

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson Five

PSALM 40

The Obedient Servant

A man is standing on solid rock with mud still drying on his legs. He has been down in a pit, the kind with slick walls and nothing to grab, and he did not climb out. Someone reached down and lifted him. Psalm 40 opens with that man, and with the new song God put in his mouth after the rescue.

Then the psalm does something you might not expect. Instead of promising God a bull, the rescued man says that bulls were never what God was really after. "In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear." What God wants is a servant who listens and obeys. Centuries later the writer of Hebrews took that verse, put it on the lips of Christ coming into the world, and built from it one of the most important arguments in the New Testament: the blood of animals never took away sin, Jesus offered His own body once for all, and in doing so God set aside the first covenant in order to establish the second.

Read Psalm 40 twice this week, once slowly with a pencil and once out loud. Then read Hebrews 10:1 to 18 at least twice. Watch for two things: what God says He does not want, and what He does want. And notice, when you get there, that the wording of Psalm 40:6 in your Old Testament is not quite the wording quoted in Hebrews 10:5. We are going to face that honestly, and you will come away with a better understanding of how your Bible works.

First impressions

The superscription reads, "To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David." It was written to be sung by the congregation of Israel, not merely read in private. The occasion is not named. David had been in more than one pit, some of them literal caves and some of them the slower kind, and he does not tell us which one this was. Notice also that the psalm has two halves that feel very different. Verses 1 to 10 are a testimony of rescue and thanksgiving. Verses 11 to 17 are a fresh cry for help from a man who is still in trouble. That is not a flaw in the psalm. That is what a life of faith actually looks like. Verses 13 to 17 appear again, almost word for word, as Psalm 70, which tells us Israel sang this cry more than once.

1.
 - a. Read Psalm 40 through twice before you answer anything else. What is the mood of verses 1 to 10? What is the mood of verses 11 to 17?
 - b. What surprised you most in this psalm?

Lifted out of the pit (40:1-5)

The Hebrew of verse 1 is vivid: waiting, I waited for the LORD. It is the language of a man who had to wait longer than he wanted to. The "pit of destruction" and the "miry bog" are pictures of a place where a man sinks and cannot get his footing. God does three things in verses 2 and 3. He draws him up. He sets his feet on a rock. He puts a new song in his mouth. Rescue, security, and worship, in that order.

2. Read 40:1 to 3. List every single thing God does for the psalmist. Which of those three do we most often forget to thank God for?

For Thought and Discussion: Verse 3 says that when God put a new song in the psalmist's mouth, "many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD." Your rescue was never meant to stay private. Who has watched God bring you through something? What did they learn about God from watching you?

3. In 40:4 to 5, what does the psalmist say about the man who trusts the LORD, and about God's "wondrous deeds"? Why do you think he says they are "more than can be told"?

Ears you have dug for me (40:6-8)

Verse 6 is the hinge of the whole psalm. "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." Four kinds of offering are named, covering essentially the whole sacrificial system of the law of Moses. And God, who Himself commanded those offerings in Leviticus, says He did not delight in them and did not require them. That sounds like a contradiction until you hear it the way Israel's prophets meant it. God never wanted the animal apart from the heart. Read 1 Samuel 15:22, Hosea 6:6, Isaiah 1:11 to 17, and Micah 6:6 to 8, and you will hear the same note struck again and again.

Now look at the middle phrase. The ESV reads "you have given me an open ear," and a footnote will tell you the Hebrew is literally "ears you have dug for me." God took a chisel to this servant's head and hollowed out ears. Some readers hear an echo of the bondservant in Exodus 21:5 to 6 who loved his master, refused to go free, and had his ear pierced at the doorpost as the mark of lifelong willing service. The Hebrew words are not the same, so we should not press the connection too hard, but the idea certainly rhymes. Compare Isaiah 50:4 to 5, where the Servant of the LORD says, "The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious."

