

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.

I've heard it said that life is 10 percent what happens to you and 90 percent how you react to it. I'm not sure what any of that means. But I do think it's true that we have some things we can choose and some things we can't. We can't choose whether or not to go through hard times and deep valleys. We can't choose the behaviors of our friends and family, or others around us whose mistakes make our life hard. We can't choose not to get cancer or not to lose a job or not to suffer a tragic loss or not to enter a season of loneliness. But we can choose how it sits in our own heart. Over and over we sing at memorial services that famous hymn the choir sang last week, and I think we had it in the Worship Center too: "It is well with my soul. It is well with my soul. It is well, it is well with my soul." When you listen to the words of that song you realize that's not a diagnostic statement: "Hey, look! Everything's great in my soul!" No, it's a protest statement. In the face of the fiery trial, I will set my jaw and proclaim: "It is well." When things are good or when things are horrible, I get to decide, it is well with my soul. How is that possible?

We have been studying Psalm 40, verse by verse, under the theme *Unstuck*. God knows life gets hard. The Bible gives us language to talk to God and understand our own pain and lament in stuck places. As this series touches on emotional issues, we have partnered with our Christian counselors to provide a help-line, which people have been calling to get unstuck (or at least begin the process) in areas like depression and anxiety, drug and alcohol addiction, abuse, job loss and others. Here's what I want you to know, even after that number goes off the bulletin page: it's still there. Your church is a place to find help. We will connect you to vehicles of help. Psalm 40 has taught us that when we feel stuck we want to cry out to a God who hears, get with people and not withdraw, get in touch with our Savior Jesus Christ, and today, finally the challenge is, even when we are in stuck places, the challenge today is to find joy, practice gratitude

and nurture hope when we are in difficulty. The challenge today is to stay positive. Stay positive.

Let me tell you something interesting about Psalm 40. Scholars don't know what category to put it in. Bible scholars, like all academics, love categories, boxes to put things in so they can group them up and explain them all at once. The Psalms are broken up into categories. Praise Psalms; Thanksgiving Psalms; Royal Psalms; Lament Psalms. Well, with Psalm 40 the argument rages. Which is it? Is it a Lament Psalm, openly sharing the pain and disappointment in life with God, from the guts? Or is it a Salvation Psalm giving thanks for the glory and joy of salvation? Scholars disagree. They can't decide. They write books and journal articles and talk at conferences and get upset and yell at each other and throw their Hebrew Bibles across the room at each other! So I imagine. They can't decide.

I love that. I love that about Psalm 40. And here's why. This Psalm is a turning-point prayer. It combines lament, sadness, stuckness and pain with salvation, joy, promise, the power of God to change a life. The scholars say, "No, no, no—either you are in pain or you are in joy; not both." But this Psalm shows it's possible. Life changes. Life turns. God changes things. Pain can turn to joy. Lament can shift to salvation. It happens. God does it. I don't know about you, but I need to know that! But do you know what else it says? It says that even for a believer, even for a saved one, one who is in Christ, there will be times of pain. Even after you're pulled out of the muddy pit and set on a rock and given a new song to sing, even after you experience life change and Jesus is in your life, there will be hard times still, and you will need to know how to cry out to a God who hears, get with people, hold onto your Savior and stay positive.

Let's get to these verses then. "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" (Psalm 40:14-15). Did you know that you have opponents? Did you know not everybody in this world wants you to succeed or wants what's best for you? You've got enemies. David prays that his enemies would fall into their own deceitful traps and pits; that the mud they sling would stick to them. He prays for their consciences to be pricked when they celebrate his sufferings or failures. Quite a picture, people watching your every move for any slip or misstep, ready to shout, "Aha! Told you so!" What a horrible way to live. Let's move on.

"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!'" (Psalm 40:16). May it be so, Lord, that all who call on You find a loving response. Do you know in all my years of ministry, I have never, not once, had someone come to me sorry they cried out to God or disappointed in the response they felt in Jesus? Not once. He doesn't fail. Life fails. Life is hard. Pain is hard. Jesus never fails. Look now, you are allowed to be glad and rejoice (double your joy over) simply because that is true about Jesus. No other grounds needed. That's enough grounds for you to be glad and double your joy—Jesus never fails. I'll say it out loud. I'll believe it when I don't feel it. "The Lord is great!" Which gets us to verse 17: "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" (Psalm 40:17). I'll break that down for us in a minute.

