

A Hope from Despair

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Date: 28 November 2021

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. My name is James, and my middle name is Stuart, and I'm more than happy for you to make up nicknames based on that.

I love doing that, so please, be creative as you like. And I'm also very excited to be ordained in a couple of weeks here, and I'd love to see you all here if you can.

I recently learned a phrase in Korean. Now, I'm very sorry, my Korean accent is, like, really terrible, but here we go. The phrase is, Does anybody know any Korean?

No? Okay, so it wasn't that helpful. The phrase means, when you walk past a mountain, there is another mountain to walk past. I think it's a slightly better version of out of the frying pan into the fire.

And the last part of the phrase, Taishan, is actually talking about a mountain in Shandong province in China. It's this mountain called Taishan. And it has this imagery of, once you walk up part of this mountain, there's just another part of the mountain to climb up.

[1 : 12] But I think it captures a certain feeling, a mixture of joy and pain really well. That feeling of getting past one struggle and being joyful that you're on the other side of it, but then the clouds part and there is just another struggle, another challenge ahead.

I know it's been exam period for many people here, and it's like that short-term feeling of joy when you finish one exam, only to remember you have four more coming up.

How foolish is it if we pretend that after the first struggle, after the first exam, that there's no more, and it's just easy roads ahead. But I think, I wonder actually, I wonder if we can do the same thing with God.

Is it possible that we depend on God in one difficult season, like a COVID lockdown, one struggle, and then we quickly forget how much we need Him, and we go back to trying to do life on our own. We've climbed one mountain with God's help, and then we don't even see the next one, and we don't realize how dependent we are on God in every season. Today is our last in our series, Hope in Despair.

[2 : 32] We've spent the last eight weeks in the Psalms and the Book of Lamentations, and I'm really thankful for this series. I texted in to that number about how thankful I am because I have been reminded of how amazing God's grace is to us.

That we do things which make God grieve, and He continues to love us. I'm thankful for Psalm 13 last week, which gave us a way to use our lament.

The Book of Lamentations was a very difficult book to read through as we saw the city of Jerusalem destroyed, but it has been wonderful for me personally to see and to be reminded that we have a God who stands by His people.

Even when He pours out His anger on them, He continues to love them, and He does that as well, ultimately in Jesus. But the challenge for me and the challenge for us today is that as we come out of a season of despair, as we come back into what seems to be more like normal life, that we cannot trust in God.

We can think that we've got it, and we can forget the mountains ahead. So the challenge will be for us to continue to trust in God and not forget our need in Him because our God is our only hope.

[3 : 56] And so today, we're in Psalm 40, and King David is going to encourage us to be lifelong lamenters who know how to cry out, how to pray to God, how to rejoice in Him, how to do what Aidan did and prepare a lament so we can use that later so that we can lament our sin, so we can grieve in a difficult season.

When there's a loss of a loved one or a difficult season, we can depend on God's grace in every season. So let me pray as we have a look at Psalm 40.

Dear Heavenly Father, I thank You for Your goodness to us, that You walk with us and You continue to walk with us when we think we don't need You.

Heavenly Father, as we are reminded of Your love and Your grace in Psalm 40, remind us of our continual need in You today, Lord. Amen. So please, have your Bibles open.

Psalm chapter 40. We're going to spend our time in Psalm 40 today. As we see that God saves and He continues to save. Psalm 40 verse 1.

[5 : 09] I waited patiently for the Lord. He turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire.

This is almost the flip side of the season we've been in. We've been looking at a number of laments and people grieving. And this is David. And he's saying, I have been grieving, but you have answered me.

David had been in a time of despair. He cried out to God and then he waited patiently. Now, we don't know how long he had to wait or what he was crying out to God for, but he waited patiently. Now, even that word there, that's a challenge. I don't like waiting for anything, especially when I'm in despair. God, come and fix it now. But David waited patiently.

David has waited on God in a season of despair. And God has answered him. He has saved him from whatever the issue was. And that description of the problem, it's just so vivid.

[6 : 17] It's pictured as a slimy pit out of the mud and mire or the miry bog from older translations. Now, it makes me think of my worst nightmare as a child.

Quicksand. It seemed to be in every TV show that I grew up in. It was the threat of stumbling upon to quicksand and then you, no matter how much you tried, you couldn't claw your way out of it. Now, I've never been in one. Has anybody been in quicksand? No, it turns out it's not actually that much of a threat. But it's this picture of danger, of slippery walls.

You're unable to save yourself. David says he was stuck in a hole, unable to get himself out there. He can't even get a foothold or purchase to try and fix the situation.

