

Modern Longings – Ancient Words *Longing to Get Out of a Mess*

Psalm 40

In my final sermon series as your Sr. Pastor, I've been turning to Bible texts and to topics that have had a significant formative effect on my life. That is most certainly true of Psalm 40. For over 25 years, that Psalm has provided a general guide for how I seek to deal with those times in my life when I feel I'm in a situation in which I just don't know what to do next. Maybe you're in one of those right now.

As Psalm 40 opens, we find the powerful King David of Israel remembering back to a time when, using his words, he had been in a “*slimy pit*”, one filled with “*mud and mire*” (**v. 2a**). This picture I found might help you envision his situation: <https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQ4Wb2NIXCVpdQibQE9tprhWmSUSNwOZvghSVVJPELADR8F5CG>

This phrase translated “slimy pit” was one that referred to a desperate situation in which people don't know what to do or where to go. And, even if they do think they know where to go next, they have no power to go there. They're stuck! Powerful and influential people like a king usually don't want to admit that they're in places like that. Many of us have learned to put on a show to those around us that makes it seem to others that we're in control, often because we don't want to look like we're weak. But, even Israel's most influential king had found himself in “slimy pit situations” over and over again in his life.

I'm glad that David did not tell us what the specific situation was that he remembered in this Psalm because it gives us freedom to apply it to many situations we find ourselves in. Here are some of his **slimy-pit-situations**:

- **Being in the wrong place at the wrong time** – like when David was a young man playing a harp to serve King Saul -- and the king irrationally turned against him and tried to kill him; or,
- **Messes of his own making** – like last week's message from Ps 51 that Pastor Jeff preached. It was written when David had sinned grievously by committing adultery, by lying and even by taking a human life. David had been found out and didn't know whether God would restore him; or,
- **A target of unscrupulous enemies** – like the times when David's sons and his closest advisors turned against him and tried to overthrow him; or,
- **Serious sickness** – Like David wrote about in Ps 38. He didn't know if he would ever recover; or,
- **Perplexing life-decisions** – like when David was old and in 1 Kings 1-2 had to decide whether to turn over his crown to his son Absalom.

Have you ever found yourselves in any of those kinds of slimy pit situations – or, in maybe in more than one of them at one time or another? I have. And, I have found practical guidance in Ps 40 about how God would have us to seek him in the midst of those times.

David often wrote Psalms while he was in those situations. In most of those Psalms, David started with the mess he was in and then wrote about how he turned to the Lord. But, in Ps 40, David started by writing about an earlier time in his life when he had been in a deep mess and had experienced the deliverance of God. That's vv. 1-10. Only after remembering God's salvation in the past did David write about the mess he currently was in. That's vv. 11-17. So, let's start where he started, remembering what God had done in the past:

The God Who Delivers People from Slimy Pits (40:1-10) *The LORD turned to me, heard my cry, lifted me out, set my feet on a rock, and put a new song in my mouth...*

Do you see the point of these first 3 verses? What the powerful and influential king could not do on his own, God did. And David's gratitude for God's rescue changed his life. Look at David's words:

- **He recognized that the rescue was all God's work** – David owned up to the fact that he could not rescue himself. Apart from God, he was in a helpless and hopeless situation. “*Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord*” he declares in **v. 4** – not in proud people who think they are powerful; not in any kind of false god, not in a self-help book. “*Many, Lord my God, are the wonders you have done (v. 5)!*”
- **He grasped an essential lesson about God** – He learned that God is a God of grace. So, David neither had to be perfect to warrant God's salvation nor did he have to bring tribute to God to earn it. No, what God wanted was to have David entrust himself in faith to Him. Listen to David's words and make them your own:

Sacrifice and offering you did not desire — Burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, “Here I am, I have come — I desire to do your will, my God (40:6-8).”

- He gave witness to God being his Savior -- I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly...; I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help (40:9-10).

When you read vv. 4-10, you may think, “This man has gotten it! David has become a devoted man of faith in God. David surely will never be shaken by any slimy pit situations that might happen in his life again!” Well, if you think that, then think again. This brings us to the second half of the Psalm.

The Human Being Who Finds Himself in Another Slimy Pit (40:11-17). *Troubles without number surround me; my sins have overtaken me... They are more than the hairs of my head... Save me, LORD!*

In the slimy-pit-situation of vv. 1-10, we don’t know exactly what David’s problem was. But, in the present tense situation that led to him writing Ps 40, we know the problem, i.e., David had sinned again. In fact, the way he put it in v.12 was that his sins had caught up with him. Some scholars think that in Ps 40:1-10, David remembered back to the time when he had sinned with Bathsheba and felt all was lost but then experienced God’s forgiveness – and that in 40:11-17, he tells of a time later in life when he had fallen into sin yet again.

