

UNSTUCK



The Bible acknowledges that there are times in our lives when we simply feel stuck. Particularly in the Psalms, we read prayers and songs from the middle of hard times. Without God, we would certainly be stuck. But with God, there is good news. We can look to Him with honest cries of lament and hope to get unstuck by His good grace and power. This four-week walk through Psalm 40 assures us that God carries us through stuck times.

UNSTUCK • Psalm 40:6-10 • Tim McConnell • May 12, 2019

It was my honor to represent you in Mongolia last week touching base with our ministry partners over there, and preaching a teaching a bit. Here's a photo of how mothers carry their babies around in Mongolia. I'm just kidding. We were in a big city and it was pretty warm actually. They carry their babies the same way we do. It made me think of you guys, the mothers I know. In one way or another, mothers never stop carrying their children around. I sure do love and appreciate my mother and my wife Abigail and I hope you can smile on all the mothers in your life or in your memory today.

We are in a series called Unstuck. God knows this life has pain. The Bible talks about hard things in life and places we get stuck. Common culture seems to start from the idea that our natural state, the default state of our soul, is happy and balanced and confident. That if we don't feel happy, balanced and confident at all times something is wrong. And if we feel like something is wrong with us, we don't want to be around others or they might see it. So we go it alone. We go into isolation. We withdraw because we think the natural state of the soul is happy and confident, but we don't feel happy or confident. But most Christian thinkers I read through history didn't see it this way. They seemed to think that our souls, our psyches, are not by nature happy and confident, but that the soul has a kind of weight or gravity constantly pulling down on it. Internally, our psyche is weighed down by all sorts of things—regrets, worries, decision fatigue, disappointed hopes and pain from mistakes we've made. Externally, the world is no help. It is unfair, full of people (nice and not so nice), natural disasters, wars, all that. So the more natural tendency then is for the spirit to go down, if left alone. John Calvin said Psalm 40 gives us a good example because "the instability of our nature commonly tends to draw us downward, and all of us, from our proneness to yield to delusions, are tempted by many wicked examples." We'd rather follow the dark stuff down than focus on God's truth and rise. Without intervention, the soul naturally descends. Happiness and joy and balance and confidence are actually things that require work and intervention both to achieve and to maintain.

That's why we are in this series, Unstuck. The medical community is torn up right now by the fact that life expectancy has gone down again in the U.S. The reason is what they call "Deaths of Despair." Suicide, opioids and alcohol or drug-related deaths are actually bringing down average life expectancy. We need to seek a better

way, a cure. Now, we want to be very clear here, we affirm the reality of mental illness, depression, bipolar disorders, anxieties, all of these recognized by the mental health community and we in no way want to present some kind of spiritual whitewash over these illnesses. In fact, we have asked our network of counselors to review our messages and we highly recommend going to a professional when you feel stuck to uncover the deeper things going on, including physical and emotional and psychological, all of that. In fact, we put a link on our web page and number in the bulletin for you to follow if you need help. I also want to say, God knows about this pain, the Bible speaks about this pain, you are not faulty if you don't naturally feel happy and confident, so don't get walled in by false expectations.

See, let me take it one step further. When we expect easy happiness, and we don't get it, we think something is wrong with us and we withdraw from others; and the walls close in, and life narrows, and soon, tell me if I'm wrong, that's when we reach for the unhealthy escape. Another drink. Another pain pill. Here's a screen that with a few clicks can take me right out of this world. An hour later, a day later, we are only deeper in despair, life is tighter, narrower, heavier. Instead of getting walled in by false expectations and stuck, the Lord says, "Turn to me instead." But that isn't easy to do alone. Loneliness is nothing to tackle on your own. Don't withdraw; show up.