Is it possible for a life to change so dramatically from sorrow to joy? So dramatically it's like a person getting pulled out of a pit of mud. It's like a life that couldn't get traction, that felt stuck, a life that was beginning to think the situation they were in was it, where it would all end, but it gets pulled out of there, set on a firm rock, cleaned off and given a new song to sing. Is that kind of thing possible in Jesus? Yes. I listened this week to an hour-long testi-

mony of a man named Tamrat Layne, a leader of the communist revolution in Ethiopia in the 1980s who met Jesus while falsely imprisoned by his own regime. Jesus came to him in three visions on three consecutive nights. Does it happen? My own story is just how Jesus came to me through Young Life when I was a dark and saddened youngster. Yes, it happens. The mud slides off. The hands of Jesus lift. The old is gone; the new has come. It happens. It can happen for you. Psalm 40 testifies. You can move from sad to saved, from lament to salvation praise.

But pay attention here. A lot of the lament in this Psalm comes after the joy of salvation, not before. Is it possible for one who experienced the joy of salvation to later enter a struggle or trial and be tempted to fall into despair? Yes, it's possible. It is even probable. In fact, it is guaranteed. Is it possible for life to be hard for a follower of Jesus? Jesus seemed to promise it. So what's the difference? What benefit is there in knowing Jesus if the rain still falls on the righteous and unrighteous alike? Well, it's just that—you get to know Jesus. When a believer suffers, she suffers with Christ. When a believer suffers, Jesus is there with him in strength. In Christ, we never suffer alone.

Levi Lusko is a well-known preacher in Montana who lost his daughter to a sudden asthma attack when she was 5 years old, just five days before Christmas. Levi has written and spoken since about what it means to trust Jesus after a thing like that. The Bible tells us not to be surprised at the fiery ordeals, not to be shocked when suffering comes our way, as though something strange were happening. Instead we are told to rejoice, because the little bit of fire and pain we suffer is tied in some mysterious way to the great pain and fire Jesus suffered on our behalf, and there is an eternal glory coming that will make all this suffering seem like nothing. Rejoice in suffering. That's not easy. Levi calls it war: "This is the war: every moment of every day, we must make the all-important choice of whether we will rely on the naked eye. Will we trust what

we can see is there, or believe what God says is there? It's a decision we are continually confronted with." Even after knowing and trusting and serving and loving Jesus, great suffering and pain come. How will you endure it?

"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" (Psalm 40:17). This final verse is a practice of gratitude. It says to stay positive. Look at "as for me." I don't deserve the Lord's attention, but the Lord thinks of me. Thank you, God. You are my God. You are my help and my deliverer. It's gratitude. Summarizing Psalm 40, Joyce Meyer says, "We must learn to resist descending into the pit of depression where we are at the mercy of the tormentor of our souls, who is determined to totally destroy us and our witness for Christ." Is pain part of the life of a believer? Yes. Is depression and anxiety allowed for followers of Christ? Of course. We don't get to choose all that happens to us in life, but we get to choose how we react to it. Don't descend and surrender to the tormentor of your soul. Look up. Stuck? Me too sometimes. Cry out to a God who hears. Get with people. Trust your Savior. Stay positive.

As we move to the table of communion today, we come as those not deserving our place, not as those who have earned a ticket, but as those whom the Lord has invited and drawn forward by grace. Not worthy. Why should the Lord think of me? Why should He name my name as He writes the invitation list? I can't answer. Only I am grateful. We come to the table also as those who feel stuck, who feel the weight of suffering in this life. But we are not alone. In fact, at the head of the table sits the one acquainted with suffering, the suffering servant, Jesus himself who suffered and died to bring us to glory. He knows where we are stuck—and He has power to bring us hope.

STUDY GUIDE

UNSTUCK • "Stay Positive"

Psalm 40:14–17

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Psalm 40:14–17.

Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note any words or phrases that seem meaningful.

- 1) Reread verse 14–15. At times it can feel like there are people, institutions and things that desire to "take" our lives. What comes to mind when you think about these things in your life?
- 2) How do you defend against these things or people?
- 3) Reread verse 16. Often, it is easy for us to become bitter when enduring hardship. We can get to the point of lashing out against those around us. Can you describe a time when this was true of you?
- 4) When are you most inclined to "seek" the Lord? What does this usually look like?
- 5) What is typically the result of your efforts to seek the Lord?

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

It is unofficially summertime! (Summer officially starts June 21.) Think about how you might serve your neighbors in the next couple of months. Maybe you will host a BBQ and invite neighbors who don't know Jesus. Maybe you do a prayer walk along your street, etc.

IN: Connect with Each Other

Who in your life is in a situation where they are "stuck?" How can you be light and life for them in this season?