

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Leader's Guide, Lesson Five

PSALM 40

The Obedient Servant

Lesson at a glance

Psalm 40 begins as a testimony of rescue and turns, at verse 6, into a statement about what God actually wants from His people. He did not want the animals for their own sake. He wanted a servant with opened ears. The lesson walks through the psalm in four movements, rescue, the hinge at verses 6 to 8, public testimony, and the fresh cry for help at the end. Then it spends its best time in Hebrews 10:1 to 18, where the writer puts Psalm 40:6 to 8 on the lips of Christ coming into the world and argues from it that animal blood never took away sin, that Jesus offered His own body once for all, and that God thereby did away with the first covenant in order to establish the second. Two honest difficulties are handled openly along the way: the difference between the Hebrew "ears you have dug for me" and the Greek "a body have you prepared for me," and the fact that Psalm 40:12 says something that could never be said of Jesus.

Goals for this session

First, that each person would understand why God says He did not delight in sacrifice, and would see that obedience from the heart has always been what He wanted.

Second, that the class would be able to explain plainly, and without alarm, why Hebrews 10:5 does not read exactly like Psalm 40:6.

Third, that everyone would grasp the argument of Hebrews 10:9, that the first covenant was set aside in order to establish the second, and would understand that we live and worship under the New Testament.

Fourth, that each person would leave resting in the once for all offering of Christ's body rather than trying to add to it, and would name one concrete act of obedience for the week.

Preparing to lead

Read Psalm 40 several times early in the week, once out loud. Then read Hebrews 9 and 10 straight through in one sitting. You cannot teach Hebrews 10:1 to 18 well without the sanctuary argument of chapter 9 in your head. Read Leviticus 1 to 5 quickly if you have never read the offerings in order; the

class will understand verse 6 much better if you can tell them in one sentence what a burnt offering and a sin offering actually were.

Read 1 Samuel 15:22, Hosea 6:6, Isaiah 1:11 to 17, Micah 6:6 to 8, and Jeremiah 7:21 to 23. These prophetic passages are the key that unlocks Psalm 40:6 for a class that will otherwise think the verse contradicts Leviticus. Have two of them marked and ready to read aloud.

Pray specifically for anyone in your class who is exhausted from religious performance, and for anyone who has been trying to pay God back for grace. Psalm 40 will meet them if you let it. Pray also for the person in the room who is not yet a Christian; Hebrews 10:19 to 22 is one of the most inviting passages in the New Testament, and you may need it at the end of the hour.

Sensitive topics in this lesson

The difference between the Hebrew and the Greek at Psalm 40:6. Some in your class have never been told that the New Testament writers usually quoted a Greek translation of the Old Testament. Handled badly, this rattles people. Handled well, it strengthens them. Say it plainly and calmly: the Greek translator rendered the sense, the ear standing for the whole body, and the Holy Spirit used the wording His first readers had in their hands. The meaning is identical, and the argument in Hebrews does not depend on the difference. Do not let anyone leave thinking that either their Old Testament or their New Testament is unreliable.

Psalm 40:12 and the crushing weight of guilt. "My iniquities have overtaken me" will land hard on someone in the room who is carrying an old sin. Do not rush past it to get to Hebrews. Stop, acknowledge the honesty of the verse, and then let Hebrews 10:17 answer it: "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."

The covenant change. When the class sees Hebrews 10:9, someone will ask what this means for the Old Testament practices people still borrow: sabbath keeping, tithing, priestly vestments, incense, altars. Answer from Colossians 2:16 to 17, Galatians 3:24 to 25, and Hebrews 8:13, and keep the tone glad rather than combative. The point is not that the law was bad; the point is that the shadow has given way to the substance. Do not turn this into a list of denominations. Let the text do the work.

People who are still trying to earn it. The most common quiet error in a mixed adult class is the idea that Christ's death got us started and our performance keeps us safe. Hebrews 10:10 and 10:14 answer that. At the same time, do not let the class swing to the opposite error and conclude that obedience does not matter; the very next paragraph, Hebrews 10:26 to 31, forbids it, and so does Psalm 40:8. Hold both: the offering is finished, and the servant still has opened ears.