I don’t know if that’s true, but I do know that David confesses in v. 12 that his sins again are serious. And, even as David was wrestling with his own moral and ethical failure, he was at the same time being attacked by enemies who mocked him, wanted to ruin his life and even to take his life -- as you can read about in vv. 14-15.

What I want you to notice this weekend is that there is a way that David approached being in the slimy pit situation in Ps 40 that ultimately led to him finding his way back to God. This is what I saw when I read this Psalm back in 1992 as I was in a hospital bed not knowing what was next. As I read what David did in Ps 40, I saw that he 1) slowed down, 2) remembered what God had done in a similar situation in the past and then 3) asked, i.e., David asked God again to, like in vv. 1-3, *turn to him, to hear his cry, to lift him out of the mess, to set his feet one more time on a rock, and to put a new song in his mouth.*

That formula is what I have found to be life-directing in slimy-pit-situations. With that in mind, I want to put before you this formula that I’ve labelled –

What to Do in a Slimy Pit				
Slow Down	Remember	Ask	(wait wait)	Act

Step 1: Slow Down –

A person who gets caught in quicksand often frantically struggles to get out – and discovers that frenetic struggling only makes things worse. <http://www.chooseyourmetaphor.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/quicksand-e1410711950353.jpg>

The same is true of a slimy-pit-situation. When David was in the time of trouble we read about in vv. 11-17, he may have wanted to run, or to panic or to hide. But, rather than reacting in those ways, he slowed down to do all the things we read about in vv. 1-10.

Slowing down when a crisis hits does not come naturally to most of us – certainly not to me. For some, the normal tendency in slimy pit times an intense emotional reaction like: panic, anxiety, paranoia or angry outbursts. Those kinds of emotional reactions rarely help get you out of the mess.

For others, we try to fix things fast – with our own wit and strength. I know that’s what I tend to try to do. But, as was the case with David, tough human predicaments rarely fix fast. I think we learn from David that there is a time to slow down – even stop for a while – until you can gain perspective on the situation and seek wisdom for what to do. Personally, I find that to slow down, I need to find a time – at least a moment or two – to be silent and, if possible, to find a place of solitude – in order to calm my soul.

When I take the time to slow down, I often find that Pastor’s Jeff’s first point from last week’s sermon become a part of my thinking, i.e., what he called self-awareness. I realize that my problem is not only things happening to me but things happening in me. That’s what happened to David in v. 12. It happens to me too. I open my eyes to my own sins and failures and confess those to the Lord. I make sure I am right with Him.

But, after you slow down, then what?

Step 2: Remember (Hebrew, “zakar”)

There is a very important Hebrew word that I do not want you to forget. It is the word “zakar”, meaning to remember. So, please don’t forget to remember.

In all the difficult times of Israel's life, God had shown up and had rescued them. When he did, what God would tell them to do is to remember that he was always present – and to remember that he is a God who rescues people out of slimy pits. In Ps 40, from the midst of a slimy pit of his own making, David remembered God and what God had done in his life – and applied what he remembered to his current difficult situation.

So, “zakar” is more than just bringing something to mind. “Zakar” is taking a memory, meditating on it, and then applying it to your current situation. Pastor Jeff mentioned that too last weekend when, in his 2nd point, he called us to bring to mind the knowledge of God and God's ways, i.e., both who God is and what he asks of us. Remember that he is the one who forgives sinners, who lifts failures out of slimy pits, who puts our feet on a rock and gives a new beginning and restores joy to our inner beings. That's what David did. Learn to do it.

Step 3: Ask

With your mind remembering who God is and what he does, then you are indeed ready to pray. And, let me tell you, you will pray as you rarely have – with fervor, and specificity and hope. Your prayer will be like Jesus's was when he was in a time in which, in human eyes, there was no way out. He prayed, “*Father, my prayer is that this cup of crucifixion will pass from me. But, your will, Father. Not mine (Lk 22:42).*”

The Book of James tells us that sometimes we do not have because we do not ask. I'll tell you, when you remember that God does what Ps 40:1-3 says he does, you will not fail to ask. Here is David's “ask”: *Be pleased to save me, LORD; come quickly, LORD, to help me (40:13).*

(Wait, Wait)

One striking thing about Ps 40 is that, when it ends, David is still in the slimy pit. Did you notice the last verse? “*You are my help and my deliverer; you are my God, do not delay (40:17)*”. David still had to wait to receive God's provision. I imagine it was hard for him to wait. When we human beings ask, we often want immediate answers – even immediate gratification. However, that's not what we should expect from the Lord.