It sounds a lot like a COVID lockdown. For a while there, it didn't seem to matter what restrictions were in place. Nothing was getting better. There seemed to be no way out.

[7 : 21] It was this season of depression and despair, attack from outside and attack from in. But God has saved David from what seemed to him to be an impossible situation.

God has saved him. He's pulled him out. And there's a contrast in the rest of verse 2. Pulled him out of the miry pit. Verse 2, the second part of verse 2. He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

Safety. Security in God. Now I don't know the feeling of coming out of a slimy pit onto firm ground, but I do know a similar feeling.

The feeling of being swept into the ocean and not being in control. I remember one morning on holiday a couple of years ago. I'd gone for a run on the beach early in the morning and then I jumped in the ocean and I swam a little bit.

And I didn't realise how tired my legs were until I tried to swim back into shore. It wasn't then until then I realised I was actually being pulled out.

[8 : 29] And I had that moment where I had my life flash before me. Is this going to be the place that I die? Are my two little kids going to be without a father at this point?

And I remember that feeling when my foot finally hit sand. Joy. Inexpressible joy, relief.

Praise to God. God, my children are going to see their dad for another day. God has taken David out of the pits of pain and despair, a struggle he couldn't climb out of, and placed him safe on a rock and David responds by praising God.

Because of God saving him, David trusts in God more and he wants to give his life and not just a couple of offerings. Have a look at verse 3. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.

Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him. He is praising God. He is rejoicing and his trust and dependence has grown.

[9 : 38] He cried out to God. He waited on him. God answered and saved him. And importantly, David doesn't just move on to the next thing he's got to do in his life. He sits in this moment and praises God.

He trusts in him and he offers his whole life to him. Verse 6, sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have opened. Burn offerings and sin offerings you did not require.

Then I said, here I am, I have come. It is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, my God. Your law is within my heart.

Now it's hard not to read this part and immediately think of Jesus. But David is the fulfillment of expectation. He is the king. But where David desires to do God's will, Jesus is the one who does it. He is the one who the scrolls point to, the Old Testament points to. And whilst God has been faithful and answered David's call, how much more for Jesus?

[10:43] Crying out on the cross, God, why have you forsaken me? And yet God lifted Jesus out of a pit. Not just a pit of despair and pain, but the pit of death.

And because God has lifted him up, he lifts us up to new life too. Placing us on the firm foundation of Jesus. In our moment of salvation, we don't even realize how high the walls of the pit are around us until we get taken out of them.

We were stuck in a pit, but not just a difficult pit, an impossible pit. Ephesians 2 tells us that we were dead, totally unable to climb out of our graves.

But God has pulled us out of this pit in Jesus and he puts us on him a firm foundation. And so now we can do what David does and see God's goodness on the other side of this pit.

We can see and be reminded that God is good. He listens to us. He answers our cries. We can say, God, I can depend upon you when I'm in a pit because no matter what pit I'm in, it's not going to be as bad as the pit I was in when I was dead.

[12:02] but God, you have pulled me out of that and I can stand on Jesus regardless of the season around me because no pit can swallow me because I am firm in him.

If those 10 verses were all we had of Psalm 40, it would be lovely and it would be amazing. It's this picture of David responding to God saving him, David crying out and David knowing that God saves him.

But that's not the full story because that's not our lived experience. That illustration from before about that Korean phrase, our life is much more we climb a mountain, we go through a season of despair and then there's another mountain to climb.

The truth is that we lurch from disaster to disaster, from the frying pan to the fire. Just because someone has survived cancer doesn't mean that they won't lose a loved one.

Just because someone has struggled to find a job doesn't mean their house won't be threatened by a bushfire. The harsh realistic truth is that we live in a damned world cursed by sin.

[13:20] God is the only hope until he sends Jesus and this world is remade. It is easy to move on from one mountain of dependence on God and forget him in the next moment.

Throughout lockdown I was very aware of the mountain that we were climbing. I was very aware how much I needed God's help just to do daily things like have patience with my kids.

God was really good to me in that season. I really appreciated reading the book of Jeremiah and being reminded about God's continued patience for his kids Israel.

And that encouraged me to be a good dad. And then we got back to normal life. We came out of lockdown and I didn't realise it but I'd actually put that dependence on God particularly for patience to one side.

And I went back to thinking normal life I can do this I can do this on my own. Even though it's just a different mountain to climb. And so you know I'm not sure if you found this came out of lockdown my kids hadn't seen anybody for four months they went back to school we thought yes school's back and then they all got sick because they were back with people.

[14:46] And I love you all thank you for wearing masks. And even then I thought okay we're back to this we've just gotten our freedom I thought I had life and now we're back in a different sort of lockdown and that challenge of having patience was back but I hadn't realised how much I needed God in that.