Someone in the room who has never been baptized. Question 15 points to Hebrews 10:19 to 22, where drawing near involves hearts sprinkled clean and bodies washed with pure water, and to Romans 6:3 to 4. If you sense the moment is right, make a simple, warm, unpressured offer to talk after class or during the week. Do not make an appeal that sounds like an altar call, and do not single anyone out.

Suggested 60- to 75-minute schedule

Five minutes: welcome.

Five minutes: open in prayer. Read Psalm 40:1 to 3 and Hebrews 10:11 to 14 aloud, the rescue and the finished work.

Five minutes: warm-up. Ask each person to finish the sentence, "The hardest thing about waiting on God is ..."

Thirty-five to forty minutes: discussion. Choose six or seven questions in advance.

Five to ten minutes: "Your response" reflection.

Five minutes: closing prayer.

Discussion priorities

Make sure these are among the questions you discuss: 4 (why God says He did not delight in sacrifice), 5 (opened ears), 10 (who is speaking in Hebrews 10:5 to 7), 11 (He does away with the first in order to establish the second), and 12 (once for all, and the priest who sat down). If time is short, do not skip 11. It is the doctrinal center of the lesson.

Notes on key questions

Question 4. God did command the sacrifices, in detail, in Leviticus. So verse 6 is not saying the offerings were wrong. It is saying they were never the point. The prophets say it repeatedly: "to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22), "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6), and God tells Israel through Jeremiah that when He brought them out of Egypt He did not command them concerning burnt offerings but said, "Obey my voice" (Jeremiah 7:21 to 23). The Hebrew idiom often states a comparison absolutely: not this, but that. Help the class hear it as God saying, I never wanted the animal instead of you. If someone worries that this pits the prophets against Moses, point out that Moses says the same thing in Deuteronomy 10:12 to 13.

Question 5. "Ears you have dug for me" is the literal Hebrew, and the verb is a strong one, to dig or excavate. God carved out ears in this servant so that he could hear. Some readers connect it with Exodus 21:5 to 6, the bondservant who loved his master, refused his freedom, and had his ear pierced at the doorpost as the sign of willing lifelong service. Tell the class honestly that the Hebrew words are different, so we cannot insist on the link, but the idea is the same, and Isaiah 50:4 to 5 makes the servant image explicit. The point to land: God is not looking for a bigger offering. He is looking for a listener who obeys.

Question 6. "I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." Notice both halves. Delight, not grudging compliance, and location, inside rather than on a stone tablet or a scroll. That is precisely what God promised in the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:33, which the writer of Hebrews

quotes at 10:16. "In the scroll of the book it is written of me" most likely refers, in David's mouth, to the law of the king in Deuteronomy 17:18 to 20, or more broadly to the written word that governed his life. In the mouth of Christ it becomes far larger.

Question 8. This is the honesty question, and it teaches the whole method of the series. Psalm 40:12 says, "my iniquities have overtaken me." Jesus had no iniquities (Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22; 2 Corinthians 5:21; John 8:46). So the New Testament does not treat Psalm 40 as a wholesale prediction in which every line is spoken by Christ. It takes the part of the psalm that describes the obedient servant and shows that Jesus is that servant in a way David never was. This is typology, not coded prophecy. Make sure the class can state the difference in their own words, because Lesson Six will lean on it hard. A good test question for the group: does this mean the New Testament is misusing the psalm? No. It means the psalm has a pattern in it, and Jesus is the one in whom the pattern comes to full flower.

Question 10. The speaker in Hebrews 10:5 is Christ, and the moment is "when Christ came into the world," that is, the incarnation. Two things are worth pausing over. First, the writer assumes the Son existed before He came into the world and spoke to the Father about coming; that is a quiet but powerful statement about who Jesus is. Second, this is where the wording question arises. Psalm 40:6 in Hebrew reads "ears you have dug for me"; Hebrews 10:5 reads "a body have you prepared for me," following the Greek translation of the Old Testament that first-century readers used. The Greek gave the sense rather than the letter, the ear standing for the whole body prepared for service. Say this without any defensiveness. The argument of Hebrews does not hang on the word "body" alone; it hangs on the contrast between sacrifices God did not desire and a servant who came to do God's will. Both wordings say that.