Learning to wait on God's timing is an important part of genuine faith. In fact, the three Psalms leading up to Ps 40 call us to learn to wait. And, the opening verse of Ps 40 is a testimony to a time when David had waited for the Lord – and found it to be worth the wait. Indeed, a paraphrase of the Hebrew in v. 1 might be something like, “Back when I was in another slimy pit and desperately wanted out, I waited, waited, waited upon the Lord. And, in his perfect time, he reached to me, heard me, and rescued me.”

As a long-time follower of Jesus, I tell you that this has often been my experience. In slimy pit situations, I want you to learn to wait in faith – to wait with hope and to live in obedience to God as you wait.

Step 4: Act

I have found that, when I'm in those slimy-pit-situations, I want to know everything about getting out of it. But, my experience is that in those times I often am aware of at least one small thing I should be doing as I wait. I find that, when I do that small thing, I almost always discover at least one more small step God would have me take. And, with his help, I do that too – and continue to until I see more fully how he will lift me out of the pit.

I confess to you that following these steps does not come naturally to me. Because of that, in that step 1 of slowing down, I find that, for me, doing what David did has to be an intentional, consciously chosen spiritual discipline. I imagine that was true for David too. As I was discussing this with several colleagues this past week, they encouraged me to share a story of how this spiritual discipline has played out in my life. So, I will. I've decided to take you back to that hospital bed when this Psalm took on new meaning for me.

It happened 25 years ago, after I had experienced repeated episodes of pancreatic attacks over a 3-year period. So, it was a time not unlike what David wrote about in Ps 38 (which I encourage you to read). The attacks were becoming more frequent and more debilitating. When the worst hit in August 1994, I was pretty sure that there was no medical solution for my condition. Our church had also prayed fervently for me – and we had called for what James 5 tells a church to do when someone is seriously sick, i.e., the elders of my church came to the hospital, anointed me with oil and prayed for God to heal me.

I recall that, in the midst of the pancreatic pain, I was quite anxious, and I remember crying out to the Lord for relief. It was in one of those moments that I read Ps 40 and told the Lord I was in a slimy pit and did not

know what to do. I decided to do what David did, i.e., to remember other difficult times in my life when God made his presence real to me. I could remember many times when I had lost hope, but that God had come – and changed things. I asked him to do it again. Like David did, I told God that I would seek to give witness to him in the hospital as I waited on him and that I would trust him no matter what transpired. I remember specifically asking God to show me one step he would have me take.

I knew that the team of gastroenterologists treating me was going to meet together to discuss my case. One of them, the doctor I had become closest to, came in to confer with Chris and me after their meeting. He told me that the team could not agree on what to do in my case. But, he said that they all agreed that my body would not withstand another attack. Then, he said that he had discovered an experimental treatment. He told us that his colleagues would not recommend it to us – but that he felt it might be my best hope. He said, “Are you willing to take one step in that direction and talk with the doctor who is doing these procedures?” “One step?” I asked. “One step,” he said. So, I took that one step.

That first step led to many other steps – and it involved a lot of waiting. But, as you know, here I am. It’s been almost exactly 25 years since I last had a pancreatic attack. I say, “God heard my cry. He lifted me out of that hospital bed and he has given me a new sermon to preach – and many songs of praise!

It doesn’t always work out that way. God’s ways are not ours. But, I have found that this basic formula I have outlined for you is a good way to walk with the Lord in this world that seems to be filled with slimy pit situations. I could have also told you the story of how, in my first year as a university president, I discovered how bad the financial condition was at the school. Then, I was told that a team from our bank was going to come visit to address the situation – and the bank president was coming with the team! To say the least, I was anxious and did not know what to do. So, I slowed down... I remembered... (I’ll tell you the rest of that story someday in another sermon.)

And, as I’m sure you already imagine, just like King David, I’ve been in many slimy pit situations because of my own poor choices. And, I’ve learned to follow the same process, one that calls for confession and repentance as a part of the slowing down and remembering.

So, today, I want to end the service by giving you the chance to apply this spiritual discipline: to slow down and bring any slimy pit situation you may have in your life to God today. I’ll put the Psalm 40 formula in front of you so that I might walk through it with you now...

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Ask

(wait wait)

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