

Psalm Forty

I waited patiently for the LORD;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit,
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.

Happy are those who make
the LORD their trust,
who do not turn to the proud,
to those who go astray after false gods.

You have multiplied, O LORD my God,
your wondrous deeds
and your thoughts toward us;
none can compare with you.
Were I to proclaim and tell of them,
they would be more than can be counted.

Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
but you have given me an open ear.
Burnt offering and sin offering
you have not required.
Then I said, "Here I am;
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."

I have told the glad news of deliverance
in the great congregation;
see, I have not restrained my lips,
as you know, O LORD.
I have not hidden your saving help
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.

Do not, O LORD, withhold
your mercy from me;
let your steadfast love and your faithfulness
keep me safe forever.
For evils have encompassed me
without number;
my iniquities have overtaken me,
until I cannot see;
they are more than the hairs of my head,
and my heart fails me.

Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me;
O LORD, make haste to help me.
Let all those be put to shame and confusion
who seek to snatch away my life;
let those be turned back
and brought to dishonor
who desire 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!"
As for me, I am poor and needy,
but the Lord takes thought for me.
You are my help and my deliverer;
do not delay, O my God.

Having grown up on a farm and worked on several others, I have plenty of memories of being stuck. A tire went flat. Someone ran out of gas. Wheels spun in place in thick, spring mud. A load turned out to be too big or too heavy.

I remember one time, in particular. It was in the middle of winter, and my father had sent me to the neighbor's to pick up straw. It was a narrow, winding laneway, and to load the truck, you had to back in. The snow was deep, but I thought I could manage it. I couldn't. I felt myself slide in reverse down a slope and immediately knew that I would not be able to get back up. I tried to, of course. The result, however, was that I became even more stuck. My vehicle ended up shifting sideways, and resting up against a fencepost. I finally conceded. I needed to call for help.

I appreciate James C. Howell's observations about Psalm Forty: *"Most of us can read [this psalm] and admire its words, the depth of thought and faith conveyed in its phrases. But who among us can with any candor say 'I waited patiently for the Lord'? When did I ever wait for anything at all without frustration or anxiety?"*

The psalm-writer describes being stuck, and being rescued from that experience by the living God. "He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure." (v. 2).

That God helped him, I can believe. What I find difficult to conceive, however, was that the psalmist could wait patiently for God to do so. Because I generally find it so hard to wait, myself. Especially in those times when I am stuck.

When I think of those times when I was stranded in a field, unable to exit a ditch, or left immobile in a laneway, I think of the opposite of patience. There may or may not have been tire-kicking and mild cursing involved at times. I wanted to be helped out of that place as quickly as I can. Because it is embarrassing and frustrating. Because there is a day to get on with and work to be done.

Likewise, with all of other ways in which I've come to be stuck in my life. So it is helpful, perhaps, to understand that "patiently," here, does not mean passively. The Hebrew word refers to a kind of strength of endurance. It is to wait eagerly, to look outward from one's situation with expectancy. It is to watch the road anxiously for a sign of my father coming to pull me free.

Howell notes that Psalm Forty "isn't a prayer so much as a report on a prayer." In that way, God's response to petition and deliverance from trouble are the primary focus (vv. 1, 3, 5). That becomes the story he tells to others, after the fact (v. 9). "He came with shovels, sand and chains. He towed me out of that place," if I was to translate it to the terms of my experience.

It isn't long before he is in trouble again, however. That's how it goes for us. As someone who's frequently gotten stuck - both literally and in figuratively - I take a certain comfort in the fact that we make it barely half-way through the psalm before writer is again in need of help. Stuck once more, and this time with a little less longsuffering it would seem: "make haste to help me... do not delay, O my God" (vv. 13, 17). I can appreciate the joyous testimony of the earlier lines, but will say that that is a prayer I can more easily relate to. - NS

For this reflection, I relied on a commentary by James Howell (via Working Preacher).