Psalm 40. You're sinking in the mud, stuck in the mire. Not only does it hold you down but it sticks to you and you carry it around. Cry out to God Who hears, Pastor Katie talked about that last week in the first five verses. Let's pick up at verse 6. "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—but my ears you have opened—burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require" (Psalm 40:6). Does God care more about the external or the internal? We think life with God or life in a church is about managing our external behaviors, but God cares about our hearts. Sometimes in stuck places we are tempted to bargain with God. If I do everything right on the outside, or do this or that religious thing right, God will have to bless me. God will have to make my life better. Like the man I heard of recently who said, "I tried God and it didn't work." Asked what he meant, he said "I went to church, every Sunday, for two months in a row!" What happened? "During those two months my car broke down, my girlfriend left me and I lost my job." I tried God. It didn't work. God doesn't promise life without pain; God promises life in His presence. God isn't a slot

machine. You can't keep dropping coin after coin waiting for God to pay off. The more you get into that posture, the further away from God you go. God cares about your heart. Open your ears. Let God open your ears and get into your inside, your interior life.

Let the Word of God get in there. "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'" (Psalm 40:7-8). Open your heart to the Word of God. I open up this Bible, and find not only God's story in there—the story of a God who loves me and pursues me and reaches out to save me—but I find my story in there. It is written about me in the scroll. My story belongs to God's story, or is part of a bigger story. How different suffering looks when we see our story, or a particular chapter in our story, as part of God's larger story. The Word of God also penetrates your heart and starts to change things. The external changes when the internal leads the way. Change your heart and the rest will follow. God's Word changes your heart. You want different things. "I desire to do your will, my God." God cares about what's going on inside more than outside, He cares more about the internal posture of your heart than your external behaviors. He wants there to be love. Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15). If you love Me, you will want to live life the way I live life. You'll want to follow Me. Behavior follows heart, and God can change your heart.

Now we get to the point for this morning. Finally! When you feel stuck you feel like something's wrong with you, so you stay away from people. Psalm 40 says cry out to God and get with people. God cares about what's going on inside you, God can change you from the inside out, but also don't withdraw; go to the community of faith, the people of God, the church. Show up. "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" (Psalm 40:9-10). There's a lot going on here. First of all, it says I go. I show up. I join the great assembly. What I like too—I think this is so insightful—is it says I don't hide what's going on inside in my heart. I don't seal my lips and keep it secret and hide it. Do you ever feel like hiding it? Both ways. You feel like hiding what's wrong, but sometimes, don't you also sometimes hide what God's doing to change you, what God's doing to make things better. You hide that sometimes. I've got a reputation now. I'm the cynic. I'm the

hurt one. I earned this reputation, this posture. I might not feel that dark anymore inside, but I'm not going to let you know that! Does anybody relate? I like being the sarcastic one with reason to doubt, reason to scowl. There's a thing that happens where we are too proud to heal. Too cool to be happy. Anyway, don't hide.

But look what happens. In the assembly, among the people, in worship, in community, in praise, we are reminded of who God is. I want you to see how David refers to God here. You can underline these words as we go along. Look, it's all in verse 10. God is righteous. "I do not hide your righteousness." God is right. He is good. All the time. I might not feel that way right now, but I need to be reminded, when I am trapped in mud, when I am thick in bitterness, when life has been unfair and I'm feeling the pain, I need to be reminded of the fundamental truth: God is good. "I speak of your faithfulness." God is faithful. God is steady on, no question about it, no variation, no wandering around, God is faithful. His faithfulness endures. I might not feel it right now, but I know it's true and I need to be reminded. God is a Savior, "... and your saving help." God saves. I know it's true even when I don't feel it's true. "I do not conceal your love." God loves you. God is love. Do you believe it when you are stuck and hurting and confused? You don't feel loved, but you know God loves you. If someone else asked you, "Does God love me?" You would say, "Yes." Of course God loves you. Try telling that to yourself, okay? Love. "I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness." We already did faithfulness, right? Well this is actually a second word in Hebrew. The first faithfulness was about steady, reliable love; this faithfulness is about steady, reliable truth. Truth.