4. a. Read 40:6 alongside 1 Samuel 15:22 and Hosea 6:6. God commanded the sacrifices. In what sense had He "not delighted" in them?

- b. What does that tell you about what God has always wanted from His people?
- 5.
 - a. What does the picture of dug or opened ears suggest about the kind of servant God is looking for?
 - b. Read Isaiah 50:4 to 5. How is that servant described, and how is it like Psalm 40:6?

Study Skill, Watching How a New Testament Writer Quotes the Old Testament: Set Psalm 40:6 and Hebrews 10:5 side by side. The psalm says "ears you have dug for me." Hebrews says "a body have you prepared for me." Here is what happened. About two hundred years before Christ, Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. That translation, usually called the Septuagint, was the Bible most people in the first-century world could actually read, and the New Testament writers quote from it constantly. At Psalm 40:6 the Greek translator gave the sense rather than the letter. The ear is part of the body, and a servant whose ears have been opened to obey is a servant whose whole body has been made ready for his master's work. The part stands for the whole. Nothing is lost and nothing is invented. Whenever you find a New Testament quotation that does not match your Old Testament word for word, do not panic and do not skip it. Write both wordings out, ask what the difference is, and ask whether the argument the New Testament writer is making depends on the difference. Here it does not. Either wording says the same thing: God has fashioned a servant who is equipped and willing to obey.

- 6.
 - a. Read 40:7 to 8. What does the servant say he has come to do, and where does he say the will of God is located?
 - b. Compare "your law is within my heart" with the promise of Jeremiah 31:33. What is God after?

Not keeping it to himself (40:9–10)

Twice in verse 9 and 10 the psalmist mentions "the great congregation," and three times he insists that he has not hidden, not restrained, not concealed what God has done. Obedience and testimony belong together. A servant with open ears ends up with an open mouth. The words he uses are worth noticing:

deliverance, faithfulness, salvation, steadfast love. He is not talking about himself. He is talking about God's character, in public.

7. Read 40:9 to 10. List the three things the psalmist says he has not done. Which of the three is hardest for you, and where?

Still needy (40:11–17)

Then the psalm turns. Verse 12 is startling: "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." That is a man crushed by two things at once, trouble around him and sin within him. Hold that verse carefully. We are about to see the New Testament put verses 6 to 8 of this psalm in the mouth of Jesus. It never puts verse 12 there, and it never could.

8.
 - a. Read 40:12. What two burdens is the psalmist carrying?
 - b. Read Hebrews 4:15, 1 Peter 2:22, and 2 Corinthians 5:21. Could the Lord Jesus have prayed Psalm 40:12 about Himself? Why does that matter for how we read the rest of the psalm?
 - c. Read 40:17. What is the psalmist's last word about himself, and what is his last word about God?

For Further Study: Compare Psalm 40:13 to 17 with Psalm 70. They are nearly identical. Israel took a cry that had already been prayed once and prayed it again. What does it tell you about the Psalter that God allowed the same desperate prayer to be sung twice?

The writer of Hebrews argues from Psalm 40

Now we come to the heart of the lesson. Hebrews was written to Christians who were tempted to slide back into the older, visible, familiar system of priests, altars, and animals. The writer answers them with Scripture. Read Hebrews 10:1 to 18 slowly, with Psalm 40 open beside it, and watch how the argument is built.

9. Read Hebrews 10:1 to 4. According to verse 1, what was the law? According to verses 2 and 3, what did the yearly sacrifices actually accomplish in the worshiper's conscience? What does verse 4 say plainly?

10. a. Read Hebrews 10:5 to 7. Who is speaking these words from Psalm 40, and at what moment in His life is He speaking them?

b. What does the writer say God did not desire, and what does he say God prepared?

