

## Scattering the Darkness: God Lifts Me Out of the Pit

### Psalm 40 (NIV)

For the director of music. Of David. A psalm. 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; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. 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. Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods. Many, LORD my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. None can compare with you; were I to speak and tell of your deeds, they would be too many to declare. Sacrifice and offering you did not desire— but my ears you have opened— burnt 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.” I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, LORD, as you know. I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help. I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness from the great assembly. Do not withhold your mercy from me, LORD; may your love and faithfulness always protect me. For troubles without number surround me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me. Be pleased to save me, LORD; come quickly, LORD, to help me. May all who want to take my life be put to shame and confusion; may all who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace. May those who say to me, “Aha! Aha!” be appalled at their own shame. But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who long for your saving help always say, “The LORD is great!” But 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.

Aron Ralston – does that name ring a bell? In 2003, Aron went climbing in the Bluejohn Canyon down south around about Moab all alone without a phone and didn’t tell anyone where he was going. Then – and this is the whole reason your mom always told you to carry your phone with you and to tell someone else where you are going - he fell and then a boulder fell on his right arm, trapping him against the rock.

What did he do to get out of being trapped? Knowing that help was unlikely to find him, he did what he could do. He first tried chipping away at the boulder that had trapped his hand but made no headway. He tried working out a pulley system with his climbing gear, but the rope was too stretchy to provide the needed leverage. Finally, he resolved to cut off his arm to escape, which also required him deliberately snapping the bones in his arm so that his dull multitool knife would actually cut him free. It worked! He escaped that canyon, that pit of doom, and is still alive today.

Many say that Aron’s resolve and determination made him a hero. No doubt, it’s an impressive feat. I think I probably would have died of dehydration. What Aron did exemplifies the spirit that we praise, a spirit of resolve, a spirit of lifting yourself out of a pit of despair, pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps.

Not only do we prize the idea of lifting ourselves up out of pits literally, nearly all religions and philosophies teach some version of this self help as the way to overcome adversity and evil in life. They throw you the apparatus needed for rescue, but you have to put in the work. They will lower you a ladder and tell you to climb up it one rung at a time, make a vow, carry it out, do a good deed and then another. They will send you down a pulley system with instructions of how you have to put it together and use it. You have to repeat a certain mantra to strengthen your mind to give you the mental attitude needed to climb out of the pit. Similar to the Greek gods of old, you have to offer the right prayers and sacrifices in order to get the gods to help you out. You can’t just wait around for a rescue. There’s an assumption made with all these religions and philosophies: that you are able to get yourself out of the pit.

But what about the pit that David writes about here in Psalm 40? He calls it a slimy pit, that he was set in mud and mire, almost like a glue that prevented him from using his arms and legs to free himself, a trap that would lead to his inevitable death. If you sent him down a pulley system with instructions on how to assemble and use it, he wouldn’t be able to do it. Even if he got his arms and legs free of the mud and mire, then he still had the sliminess of the pit to deal with, a sliminess that would cause him to continually lose his grip, his leverage. So, if you had lowered him down a ladder and told him to just climb up it, he would keep slipping and never get out. David thinks that he is going to die down there. And part of you wants to just shout down to David, “Try harder!” as if his amount of effort is the cure to his problem of being trapped in a pit.

This pit that David was in was not a literal pit. Knowing pieces of his life, this may very well have been a time when his life was threatened in battle or when he was on the run from King Saul or from his own son Absalom, as he refers to those who want to take his life and desire his ruin in verse 14. It may have been when he was inescapably steeped in his sins of adultery, deception, and murder as he was because of his affair with Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba. It may simply be him reflecting on all his sins, all the wrongs,

that he had done in life as he wrote in verse 12: “For troubles without number surround me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me.”

This was David’s pit, but what are your slimy pits in life, the traps that will seemingly end your life? Have your sins overtaken you, like David, feeling like they’re mud and mire gluing you in place? Maybe it’s a slimy pit that you don’t see while you’re in it, a pit that you’ve lowered yourself in to by surrounding yourself with people that you compromise your morals, your values, for as you try to fit in with them, impress them, have them like you. In doing so, you find yourself pushing your moral envelope, going against your conscience, going against what you once firmly knew was right, telling yourself that it’s okay, that it’s not that bad, but then you can’t get out.

How do you get out of pits like these? In another psalm, God gave us this truth: “No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them - the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough.” (Psalm 49:7-8) No amount of effort on our part is ever enough to rescue us from our slimy pits. We and all people are in a worse situation spiritually than Aron Ralston was physically. Not only are we alone, but it’s as if we have also broken both our arms and our legs and our voices don’t work. We can’t climb up the ladder that’s lowered down. We cannot assemble and use the pulley system. We can’t even cut off our own arms and walk out. Spiritually speaking, we cannot lift ourselves up out of our pits.

So, how on earth do we get out? David tells us: “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; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.” (verses 1-2) Unlike other religions and philosophies, God does not give us a plan to show us what we do in order to overcome the evil in our lives, to save ourselves, to lift ourselves up out of our own pits. No, he actually does the rescuing. He comes down into the pit. He isn’t deterred or slowed down by our mud and mire. He picks us up, broken bag of bones that we are, and lifts us out of the pit and puts us on solid ground.

The LORD did this for us by coming into our world, our slimy pit, when he took on human flesh and blood like us. He lived as one of us and did what we could not do. When David wrote, “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,’” (verses 7-8), he was foretelling of his descendant, of God made flesh, of Jesus. Jesus did what we could not. He did the will of God. He lived that perfect life, just as we heard affirmed through his baptism last week that this is his Son whom he loves, with whom he is well pleased. The writer to the Hebrew Christians confirms this when he wrote: “And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Hebrews 10:10) Our God is different from all others who claim to be gods, from all other self-help philosophies. “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire— but my ears you have opened— burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.” (verse 6) God doesn’t give us a plan to save ourselves based on our efforts to come to him, a ladder to lift ourselves to him. He does all the work, all the heavy lifting, all the deeds.

This is why we praise this God over all the other religions and philosophies in the world. This is why we sing songs of praise, even if we don’t have the greatest voices or hit all the right notes. With him coming down and rescuing us, lifting us out of the pit, “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.” (verse 3) We can’t help but tell others of how our God did all the work to rescue us. “I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, LORD, as you know. I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help. I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness from the great assembly.” (verses 9-10) Who have you told lately of how God rescued you and lifted you out of your pit?

But what if you’re still in your pit? What should you do? Follow the words of one who himself had been lifted out of his pit by the LORD. David wrote: “But 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.” (verse 17) “Do not withhold your mercy from me, LORD; may your love and faithfulness always protect me.” (verse 11) “Be pleased to save me, LORD; come quickly, LORD, to help me.” (verse 13) Cry out to the LORD! Ask him to come quickly. Trust that the LORD will come to your rescue. Why? Because he’s faithful to his Word. He does what he says, and he says that he will rescue you. And then wait patiently for our God to come down into your pit and pull you out, just as David did: “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; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.” (verses 1-2)

In the slimy pits of our lives, God does not throw down a ladder or a pulley system with instructions expecting us to pull ourselves out. No, he himself comes down and lifts us up out of our pits. Knowing that God is coming to lift you up out of your pit, may this hope scatter the darkness in your life whenever you feel trapped in a pit. Amen.