Instead of coming to him and grieving the fact that we live in a cursed world where you still have to deal with sickness depending on him as the great healer I just thought I can do it.

But there is a wonderful hope and encouragement here for us in Psalm 40. The first half of the Psalm is David being thankful to God that he has saved him.

The second half of Psalm 40 David says oh God I've stuffed up and I need you to save me I'm in another pit I need you to get me out of this. Verse 11 David's own sin has caused his trouble and his request his request is based on God and on who God is.

God is merciful he is faithful and he is loving and so even though David has effectively just gone and jumped back into the pit God has pulled him out of David cries out to him our God is a much better father than me if my kids continually come and ask me the same thing I'll be okay the first three or four or five times on the sixth it's just like leave me alone just figure it out yourself God is not like that we throw ourselves back into that pit of despair repeatedly we choose to sin and God in his goodness and patience and love for us continues to answer our cries for help verse 13 be pleased to save me Lord come quickly Lord to help me David has learnt the lesson of grief and lamentation calling out to God when in need depending on him in each and every circumstance even the problems that he is now making God doesn't ignore him

[17:14] David sees how faithful God is that he is a God who answers prayers and so he continues to cry out and he's aware of his condition verse 17 as for me I am poor and needy may the Lord think of me you are my help and my deliverer you are my God do not delay now this is King David saying these words not sure if he's in a cave at this point but this is the king and he is saying he is poor and needy he is aware of who he is before God that's what happens when we cry out to God we see God answer us when our trust and dependence grows in him we become more aware of who we are and who he is how awesome he is and how awful we are and how much we need him so that we can say God I am poor and needy but you are my help and my deliverer when we learn the lament of

Psalms 40 and the and from the book of laments or from Psalm 13 we learn David's lesson here that God is always good he is always helping and answering prayers he is always able to be trusted but also how good God's grace for us is that our God would willingly trade our place with Jesus at the cross and so that we can continue to cry out to him preacher theologian and author Don Carson told a story about a missionary who came back to Don Carson's church while he was doing his PhD he brought his wife and young daughter with him when they were there and he was studying his PhD his wife got cancer she was treated with chemotherapy and she recovered six months later he was diagnosed with cancer liver cancer no one wanted to touch him eventually they found doctors who would help him they took a large chunk of his stomach with radical treatment but eventually he recovered and was able to continue his PhD studies six months after that his wife died of cancer he finished his PhD but before he went back to the mission field with his then nine-year-old daughter he went and spoke at Don

Carson's church and he thanked everybody for their support for their prayers for him over this time and he thanked God for all his goodness he thanked God for the assurance of life for real hope that he would see his wife again he thanked God that he had left him there to care for his daughter he spent his whole time in gratitude and Don Carson made the point a very painful point that that is simply normal Christian living hope in despair is the usual life of the Christian it is to be the usual life of the Christian our hope isn't that this season of pain will get better our hope is not that we will climb a mountain and then it will just be valleys it will be smooth sailing it will just be downhill from here because that is not our lived experience that is not life it is we climb a mountain and there's another mountain our hope is in

Jesus who didn't climb a mountain he went up a hill to Jerusalem he went on to a cross who God raised from the dead who pulled him out of the pit and so that no matter what happens with our story about the mountains we have to climb we can grieve the painful difficult seasons we can grieve the challenges of work our families getting sick because Jesus has climbed the most important mountain and he has placed us on his back and carries us like a little child to stand before God the Christian can endure that the story of the missionary still rejoicing and being thankful to God it can be our story because Jesus is walking with us he says this pain you're going through I have already walked through it come and follow me come and place your burdens on me because I can carry them and so as we finish this series this season of having hope in despair and before we head into Christmas and we get distracted with the food and the lights and the feasting and the festivals and the presents remember the value of lament lament reminds us of God's goodness it reminds us of how we still depend on

God on how we should be grieving our sins grieving the things that go on around us but also remembering and celebrating and rejoicing God's goodness to us that he would have grace for us remember it because there is another mountain around the corner to climb but Jesus is already there calling us to walk with him don't get bogged down in the mountain because God is there with us cry out to him to help because he will answer let's pray heavenly father you were so kind to us

that Jesus climbed that mountain to Jerusalem that he was on a cross that you pulled him out of the pit of death and that you have raised us to life heavenly father thank you that you continue to walk with us in the good seasons and in the painful difficult ones lord heavenly father for those of us who are not in a difficult season at the moment help us not to think that we can do it on our own but lord remind us in season and out about how much we need you bring us closer to you lord and we ask this in your son's name and for your glory amen amen amen me amen amen amen