LORD in the expectation of finding him. We are poor and needy in spirit, and our poverty of spirit only places into greater relief the greatness of our God, who takes thought for us. And we do expect an affirmative answer to our daily prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus!" If we are to pray all of Psalm 40B, we shall be praying for the defeat of our enemies. King David had obvious political and military enemies, and the story of the Gospels is how Jesus in preaching the Kingdom of God attracted growing hostility until finally his adversaries crucified him. For us the issue is more clouded. On the one hand, we have all seen obnoxious people who glory in the fact that they have God on their side. And on the other, we sense, and perhaps know, that if we made full witness to our Christian faith, we probably might also experience a cooling of some of our friendships.

Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 40:

Lord Jesus Christ, you became obedient to death and your name was exalted above all others. Teach us always to do your will, so that, made holy by your obedience and united to your sacrifice, we can know your great love in times of sorrow and sing a new song to our God, now and forever. Amen.

Isaiah 50:4-6

- ⁴ The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary.
Morning by morning he wakens,
he wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught.**
- ⁵ The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I turned not backward.**
- ⁶ I gave my back to the smiters,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I hid not my face from shame and spitting.**

This is a description of the Suffering Servant whom Isaiah is inspired to construct out of the experiences of Israel suffering in the Babylonian Exile. It is a prototype of Jesus as the suffering Messiah in the New Testament Gospels. He has been taught by God by his experience of suffering, and that gives him a tongue similarly taught by that experience of suffering (verse 4a). The blessing is that he now in turn knows how to strengthen another who is growing weary in

suffering and is losing patience. Every morning the Suffering Servant awakens to hear as one who is willing to be taught by God, and the Lord God opens his ear to hear aright. And being taught by God to endure patiently his sufferings, he willingly gives his back to the floggers and his face to spitting – as Jesus did in his passion.

As we are incorporated into Christ, this becomes also the image to which we are being conformed. In our weariness we shall hear from one whose ear and tongue have been taught by God, so that our ear and tongue may also become taught by God. Every morning we may awaken to further and fuller divine instruction. And thereby we too will learn to trust God, to become obedient, and to bear our trials patiently.

Walter E. Keller

January 17, 1999 – **The Second Sunday after the Epiphany**