I'm hurting. I'm in pain. I'm disappointed. The walls are closing in. My emotions are running away with the shop. Remember: God is good, God is faithful, God is a Savior, God is love, God is true. When your heart won't believe it, let your mind remember it. Let the truth speak to your emotions. Your soul naturally gets heavy and descends, but with intervention it can rise. God sends truth. Let it speak to your heart. Where are you reminded of these truths? In church. In community. Alone you would forget, but together we remember. These truths don't return to you as long as you hole up in your dorm room and play Xbox for 12 hours straight. These truths don't return to you when you refuse to talk to your friends about how you feel inside, and you shut down and watch Netflix for 10 hours. You are tempted to withdraw. Don't shut down and withdraw. Go. Show up. When you can't remember

for yourself, let the community of faith, the fellowship of believers remember for you and remind you. God is good. God is faithful. God is a Savior. God is love. God is true. These things we know.

Church is a gift. Mongolia just learning about God's particular provision for His children called the church. Everything in Mongolia is celebrating the 20th Anniversary. Christianity was illegal there until the mid-90s. It exploded for a while, but is now struggling to mature. We held a joint conference with Mongolia Campus Crusade for Christ on working in partnership in ministry. Half the joy of it was seeing leaders of all these different churches and ministries leaning on each other as friends. We are not alone. That's the gift of church. We are not alone. Mother Teresa said, "The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved."

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:1-3). When you are stuck in a hole, look up. When you are stuck, look to God. Your life is hidden in Christ. If you have given your life to Jesus, you are in Christ. And Jesus already died, already rose, and is already in the heavenly places. You are in Him—what do you have to fear? Death? That's already over in Christ. Pain? There's no pain powerful enough to separate you from His love. But you set your mind on things above. You look up. If you look to earthly things you stay low, but if you look up you might rise. The soul naturally descends, but with intervention it can rise. Jesus is your intervention. Your life is hidden in Him, and He knows the way up. But look at this now, this command, I want you to know, isn't singular ... it's plural. It isn't just "you set your mind" but "you all, church, set your minds; set your hearts, on things above." When you forget, let the church remember for you. When you can't look up, let the body look up for you. When you lost track of who God is, don't withdraw, don't isolate, show up, join in the praises, let your lips open every now and then even. When you can't sing, let others sing for you. When you can't pray, let others pray for you. When you can't remember the goodness of God in your heart, let the community of faith testify to you. Loneliness is nothing to tackle alone. The soul descends without intervention. Jesus is your help. Jesus is your Savior, your saving help. Remember, together.

STUDY GUIDE

UNSTUCK • "Show Up"

Psalm 40:6-10

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read aloud Psalm 40:6-10 Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard.

- 1) What does this passage have to say about how we become "unstuck" in life?
- 2) Reread verse 6. It is often tempting to feel like we need to check certain boxes to appease God. For Israel, this usually took the form of sacrifices. What sorts of boxes are you tempted/inclined to "check" to try to "appease" God in difficult times?
- 3) Reread verses 7-8. The psalmist shows up, ready to do the will of God. When is it easy for you to "show up," ready to do the will of the Lord? When is it the most challenging?
- 4) Reread verse 9. One of the things we do regularly in worship is proclaim the works of God. This often happens through songs, prayers, reading Scripture, reciting a creed and the sermon. What is the value in participating in this practice?
- 5) How does consistently "showing up" to worship God aid in the midst of a challenging season?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Reread verse 10. The psalmist names the value of sharing the good news of God's action in his life with his community. What kinds of things do you typically share with your community? Does your speech regularly allude to God's work in your life? How can you grow in this?

IN: Connect with Each Other

Sometimes we need encouragement to keep "showing up." Who can you encourage this week? Maybe someone you haven't seen in a while. Reach out to them with a phone call, text or encouraging letter.