Study Skill, Following an Argument's Logic in Hebrews: Hebrews reasons the way a lawyer reasons, in steps, with connecting words carrying the weight. Take a pencil and circle every "for," "therefore," "then," "but," and "consequently" in Hebrews 10:1 to 18, and draw an arrow from each one back to what it depends on. You will find the skeleton of the argument: the law was a shadow, therefore it could not perfect; the sacrifices were repeated, therefore they never cleansed the conscience; animal blood cannot take away sin, therefore a body had to be prepared; the Son said "I have come to do your will," therefore the first is done away and the second established; that will has been done, therefore we are sanctified once for all. Learn to read for the connectives and Hebrews stops being difficult and starts being thrilling.

11. a. Read Hebrews 10:8 to 9 very carefully. What does the writer say Christ "said above," and what did He "then add"?

b. Verse 9 says, "He does away with the first in order to establish the second." What is the first, and what is the second?

c. Read Colossians 2:14 and 2:16 to 17, Galatians 3:24 to 25, and Hebrews 8:13. Under which covenant does God expect us to live and worship today?

12. a. Read Hebrews 10:10 to 14. How many times was the offering of Christ's body made, and what has it done for those who are sanctified?

b. Compare verse 11 with verse 12. The priests of the old covenant "stand" daily. What did Christ do after His offering, and why is that detail so important?

- c. Read Hebrews 10:15 to 18. What is the final proof the writer offers that the work is finished?

The obedient Servant, and the obedience He asks of us

Psalm 40:6 to 8 was true of David in a small way. He had been given open ears and had learned that God wanted his obedience more than his livestock. It became true of Jesus in the fullest way possible. The Son came into a body that the Father had prepared, and He used that body for one thing: doing the will of God. "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (John 4:34). "Not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). That obedience, offered once, is what saves us. It is not a pattern we are asked to match. It is a gift we receive.

And then it becomes a pattern. Having no more sacrifice to offer for sin, we have sacrifices of another kind to bring. Romans 12:1 asks us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. Hebrews 13:15 to 16 speaks of the sacrifice of praise and of doing good and sharing. The servant with open ears is still what God is after. He has simply given us a better reason to be one.

13. a. Read John 6:38, Hebrews 5:8, and Romans 5:19. In your own words, why did the obedience of Jesus have to be perfect?
- b. Read Romans 12:1 and Hebrews 13:15 to 16. If animal sacrifice is finished, what does God ask of you now?

Optional Application: Somewhere in your life this week there is a specific thing you already know God wants you to do, and you have been offering Him something easier instead. Name it on paper. Then do the thing itself, not the substitute, before Sunday.

Your response

14. Psalm 40:1 to 3 is a testimony. Write out, in five or six sentences, the story of a pit God has drawn you out of. Be specific about the miry bog and specific about the rock.
15. Hebrews 10:10 says you have been sanctified "through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." What in your heart still tries to add another sacrifice to that once for all offering, as though His body were not enough? Nothing we do adds to what He offered; what remains for us is to receive it on His terms. If you have never been buried with Christ in

baptism and raised to walk in newness of life, read Hebrews 10:19 to 22 and Romans 6:3 to 4, and talk with the teacher or one of the elders this week.

16. Write one specific act of obedience you will offer God this week in the body He gave you, and one prayer you would like the group to pray for you.

For the group

Warm-up. Ask each person to finish this sentence out loud: "The hardest thing about waiting on God is ..." Keep it short and keep it moving. It sets up Psalm 40:1 without any explanation from you.

Discussion. Do not try to cover everything. Choose six or seven questions in advance. Questions 4, 5, and 6 carry the psalm; questions 10, 11, and 12 carry Hebrews. If time runs short, protect question 11. The sentence "He does away with the first in order to establish the second" is the doctrinal center of the lesson, and the class needs to leave with it in hand.

Wrap-up. Read Hebrews 10:11 to 14 aloud, and let the class sit for a moment with the picture of a priest who sat down because the work was finished. Then thank God together for a Savior who came with open ears and a prepared body, and ask Him for the grace to obey rather than to substitute.