Question 11. This is the center. In verse 8 the writer quotes the first half of the psalm, the four kinds of offering God did not desire, and adds the crucial parenthesis, "these are offered according to the law." In verse 9 he quotes the second half, "Behold, I have come to do your will." Then he draws the conclusion: "He does away with the first in order to establish the second." The first is the whole system of animal sacrifice under the law of Moses, and with it the covenant that governed it. The second is the will of God accomplished in the offering of Christ, and with it the new covenant. God did not patch the old covenant; He took it away in order to put something better in its place (Hebrews 8:13; Colossians 2:14 and 2:16 to 17; Galatians 3:24 to 25). Steer the class toward the practical consequence: we do not go back to the law of Moses for our authority in worship or in life. We live under the New Testament. Keep the tone glad and free of sectarian edge; the writer of Hebrews is not scolding, he is showing his readers something better.

Question 12. Three phrases to press. "Once for all" (10:10) means the offering cannot be and need not be repeated. "He sat down at the right hand of God" (10:12) is set against "every priest stands daily" (10:11); the old priest never sat down because his work was never done, and Christ sat down because His was. "He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (10:14) holds the finished work and the ongoing process together in one sentence. Then verses 17 and 18 close the case: God remembers their sins no more, and "where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin." Guard two ditches here. Do not let anyone conclude that a Christian cannot fall away; the same

book says otherwise in 3:12 to 14, 6:4 to 6, and 10:26 to 31. And do not let anyone conclude that because the work is finished, obedience is optional; Psalm 40:8 and Romans 12:1 forbid it.

Question 13. The obedience of Jesus had to be perfect because an imperfect offering is exactly what the old system kept proving could not work. Romans 5:19 sets His one obedience against Adam's one disobedience. Hebrews 5:8 says He "learned obedience through what he suffered," which does not mean He moved from disobedience to obedience but that He knew obedience by living it in a body under pressure. Then turn the corner to us. We do not offer a sacrifice for sin; that is finished. We offer ourselves (Romans 12:1), our praise, our good, and our sharing (Hebrews 13:15 to 16). Ask the class for concrete examples rather than abstractions.

About the Study Skills in this lesson

Two Study Skills appear in Lesson Five. Watching How a New Testament Writer Quotes the Old Testament teaches the class not to flinch when a quotation does not match word for word, but to write out both wordings and ask whether the argument depends on the difference. That habit will serve them for the rest of this series and for the rest of their lives. Following an Argument's Logic in Hebrews teaches them to circle the connecting words, the "for" and "therefore" and "then," and to trace the skeleton of a paragraph. Hebrews rewards this more than almost any other book. If you have time, do the circling exercise together on Hebrews 10:1 to 10 with pencils in hand; ten minutes of it will teach more than any lecture you could give.

A suggested closing prayer

Pray your own prayer. A sample, if you would like one:

"Father, You drew us up out of the pit when we could not climb out, You set our feet on the rock, and You put a new song in our mouths. Thank You for telling us plainly that You never wanted the animals. You wanted us. Thank You for Your Son, who came into a body You prepared and said, Behold, I have come to do Your will. Thank You that His offering was made once, that it will never need to be made again, and that He sat down because the work was finished. Give each of us opened ears this week. Where we have been offering You something easier than obedience, forgive us, and give us the courage to bring You the thing itself. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen."

Looking ahead to Lesson Six

Next week is Psalm 69, "Rejected Because of Zeal for God." After Psalm 110 no psalm is quoted more often in the New Testament, and the Gospels reach for it again and again at the cross. It is also the psalm that will test everything the class learned in question 8 of this lesson, because Psalm 69:5 says, "O God, you know my folly," which could never be said of Jesus. Ask the class to read Psalm 69 through twice before next week, along with John 2:13 to 22, John 15:18 to 25, and John 19:28 to 30. Warn them gently that verses 22 to 28 are hard, that we are not going to soften them, and that the New Testament itself will show us what to do with them.